Volunteer Work, Informal Learning and Social Action

THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY AND EDUCATION

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The aim of this series is to provide a focus for writers and readers interested in exploring the relation between the knowledge economy and education or an aspect of that relation, for example, vocational and professional education theorised critically.

It seeks authors who are keen to question conceptually and empirically the causal link that policymakers globally assume exists between education and the knowledge economy by raising: (i) epistemological issues as regards the concepts and types of and the relations between knowledge, the knowledge economy and education; (ii) sociological and political economic issues as regards the changing nature of work, the role of learning in workplaces, the relation between work, formal and informal learning and competing and contending visions of what a knowledge economy/knowledge society might look like; and (iii) pedagogic issues as regards the relationship between knowledge and learning in educational, community and workplace contexts.

The series is particularly aimed at researchers, policymakers, practitioners and students who wish to read texts and engage with researchers who call into question the current conventional wisdom that the knowledge economy is a new global reality to which all individuals and societies must adjust, and that lifelong learning is the strategy to secure such an adjustment. The series hopes to stimulate debate amongst this diverse audience by publishing books that: (i) articulate alternative visions of the relation between education and the knowledge economy; (ii) offer new insights into the extent, modes, and effectiveness of people's acquisition of knowledge and skill in the new circumstances that they face in the developed and developing world, (iii) and suggest how changes in both work conditions and curriculum and pedagogy can lead to new relations between work and education.

Volunteer Work, Informal Learning and Social Action

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Fiona Duguid, Karsten Mündel and Daniel Schugurensky

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PREFACE

In advanced capitalist economies, our lives often appear to be consumed by market relations. An increasing amount of most adults' time is devoted to labour market activities, either engaging in or seeking employment compensated by a wage or salary. Once we get the money, shopping for and using goods and services commodities have become pervasive pursuits. Work done beyond the realm of market exchange has tended to be taken for granted and devalued. But the spread of this consumer society has also made more evident the necessity of unpaid work beyond the market for the reproduction of our social lives. As we have less time for household work, the issues of when, how and by whom it can be done become more problematic, especially for the women who have been increasingly expected to juggle it with paid employment. A re-appreciation of the importance and value of household work is at least slowly occurring.

Volunteer work includes activities that we choose to engage in beyond the realms of paid employment and household work, whether joining community-based organizations or just helping neighbours. The facts that these activities have tended to be more freely chosen than paid employment and household work as well as being very diverse have probably contributed to their continuing devaluation. But empirical researchers have now clearly documented that, in several advanced economies, participation in voluntary organizations has witnessed substantial decline over the past few generations (e.g. Putnam 2000). The causes and significance of this decline have been hotly disputed (e.g. Durlauf 2002). However, the general trend is now widely acknowledged, along with heightened concern about getting more people engaged in community contexts. As the incidence of volunteer work declined, appreciation of its importance for revitalizing social life began to grow.

At the same time as the general import of volunteer work is increasingly recognized, it becomes more difficult to distinguish it from paid employment. As this book graphically illustrates, numerous people are now volunteering to do work that others are paid for, in order to gain work experience to qualify for paid jobs. For example, some private employers now troll the internet, find highly qualified recent immigrants, and then expect these people to pay to be allowed to perform the work that others are paid to do. More generally, growing numbers of people are compelled to involvement in coercive volunteering to qualify for a chance at paid jobs. The only thing that distinguishes such volunteer work from paid work is the fact that it is unpaid.

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In the current socio-economic context, with many voluntary organizations facing funding cutbacks from government and philanthropic sources, the premium on use of volunteer workers increases and the importance of ensuring that these workers are as well-trained as possible to perform effectively grows accordingly. There have been some previous studies of formal training programs in the few voluntary organizations that have offered them. But most voluntary organizations appear to rely primarily on informal training, done in ad hoc terms by more experienced mentoring members. There have been no prior research studies of the array of formal and informal training activities in diverse voluntary organizations. In this respect, the current book is unique.

The editors provide a thicket-clearing review and clarification of concepts of volunteer work and provide the first tentative general framing of the sorts of learning related to this work. The book's authors present case studies of three basic types of voluntary organizations: those providing social services, representing local communities and mobilizing for social change. These case studies include profiles of the actual work their members do and detailed accounts of the sorts of formal and informal learning practices they are engaged in during their work. The concluding chapter offers some comparative analysis, practical recommendations and steps for further research.

The nature of adult learning is akin to an iceberg. Most of it is beneath the surface of normal observation. My colleague Allen Tough (1971) began documenting this condition decades ago. The research network of which the current book is a part has taken up the challenge of exploring this iceberg of learning in relation to paid employment, household work and volunteer work (see Livingstone 2010; www.wallnetwork.ca). A related study on household work offers unique insights into learning in that sphere, almost all of which has been done informally (Eichler et al 2010). It is probable that most of the learning we do is deeply submerged in the iceberg, beyond conscious recuperation. But it is also probable that most of the intentional learning we do in all spheres of work is informal, as all the studies in this network and a growing array of empirical studies of learning in paid workplaces (e.g. Malloch et al 2010) confirm. The present book finds that the most valuable forms of learning in diverse voluntary organizations have occurred informally with other workers and the authors begin to develop profiles of the most pertinent dimensions of this learning.

The central relevance of this book for this series on "The Knowledge Economy and Education" is to shine a light on the diverse forms of voluntary work that are much needed but little appreciated in contemporary societies, and on the learning largely beyond the realm of formal education that is required for such organizations to continue to survive in an era in which credentialed formal education has been given overwhelming importance. Voluntary work and related learning should be much more recognized and rewarded in knowledge-based societies than they have been. This book can contribute to that end.

In some respects, learning in conventional volunteer work may have been the freest form of learning. People who have chosen to do this form of work have tended

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to spend proportionately more time engaged in related learning than people do in learning related to paid employment or household work (Livingstone 2001). Some of the case studies in this book suggest that, especially if people actively engage in such voluntary organizations from marginalized standpoints (e.g. low formal education, recent immigrants) and in relation to social justice issues, the learning can be quite profound and transformative. In the heavily credentialed, media-laden context of our knowledge society, such deep learning only appears to happen in voluntary organizations where there are opportunities for group reflection – which is to rediscover the basic principle of critical pedagogy (Freire 1971). Reflective learning in voluntary organizations has the potential to be a very empowering form of learning, especially when formal education is highly standardized and more removed from direct experience.

The authors modestly suggest that the many volunteers' stories in this book only offer "a window into the world of informal learning in the volunteer world". This is true and this first view may still be quite obscure in some ways. But it is truly the first concerted view. As appreciation of the importance of voluntary work for revitalizing social life grows, the conceptual and empirical relevance of this book should also increase. It warrants careful scrutiny by all who are interested in wider dimensions of work and learning in contemporary societies.

DWL
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