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Introduction

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Introduction

Abstract

Children are sent to school and told they must learn. Adults do their learning on a mostly voluntary basis. School is traditionally intended to prepare children for adult life and to pass on the wisdom of previous generations. Adult education is traditionally intended to offer citizens the possibility of bettering themselves and of filling gaps in their initial schooling. School is life's compulsory initiation. Adult learning has often been seen as life's optional extra.

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Introduction

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Children are sent to school and told they must learn. Adults do their learning on a mostly voluntary basis. School is traditionally intended to prepare children for adult life and to pass on the wisdom of previous generations. Adult education is traditionally intended to offer citizens the possibility of bettering themselves and of filling gaps in their initial schooling. School is life's compulsory initiation. Adult learning has often been seen as life's optional extra.

In recent years there has been a strengthening of the ideal that learning is a continuing experience for all adults, rather than concentrating education and training resources mainly for youth. Such an ideal has been long advocated on the grounds of individual opportunity. However, lately it has been enhanced by the fairly convincing case that there is also a strong societal interest in achieving it: The world has become more complex and more changeable and will function better if citizens and workers continue learning throughout their lives.

The perception that greater adult participation in education and training could be of benefit not only to individuals but also to society—and particularly to the economy—has caused many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries to consider devoting more resources, both public and private, to adult learning programs. As long as participation remains voluntary, a society of *lifelong learning* cannot simply be decreed by program providers in the way that universal youth education is decreed by legislators. An adult will learn when given sufficient motives to do so. Therefore, societies cannot promote adult learning for collective ends without keeping sight of individual motivations and incentives.

This book looks at what makes adults participate in education and training, particularly in relation to work. Effective participation depends on a suitable course being offered, on the offer being accepted, and on the learning being effective. The book, therefore, considers three kinds of incentives: to provide education and training, to accept learning opportunities, and to learn effectively.

In the chapters that follow it becomes clear that effective adult learning is being constrained by the failure these the incentives to exist simultaneously. For example, when workers are not offered the training that they would like, when educational programs are not accepted by target groups, or when workers learn little from training programs because their roles at work remain the same, incentives need to be brought into closer harmony. The remainder of this introduction describes three potential conflicts that need to be resolved to achieve this harmony.

SOCIETAL INTEREST VERSUS INDIVIDUAL OPPORTUNITY

The growing recognition during the past decade of links between a learning workforce and economic performance has strengthened arguments for increased education and training for adults, yet at the same time has changed the nature of the education and training offered.

Meeting in Paris in 1990, the education ministers of the 24 OECD countries described initial education as “a start to lifelong learning” (OECD, 1992b, p. 33) and identified one of their main aims as the development of new learning opportunities to allow adults to “participate actively in today’s rapidly changing labor market and society” (p. 33). At the political level today, it is generally accepted that new technologies have reduced the need for unskilled labor and increased the need for a well-educated and well-trained workforce and that the desired results will not be achieved without considerable attention to the knowledge and skills of today’s adults.

Twenty years ago, recurrent education and training were being advocated in rather different terms. Then the stress was on improving individual educational opportunities across the life span, as well as creating greater flexibility between experiences in learning and in work (see, for example, OECD, 1973). Now that it is widely recognized that an increasing proportion of new jobs requires greater basic and problem-solving skills, the quality of the workforce as a whole has replaced individual opportunity as the prime goal. At one level such a shift could be of potential benefit to individual workers: The result could be to make all jobs more interesting and rewarding. At another level, as the stress shifts from individual rights to the productivity of the firm or the whole economy, the interests of the individual worker could be neglected.

In practice, however, a strategy to raise the level of education and training among adults will fail if it neglects the benefits—and hence the incentives—to the individual. As discussed in the following two sections of this chapter, adult learners need clear incentives both to participate in education and training programs and to learn effectively within them.

There is an interesting contrast in the chapters that follow between those (by Puchner, Chapter 11, and by Stromquist, Chapter 12) focusing on lessons from the Third World and those directly addressing the perspective of developed countries. The former put significant emphasis on the role of literacy programs to give opportunities to members of disadvantaged groups; the latter tend to assume that adult learning is desirable from a more universal perspective, related in particular to economic performance. At the extremes adult learning might be seen, on the one hand, as a purely political process involving the empowerment of certain groups, or on the other, as a necessary tool for achieving economic efficiency. Although the *empowerment* perspective comes into sharpest relief in the Third World, where illiteracy clearly limits the power of large sections of the population, it can also be applied to marginalized groups in industrialized countries, sometimes referred to as the *Fourth World*.

However, the different perspectives may not conflict as much as it first appears. As mentioned above, individual interests need to be addressed in order to provide sufficient incentives for adults to learn, whatever the underlying social motive for wanting them to do so. In addition, the economic efficiency perspective is increasingly in line with the approach of targeting underserved groups. The existence of a large number of undereducated, underskilled workers creates serious problems in an advanced economy. Indeed, growing alarm about adult illiteracy in industrialized countries seems to be due less to declining education levels than to rising intellectual expectations of workers, as the need for unskilled manual labor declines. Although Western economies may

be able to cope with the existence of relatively small marginalized groups, surveys finding that possibly more than one-third of the adults have difficulty applying literacy skills in complex situations raise justifiable concern (for example, see Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993, for a large-scale adult literacy survey recently carried out in the United States). Such high low-literacy levels have created a political desire to improve education and training opportunities for less advantaged adults, thereby enabling them to play a more useful and rewarding part in the workforce.

INCENTIVES TO PROVIDERS VERSUS INCENTIVES TO LEARNERS

Despite the broad coincidence of interest between economic efficiency and available education and training opportunities for individuals, the specific interests of employers and other potential education and training providers do not always match those of potential learners. Whereas the general education or training level of the population might affect a nation's productivity, the rewards to an individual are not always direct, in terms of pay, status, mobility, or responsibility. Training programs for the unemployed, for example, do not always lead to good jobs; employer-based training may not lead to a pay raise or a promotion. However, employers who support training of value to individuals may not always reap the benefit in countries and industries in which job mobility between companies is great.

A number of chapters in this book, in particular those of Ryan, Bishop, Mikulecky, Wells, and Luttringer, address the incentives conflict between providers and learners from different viewpoints. In terms of financial incentives, Ryan (Chapter 1) identifies an important distinction between the cases of training sponsored by employers and those sponsored by individuals or governments. On the whole, workers accept training when it is offered by their employers and appear collectively to want more of it than they get: thus, in the case of employer-sponsored training, incentives for providers need the most attention. *Self-sponsored* training, however, tends to incur higher costs to the individual and to offer less certain rewards; in this case, incentives to the learner become the most significant constraint.

A recurring theme in this book, addressed most directly by Bishop (Chapter 2), is the apparent failure of employers, left to their own devices, to provide an optimal level of training for their workers. Bishop examines reasons for *market failure* related to real externalities in terms of benefits to outside parties as well as to the distortions created, in the United States, by government regulations and tax systems. Looking at France, Luttringer (Chapter 3) argues, in contrast, that government is

capable of boosting training provision through legislation to give direct financial incentives to employers to train their workers.

Mikulecky (Chapter 9) focuses on workplace literacy programs by identifying a number of incentives that may be needed to encourage individual participation and by giving examples of measures to provide them. He emphasizes the limited generalizability of any one incentive, as different individuals and groups face different constraints. Indeed, workplace literacy programs could be seen as an exception to Ryan's rule that generally employees welcome training: Many feel threatened by the offer of remediation for fear that the admission of reading difficulties could damage their job prospects. Nonetheless, Mikulecky concludes that employers who have committed themselves to workplace literacy programs have the ability to create strong incentives for employee participation.

One possible conclusion is that differences in incentives could increase polarization between more and less privileged groups beyond the differences caused by inequalities in access to education and training. Well-placed professional workers with secure jobs have strong incentives to accept employer offers of training when it costs them little or nothing in time and money and when they can see direct benefits in terms of prospects in their firm. Workers with literacy difficulties who feel insecure in their jobs and people outside of work who are uncertain of the future payoff of costly investments in their own skills may view the offers differently.

A crucial element in the concept, as offered by Ryan and by Rubenson and Schütze, is the role of qualifications. As Rubenson and Schütze (Chapter 7) point out, qualifications acquired in the context of work have many advantages over those resulting from external courses; yet, as Ryan (Chapter 1) points out, employers are understandably reluctant to certify skills acquired in house in ways that make it easier for workers to move to other firms. As on-the-job qualifications gain in significance at the expense of external ones, those outside or on the fringes of the labor market are likely to become more firmly excluded.

As noted above, such polarization is likely to hurt not only disadvantaged groups but the whole economy because advanced economies require high literacy and skill levels of the great majority of workers, not just of an elite. This is the case for public intervention to improve learning incentives where they are weakest and, in particular, to help excluded groups to undertake education and training in a context as close to the workplace as possible. Such public intervention does not necessarily imply across-the-board subsidies or legal obligations for employers who give training. Intervention may need to be done selectively and designed in partnership with employers to promote not only participation in courses, but effective and relevant learning.

LEARNING PARTICIPATION VERSUS EFFECTIVE LEARNING

Sending workers to training courses is no guarantee that they will learn skills relevant to their performance at work. This limitation is more important today than it was 20 or 30 years ago because of the increasing need for workers to acquire more than just narrow technical skills. Broader competencies, such as the effective use of literacy and communication skills and efficiency at problem solving and teamwork, are growing in relative importance. The acquisition of such competencies may depend less on the number of courses attended than on the context in which learning takes place and the circumstances in which it is applied. Thus, there are needs for incentives for providers and learners not just to carry out education and training activity, but also to ensure that it is effective.

The need for broader competencies emerges most forcefully in the chapters by Rubenson and Schütze (Chapter 7), Hirschhorn (Chapter 5) and Ford (Chapter 6), and also figures in those by Luttringer (Chapter 3), Sticht (Chapter 8), and Noyelle and Hirsch (Chapter 4). Rubenson and Schütze establish what—in their view—are the key requirements for effective learning in the context of the modern workplace, notably that work qualifications seem to be produced best at the workplace itself in the context of changes in the organization of work, and as far as possible, in informal everyday settings. The priorities juxtapose the kind of legislative approach to employer-sponsored training described by Luttringer, in which the key incentives for companies are to prove that a certain percentage of the payroll has been allocated to identifiable training activity. Luttringer discusses ways to make legal measures more flexible, making learning a cooperative venture between employer and employee at the workplace, rather than simply a managerial exercise in buying an externalized service. Such lessons arising out of the French experience of legal/fiscal measures are particularly relevant at a time when similar measures are being considered in the United States.

Hirschhorn (Chapter 5) uses a specific example to delve more deeply into the incentives needed for workers to create real learning within an organization. The key requirement identified is that workers need to feel authorized to use learning as a tool for bringing about change. In other words, training can no longer be seen as merely a managerial exercise in a world in which productivity depends more on effective performance by teams with clear roles than on an old-fashioned hierarchy of command. It is not possible to create an effective work organization without giving new incentives to workers in terms of authority to act and responsibility for their actions.

A strong conclusion emerging both from Hirschhorn's chapter and from the book as a whole is that learning increasingly must become

a genuinely collaborative activity between employer and employee. The time of individuals regarding *human capital* purely as a personalized investment is over. At the same time, managers who regard labor simply as a *unit of production* to which training courses can add value have misunderstood the complex relationships that make a modern workplace function well. Luttringer calls for a shift to a concept of *co-responsibility* for training. Recognition by workers and employers that they have a mutual interest in creating effective learning in relation to work is the first step towards producing the incentives that will enhance worker and workplace learning.

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This volume emanates from papers prepared originally for a roundtable held in Philadelphia in November 1991. Jointly sponsored by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the National Center on Adult Literacy (NCAL) at the University of Pennsylvania, the roundtable brought together approximately 40 specialists and policymakers from a dozen countries to debate the issues described above.

In preparing the book, OECD and NCAL commissioned papers on six aspects of adult learning incentives: financial, legal, and organizational incentives; learning methods; incentives to provide and join literacy programs; and lessons from the Third World to the first. On the basis of the roundtable discussion, these papers were revised and given greater coherence. Under each of the six themes, a main paper and a response paper was presented. These have now been turned into 12 autonomous chapters, but each even-numbered chapter attempts to continue the discussion from the preceding (odd-numbered) chapter.

The interest of OECD in the topic of adult learning and worker training stems from the increasing concern found among many of the most industrialized nations. The status quo in first- and second-chance education as well as in workplace learning are inadequate to meet rapidly changing economies as we approach the year 2000.

NCAL has as a central part of its mission to increase the understanding of what adult skills are necessary for effective functioning in the workplace, how to improve those skills, and how well the United States is competing in the skills "marketplace" relative to its economic partners and competitors. Yet, the Center's mission, as indicated by its base in a university environment, is not focused inward, but rather is part of an effort to bring together many voices and points of view, and to share as broadly as possible the best information available.

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Thus, there was a clear overlap in the interests of both OECD and NCAL in the incentives that lead workers to learn new skills. The 1991 Philadelphia roundtable was an expression of that mutual interest, as is the production of this book. Collaborations of this kind enable each organization to accomplish more with the available resources, and, more importantly, it provides opportunities for improved networking and sharing of ideas with specialists with diverse yet converging sets of needs.