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## Career Education as Humanization: A Freirean Approach to Lifelong Learning

*This article contrasts the view of lifelong learning posed by the human capital discourse with Freire's understanding of education as a lifelong journey toward personal growth and social transformation. Rather than reducing learners to objects of economic globalization, Freire's pedagogy considers students as political participants who actively shape their vocational and social lives. We argue that career education policies and programs should accept Freire's understanding of lifelong learning as a necessary component of human ontology. The article also offers suggestions that career education teachers might employ to counteract the human capital assumptions framing the current discourse on lifelong learning.*

*Cet article compare la perspective de l'éducation permanente selon le discours sur le capital humain d'une part et le point de vue de Freire selon lequel l'éducation constitue un voyage continu vers l'épanouissement personnel et la transformation sociale d'autre part. Plutôt que d'interpréter les apprenants comme de simples objets dans le contexte de la mondialisation économique, la pédagogie de Freire considère que les étudiants sont des participants politiques qui façonnent de manière active leurs vies professionnelles et sociales. Nous faisons valoir notre point de vue voulant que les politiques et les programmes en matière de formation au choix de carrière devraient accepter la vision de Freire selon laquelle l'apprentissage continu est une composante essentielle d'une ontologie humaine. De plus, nous proposons des stratégies que pourraient employer les enseignants d'éducation au choix de carrière pour amortir les hypothèses sur le capital humain qui dominant actuellement le discours sur l'apprentissage continu.*

### Introduction

The commitment to learning as a lifelong journey that fosters continual intellectual, emotional, and social development enjoys an enduring history in educational thought. In the *Allegory of the Cave* Plato (1973) metaphorically articulates the arduous educational ascent required to free individuals from mere conjecture and guide them instead toward increased levels of epistemic and moral enlightenment. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle (1985) emphasizes the importance of lifelong learning by suggesting that it provides a necessary condition for eudaimonia, or enduring human happiness. In *Democ-*

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*racy and Education* Dewey (1916) convincingly argues that generating the psychological dispositions that encourage continual and critical learning throughout a lifetime is the primary objective of education.

In spite of its abiding presence as an educational aim, the concept of lifelong learning in contemporary career education charts a decidedly different course from that described in the views of Plato, Aristotle, and Dewey. For the purposes of this article we consider career education to include all curricula designed to prepare students specifically for their future occupational experience such as career choice, employability skills, and business and technology programs. In an educational context deeply influenced by neo-liberal assumptions that restrict the scope of valued learning to human capital precepts, lifelong learning is correspondingly reduced to formal reasoning practices that depict social reality as static and unchangeable. Neo-liberal ideology, with its unquestioned acceptance of market economy and human capital principles, naturalizes unstable employment conditions through its instrumental depiction of lifelong learning by implying that the role of students is mere workforce adaptation.

Before the onslaught of neo-liberal economics, working-class citizens in industrialized countries had enjoyed considerable gains in salaries and benefits. In his classic analysis of the social evolution during the 1950s, British theorist Marshall (1992) was so sanguinely confident of the progress made in these areas that he predicted that social justice would soon hold the same status in Western democracies as civil and political rights. "The modern drive to social equality," he wrote, "is the latest phase of an evolution of citizenship which has been in continuous progress for some 250 years" (p. 7).

During this pre-neo-liberal period, the labour movement successfully lobbied governments to provide improved protection against unemployment, to strengthen health benefits, and to implement superior workplace safety measures. The emphasis on social justice operated in conjunction with government and general populace sensitivity to economic hardship to create a kinder, gentler sort of capitalism where the fear of individual and working-class economic annihilation was considerably reduced if not entirely eliminated. However, many of the considerable social gains accrued through welfare state policies were lost or substantially rolled back during the next two decades of trickle-down economics. By 1990 the industrialized world was a radically different sort of place where vulnerable citizens were often left without meaningful public mechanisms to protect them from the ruthless application of market economy principles (Giroux, 2003). The maintenance of such a callous society requires ideological support through public education, and the contemporary lifelong learning discourse is one element in a larger scheme of public school manipulation.

The neo-liberal discourse in education characterizes lifelong learning as a teachable disposition that encourages students to accept personal responsibility for job retraining in the face of labor-market instability. Social reality is correspondingly depicted as something created and controlled by others, whereas students are portrayed as objects whose primary responsibility is reduced to meeting contemporary workforce needs. The educational agenda that accompanies this line of thinking is silent on the dynamics of social and

personal transformation and premised on the assumption that “democratic” citizenship as political action is circumscribed by neo-liberal market-driven objectives. As we argue below, a central objective in reclaiming lifelong learning as a vehicle for praxis and humanization involves empowering students with the understanding that they are subjects in history rather than mere objects of economic globalization and structural change.

In this article we contrast the narrow, undemocratic, and dehumanizing view of lifelong learning advanced by neo-liberal schooling reforms with Freire’s (2000) understanding of education as a lifelong journey toward personal and social transformation. Freire’s pedagogy views students as democratic political agents who shape their vocational and social lives toward greater measures of freedom and social justice rather than workers who are the passive objects of economic enterprise. We argue that career education programs should adopt Freire’s understanding of lifelong learning as a necessary component of human ontology to promote the principles of participatory democratic learning. Human ontology refers to the combined qualities of *being* that are necessary to ensure a fully realized human experience. In the first section of the article, we elaborate on Freire’s understanding of lifelong learning as an ontological necessity. We then explore the prevailing human capital discourse on lifelong learning and explain why this approach violates the requirements of a rational human nature. We conclude by offering some concrete suggestions that educators might employ to counteract the human capital assumptions framing the neo-liberal discourse on lifelong learning.

#### *Lifelong Learning as Praxis*

Although he does not employ the specific phrase *lifelong learning* in his writings, Freire (2000) encourages students and teachers of all ages to play a continual role in shaping and reshaping the world around them. He recognizes that education is inevitably a political enterprise and argues that a properly designed education involves the freedom to act in ways that satisfy “the process of humanization” (p. 79). Freedom and humanization are achieved, according to Freire, when students are alerted to the possibility of influencing history by reflecting and acting on the world to eliminate the forces of oppression and domination. The particular type of work in question is relatively unimportant because all vocations must provide workers with the opportunity to act both on their occupational context and on society to achieve the humanization and enhanced social justice envisaged by Freire.

In a neo-liberal order, no vocational context escapes the trend toward instrumental forms of learning that undermine the role of the worker as an agent of occupational and social change. The contemporary life of an academic, for example, leaves little opportunity for the praxis that Freire views as vital to humanization. Many junior university faculty, far more concerned with scholarly production than public discourse, are often sequestered in their office, working primarily in isolation and in competition, compiling accountability dossiers and other evidence of institutional worthiness. The ensuing academic myopia, actively rewarded by promotion and tenure committees, diverts a significant portion of intellectual culture from socially influential and politically engaged activities. Other sectors of the labor force are even more profoundly affected. The status of worker agency in such retail giants as

WalMart, for example, now the single largest employer in the United States, is evidenced by the company's perpetual efforts to crack union organization by firing workers and closing affected retail outlets.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire (2000) exposes the educational structures of control and domination in societies where the neo-liberal agenda has been adopted. Freire problematizes education to contextualize social injustice as a product of human decision-making and to challenge forms of education that undermine human reason, agency, and action. Freire writes, "The real roots of the political nature of education are to be found in the educability of the human person. This educability, in turn, is grounded in the radical unfinishedness of the human condition and in our consciousness of this unfinished state" (p. 100). A humanizing construct of lifelong learning celebrates this unfinishedness by encouraging students' participation in the social construction of reality through conscientization and praxis. The initial step in a Freirean construct of lifelong learning, then, fosters student recognition that history is created by acts of human agency and can be changed in precisely the same manner. This initial understanding is followed by direct political involvement to transform undesirable social and vocational conditions that deleteriously affect workers' agency and equality.

The scope of what might be termed lifelong learning in Freire's pedagogy extends well beyond simply serving the needs of the existing labor market. Instead, lifelong learning serves as a framework to free oneself from a potentially oppressed and static state and move toward a liberated and dynamic state of critical consciousness and transformative action. Freire (1974) distinguishes between an education that supports *naïve transivity*, with its oversimplification of problems and facile explanations, and *critical transivity*, with its deep interpretation of problems. Critical transivity requires dialogue between teachers and learners and mounts morally sound and logical arguments to advance alterative possibilities or world views. This approach to lifelong learning is "concerned with social and political responsibility" (p. 19) and serves to "increase men's ability to perceive the challenges of their time" and "resist the emotional power of transition" (p. 32).

According to Freire (1998), humans are free to establish their own history as creators and re-creators of their experiences. The perpetual cycle of learning and transformation occurs only through an awareness of history and appreciating the human capacity to alter its course through continual learning and conscious action:

When men and women realize that they themselves are makers of culture, they have accomplished, or nearly accomplished, the first step toward feeling the importance, the necessity, and the possibility of owning reading and writing. They become literate, politically speaking. (p. xi)

The role of lifelong learning, then, is to engage learners in continual reflection on social reality as a first step toward transforming the political and educational conditions that limit historical understanding and human liberation. The lifelong learner does not simply conform to prevailing expectations, but continually critiques his or her surroundings and works with others to shift the relational dynamics of power toward increased measures of social equality:

“Liberation is praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, 2000, p. 60).

Freire believes that education is not liberatory unless it is based on an abiding respect for the humanization, or ontological vocation, of the learner. Humanization can be broadly defined at two levels. First, it designates the self-actualizing requirements of humans as students as the primary focal point of education rather than market productivity. On the second level, humanization refers to the development in learners of empathy and compassion toward fellow human beings. The process of humanization requires a fundamental respect for the rationality of learners, that is, their reflective and critical capacity to explain and transform the world. The implication of Freire’s ideas for lifelong learning are exceptionally powerful because they provide a forum for disenfranchised individuals to debunk the cultural myths and ideological apparatus designed to limit their political involvement. Students are encouraged instead to act as democratic agents of social change, a potentially disconcerting imperative to politically powerful groups and organizations. In the neo-liberal order, and in sharp contrast to Freire, lifelong learning emerges as occupational retraining that dehumanizes students and workers by objectifying them as *human capital* being prepared for the presupposed inevitable and deleterious effect of economic globalization.

#### *Lifelong Learning as Human Capital Preparation*

Consistent with the neo-liberal assumptions propelling reform in education (Hyslop-Margison & Welsh, 2003) many organizations influencing contemporary education policy development advance a human capital construct of lifelong learning designed to address unstable labor-market conditions. Contemporary labor-market conditions generally include recurrent occupational displacement and instability that combine to undermine the job security of workers.

The rationale supporting the contemporary human capital model of lifelong learning is explained by Evers, Rush, and Berdrow (1998) who consider it a necessary strategy for worker success in the current labor market.

When it became clear that the world of work was changing rapidly and that students needed new skills in order to integrate this new labour market, staff began seeking advice around the design of a new approach to career education. Students would develop flexible and practical life skills to prepare themselves for a future work reality unlikely to include financial security and employee benefits as standard offerings. Students would be better equipped to handle new work related challenges such as temporary work systems and constant change. Students would have well-established lifelong networking and mentor relationships. (pp. 181-182)

Although the human capital discourse considers learning a lifelong process, its emphasis on employability skills, instrumental reasoning, and technical competence threatens the idea of education as a vehicle to promote intellectual growth, critical understanding and democratic citizenship.

Human capital discourse views education as an instrumental learning experience that simply prepares students as future workers to meet labor force demands. Cohn (2000) explains,

The effect of training is very similar to the effect of providing a worker with equipment. Just as a worker with a bulldozer is more productive than a worker trying to move dirt with his or her bare hands, a worker with skills is more productive than a worker who can't apply knowledge to the job and is forced to use raw sweat and guess work. The productivity enhancing power of skills induce economists to refer to them as human capital. (p. 80)

The problem with human capital theory, however, is its overestimation of worker skill in determining future employment opportunities that are more correctly influenced by a complex interaction between various subjective, political, and social forces. Human capital theory is ideological, then, to the extent that it blames individual deficits rather than structural problems for the employment and economic difficulties faced by workers.

The human capital construct of lifelong learning is designed to ensure that students as future workers passively accept the occupational uncertainty they will inevitably face in the new global economic order. For example, the World Bank Group (2004) endorses the following concept of lifelong learning:

In the 21st century, workers need to be lifelong learners, adapting continuously to changed opportunities and to the labour market demands of the knowledge economy. Lifelong learning is more than education and training beyond formal schooling. A comprehensive programme of lifelong-learning education for dynamic economies, within the context of the overall development framework of each country, encompasses all levels. (n.p.)

From this perspective, lifelong learning involves the continual upgrading of skills to ensure that workers remain responsive to contemporary labor-market dynamics. However, the instrumental reasoning required to achieve this externally imposed objective is inconsistent with the critical rationality that Freire believes is central to human ontology. By interfering with the learner's understanding that humans are potential agents of social change, the human capital view of lifelong learning violates human ontology. Whereas Freire's model of lifelong learning encourages the intellectual, social, ethical, and political engagement of students as democratic agents of change throughout their entire life course, the neo-liberal philosophy epitomized by the World Bank depicts lifelong learning as a set of technical skills and competences that reduce the role of students to passive labor-market adjustment.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) offers a model of lifelong learning strikingly similar to that proposed by the World Bank. Taylor and Henry (2000) observe, "Education as an activity within the OECD has been broadly legitimated on the basis of its contribution to economic growth" (p. 488). The OECD's (1996) policy work in education is predicated on human capital assumptions that portray lifelong learning as a neo-liberal labor-market survival strategy for contemporary workers:

Many individuals will find that the skills they acquired during their initial education will no longer last them a lifetime. Instead of making one key transition from education to work, they are more likely to find that life has become a seamless process of education, training and work. (p. 6)

The OECD's narrow vision of lifelong learning contradicts the principles of Freire's pedagogy by implying that occupational instability is inevitable and

that the role of workers is simply to meet labor-market demands. This construct of lifelong learning once again reduces the learner to passive social adaptation rather than promoting the praxis so compellingly advocated by Freire as a necessary condition of humanization.

The macro-education policies reflected in the human capital discourse on lifelong learning espoused by organizations such as the World Bank and the OECD are reflected at the micro level in various career education programs. For example, many international career education programs expect students to acquire the “employability skill” of lifelong learning as part of their labor-market preparation strategy. Under the heading of Managing Change, Indiana’s secondary-level Business Services and Technology Program encourages students, “to understand the need and/or value of lifelong learning as it relates to career success” (Indiana Department of Education, 2000, n.p.). In Canada, British Columbia’s *Business Education* (2000) similarly describes lifelong learning as a student adaptation strategy to cope with unstable labor-market conditions:

The rapid rate of technological change affects families, workplaces, communities, and environment. For example, individuals frequently change jobs to adapt to changing working conditions. In such a world, students need to be increasingly entrepreneurial and flexible. Business Education and Economics prepare students for this *new reality* by fostering the concept of lifelong learning. (n.p., emphasis added)

On the international front, curriculum reform in secondary-level career education reveals a similar emphasis on lifelong learning as passive adaptation to structural change. For example, Western Australia’s Work Studies reflects this trend.

It is well recognized by community interest groups that the world of work is undergoing rapid adjustment to wider social and economic changes in Australian society. Our ability to adapt to capitalize upon these changes is considered by opinion leaders to be vital to the maintenance of national, social and economic well-being. (Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 2001, n.p.)

By blurring the distinction between the constructed nature of society and natural reality, and ignoring Searle’s (1995) crucial distinction between brute facts and social facts, this discourse conveys to students that their role is simply to prepare for an inevitable vocational future rather than engaging with or democratically transforming the workforce landscape.

Many career education programs, then, respond to contemporary labor-market conditions by reducing lifelong learning to a discursive apparatus that directs students toward self-administered labor-market adjustment. As Barrow and Keeney (2000) suggest, lifelong learning in public education has become little more than a rallying cry for industry to help answer the question: “Given the pace of technological change, the new information age and the globalization of trade, how can we be assured that we are producing competent and qualified workers who are prepared to meet the reality of the new economic order” (p. 191).

The most damaging aspect of the human capital description of lifelong learning involves the imperative that students must inevitably “prepare them-

selves for a future work reality unlikely to include financial security and employee benefits as standard offerings" (Evers et al., 1998, p. 181). However well intended, this rationale presupposes that learners and workers as citizens in a democracy are unable to influence the conditions affecting their vocational lives. Lifelong learning is correspondingly reduced to the acquisition of technical capacities and dispositions that encourage learners to accept personal responsibility for occupational retraining in the face of labor-market instability. Students are simultaneously indoctrinated into accepting a particular world view that disregards their role as democratic citizens and agents of social change. This naturalizing of social reality, as Eagleton (1991) correctly points out, sends powerful ideological messages to students about the value and possibility of their future political participation.

The neo-liberal human capital discourse on lifelong learning views education as an activity exclusively connected to economic productivity with the widespread unfortunate consequences of globalization generally ignored. For example, Kim (2002) observes,

In the process of economic globalization, employability is expected to depend on continually mastering new skills. Responsibility for constant learning is now increasingly taken by individuals and the private sector. Lifelong learning, it is often argued, is necessary for the individual and for nations to survive, and there are growing opportunities for individuals to achieve lifelong learning. It is less frequently argued that there are potentially social chasms in this new world full of the warm rhetoric of lifelong learning. (p. 148)

Lifelong learning, then, becomes a necessary condition of neo-liberal production. Freirean discourse, on the other hand, understands lifelong learning as a transformative activity at both individual and social levels, and education is viewed as mediation between individual transformation and responsible democratic citizenship. As a part of neo-liberal ideology, the human capital approach to lifelong learning considers democracy as a representative, albeit privatized, managed, and market-driven system in which only a select few are schooled as political agents and leaders, whereas the masses are schooled to be productive workers. Alternatively, the Freirean model of lifelong learning strives to create a critical democracy that is widely participatory, transformative, focused on equality, and where human capital becomes social democratic capital.

#### *Reclaiming Lifelong Learning as Human Ontology*

Lifelong learning is potentially interpreted in two distinct ways: (a) as a tool that narrows the meaning of learning and restricts educational objectives to labor-market expectations that enable governments and corporations to exploit human capital; or (b) as a means of liberation that allows learners to break the bonds of political restraint and in the process achieve their humanization. As educators, we can reappropriate the lifelong learning discourse from that advocated in narrowly construed training programs to broaden the career education experience toward a praxis that views students as dynamic beings who are democratically engaged in shaping their existential and vocational experience.

A multileveled transformation is required to reclaim lifelong learning as a necessary condition of human ontology and democratic learning. At the level



of civil society there must develop a strong and proactive advocacy for the immediate need of an education system geared toward creating democratic citizens and not only producing workers for the global labor market. At the institutional level, there is a need to view lifelong learning in its larger wholesome context in which the purpose of learning is not only to gain knowledge that increases productivity, but also to develop well-rounded critical and democratic citizens. At this level efforts must be made to reverse the trend that focuses on technical subjects while totally sidelining disciplines such as philosophy and literature that are critical to the more humanizing aspects of education. Special attention is needed in career education curriculum development to portray lifelong learning as the fostering of critical and politically participatory dispositions in students. Finally, at the pedagogical level, Freirean discourse can be employed as a model of education to develop critical thinking and promote historical consciousness to ensure that students view themselves as agents in shaping their vocational experience.

Although Freire's (1974) critical pedagogy may not qualify as a method in the normal sense of the term, he does offer specific suggestions to achieve the learning objectives of humanization and praxis. For example, he proposes that, "by speaking about their fears or insecurities, educators gradually move toward overcoming them, and at the same time, they gradually win the confidence of learners" (p. 48). When we open ourselves to the possibility of change and conscientization, we enable our students to embrace the possibility of change as well. Freire also argues that through the process of problem-posing and dialogue about real, relevant issues, students can achieve a level of critical transivity where they "perceive the challenges of their time" (p. 32) as a first step toward transforming their world.

Freire (2000) believes that the world is not a "static and closed order," but a "problem to be worked on and solved" (p. 14). Problem-posing, and the subsequent understanding and transformation it inspires, relies on the human capacity to recognize, assess, and critically reflect on the world to influence its historicity. McLaren & Farahmandpur (2005) describe Freire's transformative educational approach this way.

Critical pedagogy supports the practice of students and workers reflecting critically not only on their location *in* the world and *against* the world but also on their relationship *with* the world. While capitalist schooling provides students with basic knowledge and skills that increase their productivity and efficiency as future workers and that subsequently reproduce class relations, critical pedagogy works toward the revolutionary empowerment of students and workers by offering them opportunities to develop critical social skills that will assist them in gaining an awareness of—and a resolve to transform—the exploitative nature of capitalist social and economic relations of production. (p. 53)

In the classroom students might be encouraged to ask questions about the problems affecting their personal or working lives, explore the structural causes of these problems, and seek solutions that may involve social transformation. Although few issues of daily life can be quickly resolved, this process provides an opportunity for students to imagine creative solutions that include social and political action to the practical problems they face. When discussing

labor-market instability in career education, for example, the emphasis is placed on what might be done to improve this situation rather than on what students can do to cope with such conditions. Through this process, students gain enhanced social understanding and situate themselves as participants in the creation of history. The culturally imposed myths and ideological assumptions are brought to the surface where they can be explored and critiqued as political text through the light of personal experiences and perspectives.

Freire's (2000) model of problem-posing education encourages students to construct personal understanding through successive stages of critical inquiry. Problem-posing begins by exploring the present perspective of students and gradually assisting them to become more informed and critical social participants. Although career education students might initially focus on local employment losses, they could gradually expand their inquiry to consider the global economic practices that cause such individual and community suffering. Career education programs that view lifelong learning as praxis use problem-posing techniques to elucidate connections between self and society and enhance student understanding of how social forces influence individual vocational experience. When applied to career education, problem-posing could focus on the unequal power relations between workers and corporations, the substance and conditions of various collective bargaining agreements, social and labor-market conditions, and the labor-market treatment of underprivileged workers. Students could also investigate technology ownership, its general effect on employment, and question the social benefits of its profit-driven development and implementation.

Finally, as teachers we might provide examples of lifelong learners who actively engaged and transformed their working experience. An example of the problem-posing approach to vocational education designed to enhance workers' autonomy is the Antigonish Movement that began in 1928 at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia. It was designed to reform the impoverished fishing and farming economy in rural Nova Scotia through education that taught farmers and fishers basic skills and involved them in the development of locally generated economic alternatives (Selman, 1991). The process began with large-scale community meetings to discuss issues facing the community that were examined in detail by small study groups that met regularly. These groups were the vehicles used for teaching basic skills, examining economic structures and processes, and developing community-based solutions to economic hardships faced by the region. One of the solutions that emerged from this collective movement included the development of a significant system of cooperative enterprises. The movement garnered wide international acclaim and received funding from such unlikely organizations as the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations. The organization also founded the Coady Institute at St. Francis Xavier, named after Father Moses Coady, a key intellectual leader of the Antigonish Movement and a well-recognized Nova Scotia socialist. Selman observes that, "it was a dynamic and world famous means whereby people were assisted to exercise increased influence over the forces that shaped their lives" (p. 127). This and other community development projects from the early years of the adult education movement in Canada provide helpful models of problem-posing education put into practice.

### Conclusion

We believe that the stakes in the battle for lifelong learning are enormously high. The human capital discourse portraying lifelong learning as a labor-market adjustment strategy undermines the ontological requirement of students to act as democratic agents of social change. Freire's pedagogy views humans and society as unfinished, subject to continual evaluation and transformation. As participants in history, career education students, respected as lifelong learners, have a right to influence occupational conditions and in the process, create a more just, stable, and caring vocational experience. From a Freirean perspective, then, we should no longer ask our career education students to accept an ahistorical view of the world that presents social reality and labor-market conditions as fixed and unchangeable. We should no longer expect our students to conform their existential and ontological requirements to the human capital precepts instantiated by corporations. The choice before us is relatively simple, but critically important: Do we create lifelong learners who view themselves as mere objects in history, or do we create learners who view themselves as lifelong agents of personal growth and social improvement? From an educational perspective that respects human ontology and the principles of democratic learning, the answer is abundantly clear.

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