Austerity and On-the-job Vocational Learning: Power, Technology and the ‘Knowledge Economy’ Reconsidered

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to contribute to an understanding of questions regarding on-the-job vocational learning, power, and technological change in the context of dynamic notions of knowledge economy and contemporary public sector austerity in the West based on a “mind in political economy” approach inspired by the Cultural Historical Activity Theory tradition. It draws on recently completed analysis of public sector human services work (welfare benefits delivery work in Ontario, Canada) based on a seven year mixed-methods study (learning life-history interviews n=75; survey n=339). It seeks to explain the emergence of difference between the on-the-job vocational learning of newcomers and veteran workers. The conclusion suggests that structural changes to economies, sectors and organizations, often revolving around new forms of advanced technology, may initiate a process of contestation, appropriation, accommodation and consent that must be actively accomplished by inter-generational dynamics amongst workers within activity.

Keywords: Canada, Cultural Historical Activity Theory, Informal Learning, Knowledge Economy, Labour Process, Mixed Methods Design, Occupational Enculturation, On-the-Job Vocational Learning, State Welfare Work, Technological Change

INTRODUCTION

In this article I hope to contribute toward a deepening of questions regarding on-the-job vocational learning, power, and technological change in the context of dynamic notions of knowledge economy and public sector austerity. These questions presume the following backdrop of issues: a) occupational change in relation to contemporary political economy of austerity in advanced capitalist countries (cf. Seddon, Henriksson & Niemeyer, 2010; Colley, 2012); b) the application of new Information and Communication Technology (ICT) within an aggressive form of work re-design based on Taylorism; and, c) cultural historical artefacts, on-the-job vocational learning within labour process activity. In presenting this analysis, I draw on recently completed analysis of public sector human services work (welfare benefits delivery work in Ontario, Canada) based on a seven year mixed-methods study (learning life-history interviews n=75; survey n=339). It seeks to explain the emergence of difference between the on-the-job vocational learning of newcomers and veteran workers. The conclusion suggests that structural changes to economies, sectors and organizations, often revolving around new forms of advanced technology, may initiate a process of contestation, appropriation, accommodation and consent that must be actively accomplished by inter-generational dynamics amongst workers within activity.

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DOI: 10.4018/ijavet.2013070105
Based on a seven-year study undertaken in partnership with the Canadian Union of Public Employees. This was a mixed methods study that began at the same time that a major overhaul of the state welfare benefits labour process was initiated, but which spanned economic crisis beginning in 2008 (see Sawchuk, 2013).

It is in this context that I suggest how structural changes to economies, sectors and organizations, often involving advanced ICT, can be seen to undergo a process of contestation, appropriation, accommodation, consent and forms of ratification that must be actively accomplished by workers as a relationship between the designed, perceived and lived dimensions of labour process activity. It is struggles over power, needs and control that are central. I claim that attending to these elements allows us to speak of a “mind in political economy” approach to on-the-job vocational learning. Such an approach necessarily addresses vocational learning in terms of the “construction of the machineries of knowledge construction” (Knorr Cetina, 1999). I suggest that attending to changing vocational lives in this way helps us to forefront change from the inside-out as well as from the outside-in. Moreover, it encourages us to see, under certain conditions, how on-the-job vocational learning activity is turned into a struggle for the meaning, purpose and soul of an occupation over time – and, in the broader aggregate – something we might refer to critically as a “knowledge economy”. Thus, complementing the notion that occupational change emerges from efficiency needs, competitive market relations and business cycles, technological invention, or even generalized struggle over surplus value under capitalism, in this article the dynamic struggle over the nature and form of vocational knowledge itself is central. In this sense, questions about vocational learning, power and technological change bear on our understanding of two distinctive notions of knowledge economy: one that is not inherently fraught with contradiction vis-à-vis capitalism, and another, preferred here, which is.

The (Living) Context of the Research

This article deals with a distinct occupation within public social services as well as a distinct labour process that is in transition. The historical specificities, in these terms, are vital and undergird many of the claims I try to make, though here they can only be summarized in a brief section. One of these historical specificities involves a debate on work design under capitalism that is remarkably familiar (see Sawchuk, 2010). That is, re-specified, re-packaged, and in particular, re-systematized in new ways, (and in receipt of far less attention than either New Public Management, bureau-professional regimes or simply vague claims of neo-liberal agendas and austerity measure, for example) – in public sector professional and semi-professionalized occupations, Scientific Management/Taylorism likely remains a force to be reckoned with. It is a force that as much if not more than most other work design traditions, cuts to the heart of the labouring and learning process with its unique attention to learning, materiality and task sets. Indeed, in Sawchuk (2013) we find detailed evidence for the critical turn in state welfare benefits delivery vis-à-vis specific shifts in forms of managerial control, in patterns of occupational knowledge-making, and in the balance of knowledge/power at work. It is a critical turn, by the capitalist state, toward a new assertion of control depending significantly upon a Taylorist division of labour as well as an advanced intra-net software called Service Delivery Model Technology (SDMT) (Figure 1).

Another of these historical specificities that undergirds the claims involves the distinctive as well as nationally-specific historical development of the occupation of state welfare work itself: Its unique biography. This is important because it is in a critical historical examination of the occupation that we find evidence of the evolving tropes, discourses, ideologies, identities, rules, codes, protocols, techniques, and so on; in general, the allotment of cultural artefacts – freighting, altering and introducing contradiction—that mediate the limits, pressures
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