

# *Forum / Tribune*

## Are We Aiding the Enemy? Adult Education in the Global Economy

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the impact of economic globalization on the future of work. It argues against the view of training as a panacea for solving our economic problems and suggests a role for adult educators to take in proposing and supporting alternate solutions.

### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article étudie à fond les répercussions de la mondialisation économique sur l'avenir du travail. Dans son article, l'auteur donne ses raisons pour lesquelles la formation n'est pas un remède universel pour résoudre nos problèmes économiques. Aussi suggère-t-elle un rôle que peuvent jouer les éducateurs d'adultes dans la proposition et le soutien des autres options.

## INTRODUCTION

Economic globalization is a potent force that gives enormous power to transnational corporations at the expense of national economies. This fundamental redesign of the world's economic arrangements is nothing less than a form of corporate colonialism that further impoverishes poor people worldwide, widens the gap between the working rich and the working poor, and creates a climate of fear, anxiety and helplessness among the vast majority of people.

Working from a social change perspective and building on a review of the literature, I explore the impact of economic globalization on the future of work and argue against the view of training as a panacea for solving economic problems. I suggest a role for university adult educators to take in proposing and supporting alternate solutions.

## THE PROBLEM

Economic globalization is changing the world of work rapidly. In Canada, two interwoven forces—the corporate push for “competitiveness” and the use of new technology—have caused a major dislocation of workers on a massive scale. Driving down costs has become the most important priority for business (Drache & Gertler, 1991); as a result, workers are being replaced by new technology at an unprecedented rate (Menzies, 1996).

In the past, workers who were replaced by technology were often absorbed into new jobs, many of them created by the technology itself. Today, however, workers in all the traditional sectors—agriculture, service, and manufacturing—are experiencing massive layoffs with nowhere else to go. Rifkin (1995) notes:

The only new sector emerging is the knowledge sector, made up of a small elite of entrepreneurs, scientists, technicians, computer programmers, professionals, educators, and consultants. While this sector is growing, it is not expected to absorb more than a fraction of the hundreds of millions who will be eliminated in the next several decades. (pp. xvi–xvii)

Words from the business culture such as “restructuring,” “downsizing,” “dejobbing,” “flexibility,” “re-engineering,” and “outsourcing” have become part of our everyday language. For most people, these words have only one meaning: in their quest for profits, corporations are laying off workers.

Barlow and Robertson (1994) argue that the assertion of corporations that they are being forced to restructure in order to survive in the new global economy is blatantly false. In reality, they say, the deliberate decisions of these corporations are motivated solely by the desire to cut costs and increase profits. Indeed, managers are rewarded with bonuses and salary increases for aggressively slashing their workforces.

In the new global economy, workers' demand for a living wage is a major source of inefficiency for employers. Consequently, corporations are "acting to purge themselves of this unwanted burden" (Korten, 1995, p. 237). With the threat of further layoffs hanging over their head, those who remain are being pressured to work far beyond their ability, to do twice the work in half the time.

This strategy is having a devastating effect on many Canadians. Rifkin (1995) says "the re-engineering of work is eliminating jobs of all kinds and in greater numbers than at any time in recent memory" (p. 105). He also says the process "is only in its infancy" (p. 105) and already we are paying the price in terms of rising unemployment and falling consumer purchasing power. Although a few people are benefiting from the so-called current economic boom, these benefits have bypassed many Canadians. The gap between the rich and the poor has widened considerably (Mitchell, 1997), and more and more people have been thrown into poverty (Cross, 1997).

We are entrenched in what the experts call a "jobless" recovery. We are told we must adapt to a world without jobs, to a world where people work on short-term contracts and move in and out of the labour market in response to its demands (Bridges, 1994). Under the new rules, people must become entrepreneurs and sell themselves on a piecework basis. Consequently, wages will fall and benefits will disappear. Rifkin (1995) states:

The new technologies are bringing us into an era of near workerless production at the very moment in world history when population is surging to unprecedented levels. The clash between rising population pressures and falling job opportunities will shape the geopolitics of the emerging high-tech global economy well into the next century. (p. 207)

Everywhere we see the effects of this economic shift: high unemployment, falling real wages, a growing wage inequity, the weakening of unions, increasing poverty, and a general feeling of helplessness among many people. More and more workers find themselves in part-time,

temporary, low-wage jobs without benefits. Many are treated as the “human equivalent of post-it notes: marginal add-ons used briefly, then discarded, without a sound and without leaving a trace” (Menziez, 1996, p. 10), expected to be grateful to have jobs at all.

Canadian political leaders seem to have no plan to deal with this crisis. On the one hand, we are told we must adapt to a world without jobs, to a world where people must become “contingent,” “non-standard,” or “contract” workers and move in and out of the workforce as needed. On the other hand, we have a federal unemployment policy that penalizes people who take seasonal and /or short-term jobs and collect Employment Insurance (EI) on a repeat basis. Why? Because they are perceived to be taking advantage of the system. They are told they should be taking longer-term jobs.

But isn't the new world of work just that? Aren't more and more people being thrown out of full-time jobs? Aren't they being forced to take short-term, part-time contingency work? Isn't this what the corporate elite calls the “agile workforce”? Isn't this what flexibility is all about? At the same time that people are being tossed out of work, we are losing our social safety net. To make matters worse, our political leaders seem to be indifferent to the plight of people being thrown into poverty. As Prime Minister Jean Chretien said at a CBC Town Hall meeting (December 1996), “Some are lucky, some are unlucky.”

Rifkin (1995) warns that “a near-workerless world is fast approaching and may arrive well before society has sufficient time to either debate its broad implications or prepare for its full impact” (p. 106).

The growing hordes of the poor and jobless... will not remain quiescent. As the new industrial revolution spreads its devastation through the economy, we can expect more family break-ups, more abuse of women and children, more antisocial behaviour of all kinds. Trapped in a downward spiral, and with fewer and less dependable safety nets to break their fall, a growing number of the unemployed will decide to take by force what is denied them in the shrinking jobs market. The incidence of crime—especially violent crime—will escalate. (Jobs, 1995, p. 2)

## THE TRAINING DEBATE

Training is being portrayed as a panacea for solving our unemployment problems. We are told that Canada will need a highly skilled workforce in the future and we must prepare for it now. As adult educators, this story goes, it is our role to train people for the new high-technology jobs that will be created; this training is essential if Canada is to be competitive in the global marketplace. Many adult educators have bought into this theory, believing it to be true. They believe in the importance of helping people to become “lifelong learners” and to adjust to the new global economy.

But training is a straw man and we cannot allow ourselves to be seduced by this rhetoric. Dunk, McBride, and Nelsen (1996), using a framework developed by Edwards (1993), stress that the present demands for increased training are elements of an ideology that views unemployment as a temporary problem, criticizes the education system for failing to meet the requirements of the new global economy, and blames the unemployed for their “inadequate” skills. It assumes that, once the training system is reformed and adequate training opportunities exist, all will be well. If people continue to be unemployed, the fault will be theirs: indeed, they will be judged as being either unwilling or unable to develop new job skills.

Dunk et al. (1996) argue that training is “being advanced as a substitute for an economic and industrial strategy rather than as part of one” (p. 18). Training then becomes a stand-alone policy disconnected from any serious industrial strategy. Unemployment becomes an individual “deficit” problem rather than a systemic one resulting from deliberate economic policies.

NB Works, a New Brunswick workfare/learnfare program that began in 1992 with a mandate to provide academic upgrading, training, and job placements for selected social assistance recipients, provides an example of the weakness of this strategy. Based on beliefs about poor people that are steeped in neo-conservatism and Poor Law mentality (Mullaly, 1997, p. 51), NB Works states that the problem in the province is not high unemployment but the unemployed (Mullaly, p. 52).

Mullaly (1997) points out two major problems with this program: high program costs and the lack of jobs. With a budget of \$177 million over six years, NB Works would cost \$59,000 per person if all 3,000 participants accepted into the program were to complete it. However, the cost per person has skyrocketed because of the high dropout rate. After 30 months

of activity, only 33 percent of the participants in the first intake remained in the program; two-thirds of the participants had dropped out (Mullaly, 1997).

The main problem, however, is the lack of job opportunities in the province. In his interviews with NB Works' participants, Mullaly (1997) found that no one had secured a job. At the time of his study (1995), while no official employment figures had been collected, only ten subsidized work placements had been developed (p. 45). He argues that in a province like New Brunswick, with an double-digit unemployment rate and many university graduates unable to find employment, this type of training program has virtually no chance of success. Mullaly says:

This, of course, is the "Achilles Heel" of all workfare [learnfare] programs. In a high unemployment economy such programs simply increase the competition for jobs, rather than reducing unemployment or doing anything about the structural causes of unemployment.  
(p. 45)

There is a clear contradiction in the current drive for more and better training. Governments and business continually stress the need for a highly skilled workforce, saying this is essential for Canada is to maintain its competitiveness abroad. However, their actions speak louder than their words. In fact, on-the-job training in Canadian businesses "is so negligible that it ranks at the very bottom of the list of industrialized countries" ("Training," 1996, p. 2). Similarly, while publicly demanding that post-secondary institutions provide more relevant education and skills training, governments are drastically slashing funds for universities, colleges, and technical institutes. The cuts are so deep that many institutions are eliminating programs and departments, increasing class sizes, slashing library and other support programs, and raising tuition fees, thus effectively denying access to many students and lowering the quality of post-secondary education. Academic disciplines such as the humanities, arts, and social sciences, which do not readily serve the corporate job market, are particularly vulnerable. Those disciplines that do serve this market tend to receive increased funding.

Despite the lip service they pay to the need for increased training, governments and business are not translating their words into action. Why?

The Canadian economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will never require more than 20% of its work force to have better than a high-school education. That 20% comprises the managerial, professional and technocratic

elite. The other 80% are to be forced to compete with serf, slave, prison and child labour in Asia and Latin America. No particular skills needed here. Just hard physical labour, long hours and low pay. (Training, 1996, p. 2)

Canada is being restructured. The corporate agenda is to drive down wages, eliminate benefits, weaken unions, and make profits on the backs of underpaid contract workers. As a result, poverty is growing rapidly.

Today's high levels of unemployment, poverty and injustice in Canada are not the result of an inadequately educated work force. They are the result of deregulation, high real interest rates, low-cost competition, anti-unionism, and the mass layoffs and deindustrialization that were unleashed by the two free trade agreements. (Training, 1996, p. 2)

Canada's unemployment situation is brutal. In the past, people with educational qualifications and skills could look forward to particular jobs, but these jobs no longer exist. Consequently, even if politicians and corporations were sincere about developing a highly skilled workforce, "all we would end up with would be more people with degrees stuffing envelopes or serving Big Macs" (Training, 1996, p. 2).

The escalating surplus of skilled workers is the "Achilles heel" of the new global economy (Barnet & Cavanagh, 1994, p. 425). The rapidly increasing number of people with degrees and technical skills who have seen their job disappear and their income fall "mock the idea that unemployment can be eliminated simply by improving education and job training" (Korten, 1995, p. 19).

By supporting the rhetoric on skills training, we, as adult educators, are being manipulated. We are not looking at the whole picture. Instead, we are addressing unemployment as an individual "deficit" problem—as individual wounds to be healed with Band-Aids—rather than the creeping, systemic "whole body" disease that it is. And when we blame unemployed people for the situation in which they find themselves, we become part of the problem.

## A ROLE FOR UNIVERSITY ADULT EDUCATORS

There are two distinct camps among university adult educators: the social activists, who view adult education as a vehicle for social change and tend to oppose the idea of training as a "solution" to a structural problem, and

the entrepreneurs, who see education as a product to be bought and sold and tend to see training for the competitive marketplace of the future as an opportunity to be seized. The activist/entrepreneurial debate has received considerable attention in the literature (Cruikshank, 1991, 1993, 1994; Selman, 1985, 1994; Welton, 1987a, 1987b), and is an ideological debate that will continue well into the future as it clearly reflects the broader discourse over the corporate restructuring of Canada.

As adult educators, we are told there are no alternatives: we have no choice but to adjust to the new global reality. But there is another choice. Rather than accept this new reality, university adult educators who believe in the importance of education for social justice should challenge this new reality and work to change it.

With the recent budget cuts, many universities have rushed to develop corporate alliances in an attempt to obtain much-needed funds. Thus, although most universities, and particularly their continuing education departments, have chosen to support the training agenda, there are activist adult educators, both within these departments and within the broader university community, who question this approach. Clearly, there are limits to what we can do, but there are still spaces within the university from which to work. Four adult education strategies provide a starting point for our struggle.

### 1. *Inform Ourselves*

As adult educators, we must become more informed not only about economic globalization and the future of work, but also about the role adult education is expected to play in this process. We need to discuss and debate these issues at our conferences and in our journals, our organizations, and our workplaces. In order to develop adult educational activities for and with the broader community we must have a clear understanding of the issues.

Newman (1994) writes of the importance of understanding the enemy—their values, ideologies, and motives. He believes this to be essential if realistic strategies are to be developed to oppose them. Clearly, this is relevant to our current struggle. We must learn more, and thus understand more, about the people behind the corporate agenda, their strategies and, in particular, the media strategies they use to sway the public to accept the inevitability of their views. We must learn to use the media more effectively ourselves—to expose the weaknesses of the corporate approach and to show that alternate economic policies are preferable. Without a clear

understanding of the opposition, we will remain on the defensive.

There are some very good critical analyses of the corporate agenda that would help us gain this understanding. Four works in particular provide an excellent starting point: Tony Clark's (1997) *Silent Coup*; Linda McQuaig's (1995) *Shooting the Hippo*; Heather Menzies' (1996) *Whose Brave New World?*, and John Ralston Saul's (1995) *The Unconscious Civilization*.

## 2. *Stimulate public discussion and debate*

To date, there has been limited public discussion and debate around these issues. Universities have not made a serious effort to describe the nature of and the ideologies behind the rush towards economic globalization (Mander, 1996) and the use of new technology. As Korten (1996) notes, it is imperative that we "get these issues on the table and bring them into the mainstream policy debates" (p. 30). As university adult educators, we can play a role in stimulating debate at the community level. We can develop educational activities (public forums, workshops, seminars, conferences, study groups, and courses) to help people in our communities develop an understanding of the forces and values that are driving the economic globalization agenda, debate the implications for the future of work, and propose and explore a range of alternative visions and strategies.

We need to open up the debate and ask questions such as:

- How do we see work?
- How do we see remuneration for work?
- How do we protect the masses of people who will be dislocated by the introduction of new technology?
- What kind of role should government play?
- What responsibility do corporations have to the communities and countries in which they operate?
- What kind of world do we want to live in?

These important questions must be discussed, even though some doors within the university now may be closed to this type of work because of the rush towards university / corporate alliances and the need to not bite the hand that funds them. However, adult educators can use other strategies. For example, it is important to develop alliances with socially committed faculty from other academic disciplines in the university, as well as with community groups and organizations, in the development and delivery of, at least some of, this work. This approach could open up alternate

community-oriented funding sources; it could also informally move some of these activities from a continuing education base to a wider community / university base (thus moving it further away from possible outside interference from corporate funders), which would broaden the base of support for this work.

### 3. *Propose alternatives*

University adult educators can work with people to propose alternatives by going beyond the demands for training and exploring alternate economic strategies. Various strategies have been proposed: a shorter work week, jobsharing, a guaranteed annual income, a reinforced social safety net, a shift towards paying people to work in the NGO (non-government organization) sector, and an increased focus on supporting community economic development initiatives, to name a few (Cameron, 1991; Nozick, 1992; O'Hara, 1993; Rifkin, 1995). We can provide research and educational support to groups and organizations that propose democratic alternatives, and we can help to develop other socially responsible visions of the future.

### 4. *Develop international links*

As Barlow (1997) observes, we are engaged in a global struggle and "international action is essential to counter the power of transnational corporations" (p. 7). We can develop links with adult educators in other countries who are working on these issues, and look for ways to support each other's work. Sharing information could, hopefully, lead to joint educational and organizational projects and strategies.

## CONCLUSION

Historically, adult education in Canada has had a strong social purpose and vision. Illsley (1992) believes it is a field designed to help people face the future, stating, "What kind of future is most desirable to adult educators?... Certain images of the future favour only certain groups of people, depending on the values contained in and served by these images" (p. 32).

In the past, adult educators have helped people in times of crisis (Selman & Dampier, 1991; Welton, 1987a, 1987b). Our society is now experiencing a major crisis and, as adult educators, we are being asked to support a system that works against the interests of ordinary people. Skill training that is divorced from a comprehensive economic strategy supports a corporate vision of society—a vision that favours the rich and penalizes the poor.

We cannot allow ourselves to be manipulated into viewing training as a panacea for solving Canada's economic problems. Rather than looking at training in isolation, we must explore new ways of living and working. We must look at different ways of redesigning our economy so that it serves the interests of people, not of corporations.

We must be clear about our values and where we, as adult educators, want to locate ourselves in the current crisis. If we decide to give unconditional support to the corporate agenda and simply focus on training people to adapt to the corporate view of the world, then I believe we will have lost the values and the vision of our past.

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