

Reviews / Comptes rendus

The Knowledge Economy and Lifelong Learning: A Critical Reader

*edited by D. W. Livingstone and David Guile
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If there were to be a competition for the most recent educational concepts that are bandied about so frequently but so casually, the “knowledge economy” and “lifelong learning” would be two of the leading contenders. Both terms have featured prominently in the mass media and numerous social, economic, and educational policy discussions over the past two decades, yet each suffers from a lack of consistency and clarity, and has been inadequately theorized and critiqued. In particular, the absence of much careful and critical analysis of the ways these notions intersect renders the dominant claims made about them and the ways they are being applied virtually meaningless.

Thankfully, D. W. Livingstone and David Guile address this concern head on. They question the common assumptions that (a) the increasing speed of innovation in new knowledge-intensive commodities is necessary for economic prosperity, and (b) workers must now engage in greater learning throughout their lives to respond to this imperative. In their book, they set out to answer two questions: Is the notion of a knowledge economy becoming a new global reality? Is lifelong learning an effective strategy to cope with it? To help them find answers, they have assembled a broad array of international scholars from the fields of business, economics, sociology, political science, and educational studies.

They break their book into 15 chapters in two sections. The first section analyzes the most commonly recognized features of the knowledge economy and the development of learning societies that rely upon an increase in lifelong learning to enable further innovation and more knowledge-intensive products. In addition to these general critiques, chapters discuss more specific issues: the use of policy measures—such as information and communication technologies, and investment in research and development—to demonstrate the knowledge-driven character of modern economies; the nature and supposed democratization of knowledge; the associations among education, jobs and their rewards, communities of practice, and information exchange in social networks; and the shifting relationships between capital and labour. The

second section extends this analysis and examines specific examples of where learning innovations intended to foster workplace transformation are supposed to be happening. Chapters explore the different ways that occupations use knowledge to sustain and develop products and services, and increase occupational expertise and identity. Drawing upon examples from various industries and occupations—food processing and distribution, retail sales, software engineering, and school teaching—they identify and accentuate the complex interplay of work and learning.

Overall, Livingstone and Guile conclude that the claims of a general transfer to a knowledge economy have been exaggerated and simplified; the reality is more complicated and uneven. Although there has been a significant downturn in manufacturing industries and concomitant growth in the service, financial, and information-processing sectors, capitalist modes of production still dominate private enterprise. Despite widening access to knowledge and greater entrepreneurial or cognitive activity by some workers, such workers still have little say in decisions about, for example, their workload, financial issues, job design, or the types of products or services they provide. In addition, the presumption that knowledge-based economies require an increasingly more formally qualified labour force is demonstrably false. In fact, many workers in industrialized countries are increasingly becoming over-qualified for the jobs they do. The case studies in section two show that the equation of formal qualifications with job skills and knowledge has encouraged workers to engage in an unnecessary race for qualifications that might possibly enhance their job prospects and earnings. Further, the responsibilities for additional job training have been shifted from employers and governments on to individual workers who now have to ensure and demonstrate that they have the sufficient (formal) qualifications to do their work.

This poses challenges for many educational institutions that increasingly describe their degree and certificate programs and couch their recruitment efforts in terms of enhancing job-related skills. However, while not advocating less work-related training, this book questions its dominant approach. It won't surprise most adult and continuing educators to learn that, contrary to much received opinion, knowledge and learning can neither be reduced to commodities nor diminished by use. In fact, the more they are used, the greater they become. Also, informal learning in the workplace is far more important than most employers or policy-makers credit. The case studies indicate that informal learning, although largely ignored by educational institutions, is more extensive and has a greater effect on job performance and individual development than previously acknowledged. Yet, as Livingstone and Guile show, there is almost no recent research on the interrelations between formal education and informal learning in paid work or learning related to unpaid work.

To address this issue and to better acknowledge workplace epistemic cultures and their modes of informal learning, the authors put forward several suggestions for policy-makers and educators to consider. Specifically, they suggest that the transitions from formal education to work and from present work (or unemployment) to future work be reconceptualized as the development of vocational practice and social capital. In addition, they argue that learning is better conceived as the development of judgment rather than the accumulation of prespecified and standardized outcomes. Finally, they recommend that more "heterarchical" modes of planning and delivery for educational policies be introduced. By this they mean that policy-makers should involve other stakeholders (particularly, those directly affected by the policies) in the coordination and governance of any subsequent changes. For example, when considering policy changes for workplace training, greater involvement by local representatives of employers, workers, unions, and local governments would allow for the coproduction of new firm- or region-specific training models.

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Wide-ranging and theoretically sophisticated, this book draws upon a broad variety of concepts and approaches—such as cultural historical activity theory, labour process theory, symbolic interactionism, and semiotics—to explore the contextual and relational concepts of knowledge societies and lifelong learning. It will be essential reading for those researchers, policy makers, educators, and graduate students who wish to explore and engage in debates about alternative approaches to the conventional wisdom that the knowledge economy is a new global reality to which everyone must adjust through increased lifelong learning. Highly recommended.

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