

“Disposable” Labourer vs. Active Learner: Learning for Foreign Contingent Workers

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Abstract: This paper argues for the need to conceptualize foreign contingent workers as legitimate adult learners. By looking critically at adult learning for these workers we can begin to discuss the importance of supported adult learning. This focus contributes to the formation of a just society where every group of learners’ communicative actions are supported and not infringed upon by oppressive structural power.

The Foreign Contingent Workers

Recently, we have witnessed the spread of increasing numbers of migrant workers into many parts of the so-called “globalized” world. On the one hand, globalized labour in a capitalist nation-state has become a reality that may give new opportunities to workers in this “borderless” world. On the other hand, global conditions of labour have brought ever-present challenges to most of the workers in the world (Munck, 2002). Unlike a small number of knowledge workers who possess a kind of knowledge that makes them employable on many levels and are the leading actors in this globalized era, most workers’ lives are subject to deterioration under pressure to keep “cost[s] down and profit[s] up” (Newlands, 2002, p. 217).

Migrant workers, in many cases, make decisions to move to countries with strong or growing economies where there are presumed opportunities for higher paid work. However, this individual decision to move also intersects with other humans, communities and even countries. For example, Castles and Miller (1993) point out that the movement of migrant workers shows where the centre of global capitalism is and where the peripheries are. This highlights the unequal relations between countries.

Amongst migrant labour practices, contract labour is a good example of the effects of globalization due to its high degree of control and the restrictions on the rights of migrant workers (Castles, 2000). These contract-based, non-citizen workers are subject to various types of oppressive practices such as economic exploitation and/or cultural misunderstanding. They are often regarded as “disposable” labour (Macklin, 1992) in host countries as many receiving countries have used these workers to meet their long-term labour needs to the disadvantage of the workers. The boundary of their rights is often blurred because the workers are “inextricable from the substance of citizenship” (Soysal, 1994, p. 164). This is inherently nationalistic, which is one of reasons why these workers tend to remain “Othered”. The “othering” experiences of migrant workers are constructed both locally and globally: locally, these workers are often excluded from many protection schemes that are in place for the well-being of workers. Globally, they are a group of “transborderers” who are situated in an unequal global context between the host countries and their countries of origin. Their marginal experiences in both contexts often lead them to a problematic status in both the workplace and the host society.

While marginalization in the workplace is one experience for these workers, it is also important to consider their lives as learners. Migrant workers are often not considered “learners”, even though they “learn” and are actively involved in workplace learning. They are, in many cases, an important part of the labour force of many countries and their learning is often not cared about or encouraged by the host country. This apathy to the learning needs of migrant workers and their development as mature adult learners is apparent in light of the fact that this issue is one of the least discussed subjects in theory and practice of adult education and training.

This paper explores the “neglected learning” of a particular group of non-citizen, contract-based migrant workers and why critical perspectives on adult learning are needed to

support the learning of this group of workers. Defining them as “foreign contingent workers” captures their unique position among groups of workers in the current global economy because they are an informal labour force in a country that is foreign to them. Therefore, the definition of “foreign contingent workers” as the name suggests, shares three common characteristics: they are contemporary (global era), non-citizen (foreign) and temporary (contract-based) workers. These characteristics represent the unequal structural relations that these workers have within their workplaces and the host society. We must recognize that even though these workers make positive contributions in the local industries and live and work in the host countries for extended periods of time, they are still permanent “Others”.

Cases of Geographically Dislocated Worker-Learners

As noted above, the experiences of foreign contingent workers are socially constructed within local and global context. In the study of foreign domestic workers in the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) of Canada, Blomley and Pratt (2001) observe the “unequal human geography” (p. 162) between labour importing countries and labour exporting countries. Bounded in unfamiliar space, these foreign domestic workers share the experience of inequality with other low-skilled or domestic workers, particularly women. But what makes the experiences of foreign contingent workers unique is that they are perceived as “third-world looking” (p. 161) and have non-citizen status, and this makes the workers’ experience even more dislocated in a global context. These foreign contingent workers often live in constant insecurity. Regardless of their personal learning goals, they are often unsupported in the desire to be active learners. Even though they are not deported and may “successfully” obtain formal citizenship after extended period of service, they are likely to maintain their lives as a marginalized social group due to differences such as race, ethnicity, class, and gender, which are far from the “norms” of the society. Thus, citizenship is not the only criteria of discrimination, and Bakan and Stasiulis (1997) argue that these workers experience “a spectrum of variable rights and denial of rights” by conditions of “global capitalism, class exploitation, racism and sexism” (p. 114).

Korea’s foreign trainee workers are a group of foreign contingent workers who provide Korean industry with low-skilled labour under the Industrial Trainee Program (ITP) (Seol, 1999). This trainee program stipulates that workers will have the opportunity to learn work-related skills. In many cases, however, the workers are forced to work without having proper education and training opportunities. This is partly caused by their non-citizen status and cultural “differences” such as nationality, race, and linguistics. These workers face numerous maltreatment including economic exploitation, injustice by cultural misunderstanding and/or denigration. It is important to note that Korea is an extremely homogeneous society by race.

Since the year 2003 there has been a large scale government-initiated deportation of workers who are not “eligible” to work in Korea, such as the “overstayed” workers. While many Korean employers seriously need these workers due to shortage of labour, the intention of the government is clear: “kick out the ‘overdue’ and take in ‘new’”. The resistance of these workers against this massive deportation has gradually taken an organized form, which can be described as a new group-based social movement. In this movement, the workers have asserted their rights to be treated humanely and ardent desire to work in secure conditions. The workers at risk of deportation, as well as legitimate foreign contingent workers, and the activists of various non-governmental organizations (NGO) have actively participated in these protests. It points to the workers’ desire to be treated as active learners.

These two cases represent the wide spectrum of discriminatory practices that have made many foreign contingent workers vulnerable as workers. They are workers who are easily

exploited and misunderstood in the places they work. The self-determining power of these workers as active human beings and learners is significantly undermined. Young (1990) would call this “exploitation” and “powerlessness” which are the other names of oppression that we as human beings should challenge. Oppression refers to systemic constraints on social groups in the normal processes of everyday life (ibid.). The social construction of “difference” perpetuates exclusion, and hinders foreign contingent workers from functioning as productive workers and as mature adult learners.

Critical Perspectives: Mapping Foreign Contingent Workers as Adult Learners

An enabling conception of justice concerns the degree to which a society contains and supports the institutional conditions necessary for the realization of the values of “developing and exercising one’s capacities and expressing one’s experience, and participating in determining one’s action and the conditions of one’s action” (Young, 1990, p. 37). Varying conditions of equal participation for different groups of people, therefore, need to be explored (Young, 1990; Fraser, 1997; Luke, 1992). The focus on a “social learning paradigm” suggests that the oppression of human beings is a crisis of authentic learning which exposes certain groups of people to peril. This social learning paradigm originates from a critical theory tradition which questions “the given” social situations, instead of “reaffirming and reifying the given social reality” (Young, 1990, p. 5). The reason to doubt such social descriptions, according to Young, is that “without such a critical stance, many questions about what occurs in a society and why, who benefits and who is harmed, will not be asked” (Ibid.). The two previous cases highlight how foreign contingent workers are structurally prohibited from being active worker-learners, and this neglected learning is an unjust situation.

Asking about “Who is free?” or “How we can redeem human potential to be free?” has for a longtime been a daunting project of critical theorists. Particularly, Habermas’ (1987) notion of learning deals with active learners who constitute and defend civil society. Welton (1995) links this Habermasian project of communicative action with the means of understanding the nature of social learning process. Social learning processes, one of the most important intersubjective actions in the “lifeworld,” is often distorted and misshaped under enormous systemic forces, such as “global order” or, what Welton calls, “disorder”. The purpose of the critical theory (and the critical theory of adult learning) is “to help people to stop being passive victims who collude, at least partly, in their domination by external forces” (Welton, 1995, p. 37). Collins (1995) also points out that educators should think deeply and realistically about the “systemic blockages to the achievement of a more fully democratized society” (p. 198).

In a critical approach to adult learning, learning is regarded to be actions which save adult learners from the existing oppressive structures of communication which “prevent humans from mutual understanding” (Welton, 1995, p. 86). The task of ensuring that people achieve power to determine their lives has served as one of the foremost agenda of adult education and training. A critical approach to adult learning therefore holds “the commitment to enhance individual and collective autonomy to achieve maturity through interactive learning and collective action” (p. 36). This postulates that the communicative efforts of human beings should influence the decision-making procedure of the society where they belong. Enhancing this ability or resuming this capacity is the prime task of adult learning. This lens is never neutral. Rather, it protects adult learners in contemporary society from the “colonization of their lifeworld”. In this way, learning by active human beings can be a counterforce to the structural marginalization of human beings, and then every setting of learning can be a “countersystem”.

Along with critical theorists, critical pedagogists share the definition of human beings as active learners of civil society and the visions of social justice toward these learners (Freire, 1970; Shor, 2000). They challenge various oppressions imposed on different social groups of learners like foreign contingent workers. Particularly, feminist pedagogists have argued for the importance of contextuality of the groups of learners (Weiler, 1991; Luke, 1992). Therefore, by investigating the local context of learners and its relation to a larger social and cultural context, feminist pedagogists are able to fully explain “why” the learning of a particular group is neglected and “what” should be done for these “abandoned learners”.

In relating to the learning of foreign contingent workers, feminist pedagogy has two notable vantage points: first, feminist pedagogy can capture the unique positioning of the foreign contingent workers as a group of learners who possess disadvantages in global context and can provide differentiated reference to “the oppressed” by rejecting single, universal and/or undifferentiated empowerment strategies or emancipation (Shor, 2000). While (masculine) critical theory retains a universalist conception of “communicative actions” (see Benhabib, 1986), and many (masculine) pedagogists also tends to reveal its one-dimensionality in interpreting “the oppressed” “as a unitary rather than as a contradictory and diverse population” (Shor, 2000, p. 3), many feminist pedagogists argue against them. By taking an example of the one-dimensionality of critical pedagogy such as shown in “Freire’s call for liberation - class-based only - and his undifferentiated notion of oppressed learners, feminist pedagogists intend to capture the group differences and accordingly advocates learning as a “life-affirming” (Hall, 2000) actions which serve the group difference.

Second, the notion of inclusion is fully discussed in the agenda of feminist pedagogy. This is about what needs to be done in the settings in which learning occurs. The feminist position critiques theoretical frameworks of an “add-on” approach. By attentively tracking the grand narratives which insidiously perpetuate exclusion, feminist pedagogists are able to suggest the differentiated and inclusive learning agenda of women and also all other similarly marginalized social groups (Fraser, 1997; Luke, 1992) while many (masculine) critical pedagogists somehow fail to envision what “inclusive spaces” mean in the settings of learning for differently situated social groups of learners. Pointing out not all learners share the same oppressions, Shor (2000) argues that oppression “needs to be defined locally at each site, to discover how differences of gender, race and ethnicity affect a specific group and curriculum” (p. 4). In defining critical dialogue, feminist pedagogists embrace diversity and plurality, and argue against oppression which happens in the intersections of various differences. Feminist pedagogy, therefore, formulates an alternative paradigm to encompass diversity in different situations of learning of different groups of learners. It offers a lens that difference can be seriously taken into consideration in the settings of adult education and training and the experiences of foreign contingent workers.

The weakness of this critical lens on learning is that it focuses, however, on mostly pedagogical situations while adult learning embraces the wider range of settings of learning, including formal, informal, and non-formal learning in both intentional and incidental forms of learning. The need to look into the varying lived experiences of adult worker-learners is increasing in this fast-changing era. For example, Zandy (2000) points out the absence of workers in critical pedagogy discourses. She asks, “What is the relationship between the flourishing of critical theory inside the academia and the decline of economic justice outside the academia?” (p. 145). This question is pertinent to the conceptualization of foreign contingent workers as worker-learners in these late-capitalist societies.

Implications of Critical Perspectives of Adult Learning for Policymakers and Practitioners

Critical approaches on adult learning discuss the role of civil society in making a more just society where every group of learners' communicative action is not infringed upon by oppressive structural power. Mapping foreign contingent workers as legitimate learners, however, has not been fully discussed in adult education and training due to their difference - primarily citizenship and other differences such as class, race, and ethnicity. Knowledge and experience of the foreign contingent workers have been assumed as "invalid" and/or "valueless" in the local and global context of learning. These differences act to impair belongingness, social integration, productivity, and development of these workers.

In this globalized era, the number of these worker-learners is rapidly increasing. Adult education and training can provide foreign contingent workers important supports that these currently "abandoned learners" do not have. Learning opportunities which are conceived by critical perspectives on adult learning can help them become more active worker-learners who can actively deal with the constant local and global changes. The learning of foreign contingent workers is not an unaffordable extravagance, but an indispensable means to protect humanity.

The notion of the "fourth world" (Morrow & Torres, 2000, p. 49) in the realm of adult education and training points out that the mission of adult education and training has not been used to discuss foreign contingent workers, but has the potential to be an important area of research in a fast-changing era. Right now foreign contingent workers remain in the "fourth world" within the late-capitalist countries and the injustice of neglected learning of the workers is an important interdisciplinary issue that many areas of study, such as sociology, labour studies, law, adult education and training, can contribute to theorizing about. Adult education and training should formulate a feasible discourse which claims a space for this group of "learners" who try to constitute themselves as active members of "global civil society." Adult education and training can identify these workers as global worker-learners who are most closely confront the local- global tensions in their everyday experience of learning.

The learning experience of these transborderers in global era can possibly be the important test case which applies to the area of adult education and training regarding what adult education and training should do for the learners from newly generated social groups. The future agenda of a critical adult education vision and practice should recognize the difference and/or specificity of the groups of learners rather than represses these. Policy and practice of adult education and training regarding these workers, therefore, should reflect the "complex layered relationship of local and global" (Manicom & Walters, 1996, p. 71) which these learners bring.

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