

**LEARNING CAREERS AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING:
CHALLENGES OF LEARNING AND WORK IN NEOLIBERAL SPACES¹**

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INTRODUCTION

Many adults have been ‘locked out’ of opportunities by their previous schooling, life experiences and continuing financial barriers. Disability and literacy difficulties also exclude many from the twin desires of education and work. Education and training are widely seen as providing keys to work and jobs. A number of the chapters in this book present broader understandings of how students experience the world that is unlocked by training and work that in turn lead to new identities and careers.

This chapter outlines a vision of education that ‘unlocks’ its emancipatory potential as articulated by Paulo Freire (critical pedagogy) and Jack Mezirow (transformative learning) and a vision of education that is an antidote to neoliberal policies. This chapter explores work in the global political and economic project known as neoliberalism and outlines current understandings of neoliberalism in a way that illustrates how public policy drives educational agendas towards addressing the needs of the market for workers rather than for the broader needs of individuals, communities and society. Mezirow and Freire are allies in this, as is Axel Honneth. The following chapters in this book are studies of continuities and discontinuities and of persistence and these issues are explored in the world of education and work.

Adult are resilient and if barriers such as finance are minimized and learning supports enhanced they will persist in education (Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan, 2017). Real learning can be achieved and learning needs met by education, especially as it is an important source of recognition for learners. Recognition is a psychological and political spark that ignites and sustains learning that is deeply satisfying, critical, developmental and capable of delivering the educational promise of freedom and emancipation. It is the key that unlocks individual and social potential.

NEOLIBERALISM

As a recent iteration of capitalism, neoliberalism emphasises privatization, downsizing the state as arbiter of the public good; encourages markets to supply everything; curtails organized labour often with legislation and dismantles the welfare state. The state is restructured to reflect the interests of business. According to Harvey (2005, p. 2) neoliberalism is;

A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.

Neoliberalism subjects the social functions of the state to economic calculation as if public services were private companies that regulated education, health, social security and employment (Bauman, 2014, p. 17). The state is compelled to cede functions they once considered their domain into the care of already deregulated market forces. Citizens lose faith in the ability of government to deliver on their promises. The certainties of employment are

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demolished (or at least called into question) by part-time or zero-hours contracts thus adding to the insecurity of temporary employment.

Everything is subject to review so as to constantly reset priorities based on perceived shortages of public funding. Everything has become debatable, questionable, shaky, destined to remain standing or be wiped out with a stroke of the pen in response to more urgent needs, budget problems and compliance with European regulations (Bauman and Bordini, 2014, p. 67). Everyone is expected to provide for themselves without burdening others (Bauman and Bordini, 2014, p. 57). Consumerism ‘may lubricate the wheels of the *economy* but sprinkles sand into the bearings of *morality*’ (Bauman and Bordini, 2014, p. 153). Discontinuities are embedded in the system.

We are required to do more with less and manage with scarce resources and adjustments – a euphemism for deep cuts in public expenditure, including education. Governments are preoccupied with austerity even though there is evidence that austerity makes the problem worse (Blyth, 2013). Austerity is first and foremost a transfer of wealth from the lower and middle classes to the classes above them. It furthers the neoliberal project of increasing inequality under the guise of freeing lower socio-economic groups from their social welfare supported unwillingness to work. These ideas are worked out in greater detail by Giroux (2014), Piketty (2014) and Sen (2015).

Neoliberalism does not aim to increase well-being but drives for a more competitive society and economy. Education is required to meet the needs of the economy for skilled workers and to re-focus its curriculum to become business friendly and produce graduates who are more ‘work-ready’. State investment is expected to increase productivity and innovation, while investments in education are adjusted downward. The potential of lifelong learning to respond to the learning needs of active citizens is neglected (Fleming, 2011) and instead is implicated in the push to have everyone upskill and contribute to the economy (CEC, 2000). This context is important for this chapter and the following chapters in this book where the impacts of how work and education are reconfigured to fit the neoliberal agenda are addressed.

ROLE OF ADULT EDUCATION

Education has always been associated with progress, with freedom, democracy, justice and care. In its *Manifesto for Adult Learning for the 21st Century* the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA, 2016) asserts that adult education has a role in changing lives and transforming society. It sees adult education as a human right and a common good. But it needs investment. The *Manifesto* (p. 3) supports the traditional aims of adult education including citizenship, democracy, emancipation as well as life skills, health benefits, social cohesion and equality. Reskilling for work, second chance education and entrepreneurship are not neglected (pp. 4-5). By the conclusion of the document there is little that adult education cannot achieve about sustainability and other social, political, economic targets and aspirations.

See the full article in

Fleming, T. (2018). Learning Careers and Transformative Learning: Challenges of Learning and Work in neoliberal Spaces. In B. Merrill, A. Galimberti, A. Nizinska and J. Gonzalez Monteagudo (Eds.), *Continuity and Discontinuity in Learning Careers: Potentials for a Learning Space in a Changing World* (pp. 19-34). Rotterdam: SENSE