

Book review: Working and learning in times of uncertainty—challenges to adult, professional and vocational education

By Sandra Bohlinger, Ulrika Haake, Christian Helms Jørgensen, Hanna Toiviainen and Andreas Wallo. (Eds.) (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2015). 244 pp. ISBN open access e-book: 9789463002448

Over the past few years, the relationship between working and learning has been one of the most-discussed topics in policy and practice, both in literature and in research. To shed light on this complex phenomenon, the editors chose “times of uncertainty” as their point of departure. They see the causes of this uncertainty as globalisation with its aggressive competition, and the international scale of the ways in which business is done, along with the creation of network-based work practices and co-configurative production. All of this also goes hand-in-hand - in times of economic crisis - with ever-faster technological developments, processes of digitalisation, specialisation, flexibilisation, privatisation and with demographic change in the workforce and the (longer) working careers. These trends raise the editors’ concerns about the consequences for adult, professional and vocational education. They are under pressure to focus on the individual responsibilities of the workforce and their self-governing or learning in order to acquire the necessary skills and adapt to the demands of the capitalist or free market respectively. As a result, learning and education are veering ever further away from collective service provision and accountability, and this is moreover being reinforced by the current underdevelopment and embedding of HRM practices that can create a working organisation as a powerful learning environment and by the lack of suitable leadership.

Taking these observations and critical considerations as their springboard, the editors have brought together fifteen articles by researchers from predominantly the Nordic countries, but also from Germany and Spain, to delve deeper into the “Challenges to Adult, Professional and Vocational Education” conceptually, empirically and in critical-discursive form. What is striking is that this subtitle only addresses the issue of the relationship between working and learning from one perspective. Most of the contributions primarily illuminate the matching in professional and vocational education between supply and demand, i.e. linking educational profiles and qualifications with labour market needs and positions. The five editors and 16 authors explore why most types of work, as a result of globalisation, are being reconfigured in new ways, which not only requires learning, but also provides opportunities for learning. In the contributions this explains why scant attention is paid to the (re-)design of jobs and job crafting that ultimately purpose to promote the learning potential of the jobs, the labour organisation and the careers, and not just to suffer the consequences of any induced changes brought about as a result of other reasons and interests. Nevertheless, the two overarching questions raised do offer room for a dual approach: “How is working and learning affected by uncertainty and globalisation? And, in what ways do individuals, organisations, political actors and education systems respond to challenges that arise from globalisation and uncertainty?” These are pertinent questions, to which most of the contributions deliver relevant information and answers. This is not the case, or is less the case for a few articles that while certainly interesting in and of

their own right, do not deal very explicitly with or link to the issue of globalisation and uncertainty. (see Art 5, 7, 10 and 15)

One added value of this publication is without a doubt formed by the diversity and in part also the complementarity of the shared research. Both quantitatively empirical and qualitatively designed research are present, and there is also room given to conceptual-theoretic frameworks and discursive analyses of policy documents. Eight articles report on case studies from a variety of sectors (to include the police, elderly care, automation engineering in forestry, public administration, university colleges and training centres among others), zooming in on concrete and recognisable practices. Sometimes there is a lack of explanation of the case's relevance to the problematic nature of globalisation and uncertainty and/or an indication of the particular or universal scope of the findings. In this way the editors fail to justify their choice of the spectrum of the - otherwise praiseworthy - authors, the majority of whom are active in Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway. ESREA - the sponsor of this book - does after all form a large (or in any case larger) European potential of researchers or authors who can more richly document the theme of the effects of globalisation on working and learning, and in so doing could bring both the particular and universal character of the findings to the fore.

The editors have created structure from the contributions' diversity by ordering the articles in three parts. Part 1 of the book focuses on the micro level of working and learning, i.e. on understanding the learning process and the learners, leaders and trainers from an individual point of view. In Part 2 the meso level sheds light on organisations, professions and institutions, where work has shifted from being a site of carrying out standardised tasks to an environment for learning and shared generation of new knowledge and innovations. Part three of the book addresses the macro level by analysing how vocational, professional and adult education are governed, structured and organised. In a detailed "Introduction: Working and Learning in Times of Uncertainty" and an extensive "Conclusion: The Contested Field of Working and Learning", they have also clearly and critically highlighted the issue's line of thinking, the positioning of the contributions as well as the answers, and (five) focal themes for further consideration and research.

To indicate the meaning of this book for practitioners, policy makers and researchers alike, there now follow a handful of key conclusions with a few remarks in the margins.

The analysis of learning *in* and *for* work in this volume deals exclusively with paid labour. As the editors state in their concluding remarks, further research should take a broader view, in order to encompass collective productive activities, including civic activity and voluntary work.

Although adult education is mentioned in the subtitle of the book, the general or liberal adult education and its significance for the learners' personal and professional development, his/her empowerment and active citizenship in work and society, remains unexplored.

That said, a nuanced picture *is* painted of the actual-empirical configurations of learning in and for work. Four configurations are discerned: orientations towards behaviouristic control, a cognitivist emphasis on meaningfulness, a socio-cultural participation approach, and technology-mediated distributed learning.

Rather than observing large groups of low skilled workers in poor working conditions at the bottom of the global supplier chains benefit from rich learning environments provided, some articles offer evidence that new experiences in the workplace are what can transform an employee into an engaged learner. Nevertheless,

the editors raise the question of whether we are moving towards a new polarisation between higher-ranking autonomous professionals with autonomy, challenging jobs and learning opportunities, and the lower ranking workers with routine jobs and little autonomy.

An interesting perspective regarding lower ranking workers focusses on their learner identity. An analytical framework of the “learner identity” presented in one of the articles, embraces knowledge that emerges from people’s historical life experiences and their bodily and practical engagement in work. These elements evoke concerns and emotions about feelings of competence, and responsibility for the quality of work. It also shines a spotlight on people’s perceptions of their need and opportunities to participate in job-related adult education and training.

In work’s fluid globalized context, one of the complicated transition patterns from education to employment is the young graduate’s tendency to evade (traditional) vocational paths in order to keep his/her options open to the opportunity of higher education. This observation of “academic drift” and the fact that apprenticeship - which is called the archetypal form of learning a craft - has been replaced in most countries discussed in the articles, by school-based forms of learning is associated with a shift in the structuring of modern societies. In modern societies formal education and credentials have become more decisive for the attainment of social positions. As a consequence learning of standardised, codified and abstract knowledge *for work* in educational institutions has displaced the learning of situated, specific and embodied knowledge *in work*. At the same time, it must be clearly recognized that the large cohorts of graduates from higher education encounter problems gaining access to stable employment at an adequate qualification level. This observation provokes an inquest into the value of academic education, and a problematisation of the credentials’ inflation, over-qualification, under-employment, as well as the precarious employment situation of graduates.

A counterbalance to the domination of formal education and diplomas is - or could be - the recognition of prior learning. This represents a formal approach to identifying, assessing, and documenting knowledge that people have gained through experience and personal learning history, which needs further implementation in HRM practices. Research reported in this volume demonstrates the added value of this awareness by showing how a prior learning assessment process simultaneously produces new knowledge and initiates new learning processes, particularly when facilitated by discussion as the training method.

Another well-known problematic aspect of learning for work in academic settings and in off the job training, is the transfer of what has been learned. This transfer is, in many cases, inadequate, insufficient or completely absent. Not only do the collected data and data-analyses in some articles confirm this problem and challenge, but an interesting conceptual framework is also provided to better describe and understand the transfer issue. The framework is a re-conceptualisation of the notion of transfer, featuring an integrative model that approaches transfer through both process and outcome data and that links transfer and transformation. The model highlights how learning transfer in continuing vocational training should be understood as a context-related transformation of knowledge, where both the training and the work environment constitute learning resources for each other. Complementary to this model is the concept of “deferred transfer” as it has been conceived and tested in Spanish research.

To conclude, the editors highlight that the organisation of learning in and for work takes place in a field of tensions between power relations and opposing interests. Interesting

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contributions in this respect are the analysis of the influence of EU-policies on promoting and funding work related learning, and also the article revealing how in Spain - and probably also in other countries - the funding system for training programs can result in the satisfaction of powerful financial interests of large employer organisations, to the detriment of supporting participative worker training.

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