

## **‘Learning for Work or Learning through Work?’**

Nayda Veeman, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon

## **Abstract**

This paper suggests rethinking the conventional, linear relationship between education and work and argues that learning through work may be more effective than learning for work.

## **Governments and Learning**

Lifelong learning has become a government buzzword, but related policy discussions in Canada focus primarily on formal education, and do not account for the diverse literacies of family and community. In Sweden, the focus of policy discussions is also primarily on the formal education system however in that country there is a rich array of formal and informal learning opportunities for adults and also generous support for education from kindergarten to post-secondary education. It is a common assumption that education is a prerequisite for work but for some youth and adults, learning through work may be a more effective and meaningful approach

In this paper, I discuss the findings of a recent qualitative study of adult education policy in Canada and Sweden, a study that grew out of relative differences in adult literacy levels in the two countries. The personal stories I describe call for a need to rethink the conventional, linear relationship between education and work. They also pose questions about whether responsibility for education and lifelong learning should fall to the individual, business or government.

## **The Quantitative Perspective**

In the context of the global economy and "economic theory that regards education as a capital investment rather than an issue of human development" (Agnello, 2001)p. 32), it is not surprising that governments are interested in international comparisons. As Husén (1999) stated "policymakers, planners, and administrators want generalizations and rules which apply... to a whole system...[but] teaching and learning happens at the individual level" (p. 37). The International Adult Literacy Survey [IALS] (1995) provided a large-scale picture of literacy against a set international standard that placed a focus on the skills, and lack of them, of countries and individuals. When skills are measured against a standard, a deficit is quantified if standards are not met. Using everyday test items, the IALS revealed that many individuals may be disadvantaged in contemporary society, but it also positioned literacy as a technical skill. The resulting implication is that literacy skills will increase if the right methods and opportunities are made available through the formal education system. An empirical study such as IALS can not adequately explain the causes or nature of differences among countries, or even within countries, and is therefore not a sufficient basis for policy development.

According to the IALS (1995), Swedish adults demonstrated literacy levels that were consistently higher than those of Canadian adults. Literacy levels in Sweden are less dependent on level of school completed and are less closely tied to socio-economic status than are those in Canada. Initiatives in Sweden support both informal and formal learning. It was surprising therefore that Sweden was the first of the participating countries in IALS to implement a large national initiative, the Adult Education Initiative, to raise the educational level of its people (*kunskapslyftet [Knowledge Lift/Leap]*, 1997). This included study grants and study leave with priority given to the least educated in addition to the existing nation-wide system of adult

education provided by every municipality in the country. It is important to point out that all formal education in Sweden is free and childcare and school lunches are universal for children. It was therefore surprising to find that the older industrial workers were uninterested in this generous and widely available learning opportunity.

## **Learning for Work**

### **The Swedish Context**

It is worth noting that the under education of a subsection of the Swedish population was an issue that the national government addressed in 1968 when it established by law the municipal adult education system. This was expressly a compensatory system for those who had been excluded from higher education in the hierarchical school system that existed until 1957. "Adult education was no longer a marginal activity...with the introduction of adult 'education equivalent to primary and secondary school and...a permanent structure for educational TV and radio programmes' " (Rubenson, 1997, p. 72).

This system of municipal adult education still exists throughout Sweden and typically there are no waiting lists to get into the adult education programs. The current concern of policymakers is an aging population and the need to retrain older workers due to impending skill shortages. The Adult Education Initiative, a five year strategy introduced in 1992 was intended to diversify learning opportunities. The future of municipal adult education is uncertain since in 2006 municipalities will have full authority over their own budgets. In addition to the formal system, of course, study circles have existed in Sweden for the past one hundred years, as well as folk high schools. The Swedish national government provides funding for these and other learning opportunities for adults.

### **The Canadian Context**

Canada faces similar challenges of an aging workforce but, in this case, coexisting with is high unemployment among aboriginal youth in the face of significant skill shortages. In this study, rural and urban communities in each country were studied in depth. In Saskatchewan, the site of one community in the study, Aboriginal people make up approximately 95% of students in adult upgrading and literacy programs (Veeman, Walker, & Ward, 2003), reflecting their difficulties in negotiating the school system. Canada is dealing with the under education of a significant subsection of the population and the need for a compensatory system to redress the situation. In some ways this is parallel to the under education that existed in Sweden in the fifties. Canadian counsellors, coordinators and program participants in this study all confirmed that there are lengthy waiting lists to get into adult basic education programs.

## **The Personal Perspective**

The framework of "New Literacy Studies" (for example, Barton & Hamilton, 1998) seeks to understand literacy within the framework of social practice, rather than as a set of autonomous, hierarchically organized skills. The research described in this session took a sociocultural view of adult literacy, and used an ethnographically informed methodological approach to compare adult literacy in Sweden and Canada.

It was of interest to find that the goals of adults are similar in the two countries, namely improved lives, jobs or higher education as a way to a job. It was also surprising to find that some Swedes, particularly middle-aged industrial workers, were not interested in formal education in spite of the generous support they could get. Findings did point out two interesting ways that work and learning were related.

### **Learning through Work**

In the Canadian study, on occasion, adults attended trades training courses such as while waiting to get into the regular adult program. In the words of one forty year old man  
“I took a cabinet-making course here ... I went to pursue (education) after I done that, the kind of work we were doing there, I think it was 10, 11, and 12, and I found myself that I could do it.”

This man had gained confidence by doing a practical course where he worked with his hands and at the same time could see the relevance of the math and English needed in the course. He realized that he could learn and that he could succeed in a school setting.

Another young man had had a similar experience as a result of taking a welding course while waiting to get into adult upgrading. For individuals with unpleasant memories of unsuccessful and interrupted schooling, these practical hands-on courses showed them they had skills and also showed them how school learning related to something tangible. This was a demonstrable example of Sticht's (1997) functional context education where learning is most effective when it has a functional role for individuals. (Sticht, 1997)

In Sweden, the example I will share deals with industrial workers and workers from the social sector (home care and schools). These workers earn up to four times what they could get for a study grant so it was hard to interest them in studying (in the formal system). Through an arrangement between the trade union and the employer, workers could take one paid day off a week over a thirty week period to study the core high school courses. I met with a group of five women and three men who were attending one such school; half of the class was made up of those high paid Volvo workers, those who were not interested in a year of study leave. They studied English, Swedish, Math and computers for one day a week with “salary” (a little less than their regular salaries) paid by the union. The oldest person in the group was a woman with only six years of schooling. The motives better education so they could help their children and also to do something different. Most of these people had been out of school for 15 -20 years and so even learning to sit in class and to talk with other people for a day was important. This could open the door to further learning for them.

### **Personal Goals and Public Policy**

In Livingstone's (1998) words “to live is to learn (and) continual social learning is the most distinctive feature of human beings” (p. 12). These above observations support Langer's (1987) statement that “literacy learning begins and continues when people understand its advantages and know it will benefit them” (p. 13). A recent study in Canada found that over 95% of Canadian adults had participated in informal learning during the month when the survey was conducted (Livingstone, 2000). Shouldn't public policy support and build on informal learning and nonformal learning? It also raises questions about the premises of a second Canadian study

that seeks to find out why adults do not participate in adult upgrading and literacy programs (Long, 2002).

Literacy and learning has become like a commodity with emphasis put on the product, how it is packaged and sold, but not on what the consumer wants to buy. Individuals may not see the need for the dominant literacy skills within the context of their everyday lives. They may have a good job or consider the possibility of a better one too remote and they may have unpleasant memories of previous school experiences. In Canada, policy tends to focus on public awareness to create a demand for learning with less concern about the supply of learning opportunities. In Sweden the policy focus has been on the supply side.

Can individually motivated learning address the demands of the workplace and the society? The Canadian and Swedish examples given in this paper show that work related learning experiences can provide the confidence to take on other learning challenges. This can happen through the building of technical or trade related skills or when employers provide tangible support for learning outside the workplace provided that it meets the goals and interests of workers.

## References

- Agnello, M. F. (2001). *A postmodern literacy policy analysis*. New York: P. Lang.
- Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (1998). *Local literacies: Reading and writing in one community*. London: Routledge.
- Husén, T. (1999). Research paradigms in education. In J. P. Keeves & G. Lakomski (Eds.), *Issues in educational research* (pp. 31-39). Oxford, England: Pergamon.
- IALS. (1995). *Literacy, economy and society: Results of the first International Adult Literacy Survey* (9264146555). Paris/Ottawa ON: OECD & Statistics Canada.
- kunskapslyftet [Knowledge Lift/Leap]* (1997). National Board of Adult Education. Retrieved December 2001, 2001, from the World Wide Web:  
<http://www.kunskapslyftet.gov.se/english/>
- Livingstone, D. W. (1998). *The education-jobs gap: Underemployment or economic democracy*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Livingstone, D. W. (2000). *Exploring the icebergs of adult learning: Findings of the first Canadian survey of informal learning practices*. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Retrieved October 31, 2002, from the World Wide Web:  
<http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/sese/csew/nall/res/10exploring.htm>
- Long, E. (2002). *Why aren't they calling? Nonparticipation in literacy and upgrading programs*. Toronto: ABC CANADA Foundation.
- Rubenson, K. (1997). Sweden: The impact of the politics of participation. In P. Bélanger & S. Valdivielso (Eds.), *The emergence of learning societies: Who participates in adult learning?* (1st ed., pp. 71-93). Oxford/New York: Pergamon & UNESCO Institute for Education.
- Sticht, T. (1997). *Functional context education and welfare reform*. San Diego, CA: San Diego Consortium for Workforce Education and Lifelong Learning.
- Veeman, N., Walker, K., & Ward, A. (2003). Comparing Adult Education in Canada and Sweden. *Unpublished*. (see <http://www.usask.ca/education/alcs/>)