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Lifelong Learning as Human Ontology: A Freirean Response to Human Capital Education

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Abstract: *In this article, we argue that Freire's view of lifelong learning is a journey toward personal growth and social transformation. Rather than reducing learners to objects of economic globalization, Freire's pedagogy considers students political participants who actively shape their vocational and social lives.*

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The idea that learning is a lifelong experience intended to foster continuous intellectual growth and social improvement enjoys an enduring history in educational thought. In the *Allegory of the Cave*, Plato (1973) describes the lifelong journey required to free individuals from the realm of mere conjecture and guide them instead toward a life of intellectual enlightenment. In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1985) emphasizes the ontological importance of human reasoning by suggesting contemplation provides a necessary condition for *eudaimonia*, or lasting human happiness. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) argues that generating the psychological dispositions that encourage continuous and critical learning by students throughout life should be the primary aim of education. However, the conviction that education ought to promote a lifetime of intellectual engagement and social transformation is perhaps best reflected in the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire.

Yet, constructs of lifelong learning in contemporary career and adult education chart a decidedly different course from that articulated by Freire. Within an educational context deeply influenced by neo-liberal ideology, the prevailing human capital discourse reduces lifelong learning to instrumental forms of teaching that present social reality as fixed or unchangeable. Neo-liberal ideology, with its unquestioned acceptance of market economy principles, naturalizes unstable employment conditions by depicting them as inevitable, and limits the role of students to workforce adaptation. The human capital discourse characterizes lifelong learning as a student disposition to accept personal responsibility for job retraining in the face of unavoidable labor market strife. Social reality is portrayed as something created and controlled by others, while students are reduced to mere objects of history.

In this article, we contrast this narrow, dehumanizing view of lifelong learning 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 political participants who actively shape their vocational and social lives. We suggest that career and adult education programs should adopt Freire's understanding of lifelong learning as a necessary component of human ontology. In the first section, we elaborate on Freire's vision of education with its portrayal of lifelong learning as an ontological necessity. We then provide an analysis of the human capital discourse on lifelong learning and explain why this approach violates human ontology. We conclude the article by offering suggestions career and adult educators might employ to counteract the human capital assumptions framing the current discourse on lifelong learning.

Lifelong Learning as Praxis

Although never actually employing the term *lifelong learning* in his writings, Freire encourages students and teachers to play an active role throughout their lives in shaping and reshaping the world around them. He understands that education is an inevitably political enterprise, and argues that a properly designed education involves the freedom to act in moral and rational ways that satisfy “the process of humanization” (2000, p. 79). Freedom and humanization are achieved, in Freire’s view, when students are awakened to the possibility of influencing history by acting upon the world. Freire’s politicizing of education is a means of historicizing social injustice and challenging the traditional forms of education that ignore human freedom and development. According to Freire, traditional education controls, dominates, and dehumanizes the masses, a trend that can only be reversed by transforming human consciousness. Freire maintains that, “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” (2000, p. 100).

Freire argues that respecting human ontology and achieving humanization requires recognizing this unfinishedness and transforming the world through *praxis*. Many of Freire’s (1996) writings are based on an analysis of authoritarian schooling relations generated by the capitalist mode of production: “My criticism of the traditional school, inspired by the influence of thinkers from the New School and my personal experience, led, little by little, to my criticism of the very system of capitalism” (p. 89). The New School’s effect on Freire was significant: “No reflection about education and democracy can exclude issues of power, economic equality, justice, and its application, and ethics” (1996, p. 146). Although Freire adopted many Marxist principles and ideas, such as the notion of a historical dialectic, the former rejects the notion that humans cannot transcend their experiences and reshape history.

The scope of what might be termed lifelong learning in Freire’s pedagogy extends far beyond simply serving the needs of the labor market. Instead, lifelong learning serves as a framework to free oneself from an oppressed state and move toward a liberated state of critical consciousness and transformative action. Freire distinguishes between an education supporting “naïve transivity,” with its oversimplification of problems and magical explanations, and “critical transivity,” with its deep interpretation of problems. Critical transivity requires dialogue between teachers and learners, and offers sound arguments to advance alternative worldviews. This approach to education as a lifelong learning commitment is “concerned with social and political responsibility” (Freire, 1974, 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).

The role of education as lifelong learning, then, is to foster continual reflection on social reality and transform the conditions that limit historical understanding and human liberation. The lifelong learner does not accept defeat or terminate reflection with self-congratulation, but continually organizes 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 based on an abiding respect for the humanization of the learner. This process of humanization requires a fundamental respect for the rationality of learners that understands praxis as a necessary component of human ontology.

Freire’s ideas and their implication for lifelong learning are powerful because they provide a forum for disenfranchised populations to debunk the cultural myths and ideological apparatus

designed to keep them silent. This model of lifelong learning encourages students to act on their own behalf and to assist others to act as agents of social change, a disconcerting imperative to powerful groups. In order to keep populations under the ideological control of oppressive governments, corporations, or international policies, lifelong learning is presently defined in entirely instrumental ways. Within a neo-liberal order, lifelong learning is increasingly portrayed as occupational retraining that dehumanizes students and workers by viewing them as “human capital” being prepared for the impact of economic globalization.

Lifelong Learning as Human Capital Preparation

Consistent with the neo-liberal assumptions propelling contemporary reform in education (Hyslop-Margison & Welsh, 2003), many organizations shaping education policy advance a human capital construct of lifelong learning to address current labor market conditions. These conditions generally include recurrent occupational displacement and labor market volatility that combine to undermine the job security of workers. Human capital education is designed to ensure that students, as future workers, passively accept the occupational uncertainty they will inevitably confront in the new global economic order. For example, the World Bank Group (2004) endorses the following conception of lifelong learning:

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

From this perspective, lifelong learning involves the constant upgrading of employability skills to make workers more responsive to contemporary labor market dynamics. However, the instrumental reasoning required to achieve this externally imposed objective is inconsistent with the praxis Freire believes so central to human ontology. By interfering with historical understanding, the human capital view of lifelong learning violates human ontology by depicting social and economic conditions as predetermined, and reducing the role of workers to passive adaptation.

The primary ontological concern with the human capital discourse on lifelong learning involves the implicit messages such a vision of education conveys to learners. Freire’s model of lifelong learning encourages the intellectual, social, ethical and political engagement of students as agents of change throughout their entire life course. In sharp contrast to this position, the World Bank depicts lifelong learning in purely instrumental terms as a set of technical skills and competencies that undermine praxis by reducing the role of students to passive labor market adjustment. When social reality is naturalized in this fashion, the role of students becomes that of simply conforming to the material conditions that shape their lives rather than considering the possibility of structural transformation.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) offers a model of lifelong learning strikingly similar to that proposed by the World Bank. The OECD is an extremely influential body in the field of international policy development generally and public education more specifically. It represents the world’s thirty-one most industrialized nations and develops policies and programs designed to enhance international economic growth. The organization is a powerful lobbying force behind the international free trade movement. Taylor and Henry (2000) observe that, “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 policy

work in education is predicated on human capital assumptions that portray lifelong learning as a 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 (OECD, 1996, p.7).

The OECD's narrow vision of lifelong learning contravenes the ontological basis of Freire's pedagogy by implying that occupational instability is inevitable, and that the role of workers is limited to satisfying labor market demands. This construct of lifelong learning once again reduces the role of the learner to passive social adaptation rather than promoting the praxis so compellingly advocated by Freire.

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 and adult education programs. Many career education programs expect students to acquire the "employability skill" of lifelong learning as part of their labor market preparation. Under the heading of Managing Change, for example, 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* [emphasis added] by fostering the concept of lifelong learning. By blurring the distinction between social reality and natural reality, this type of discourse conveys to students that their role is simply that of preparing rather than leading, engaging or transforming.

Many career and adult education programs respond to the contemporary labor market environment by reducing lifelong learning to a discursive apparatus that directs students toward self-administered labor market adjustment. Barrow and Keeney (2000) suggest that lifelong learning 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). In contrast to the human capital model, lifelong learning respects human ontology by encouraging the continuous critical analysis of labor market and vocational conditions, and entertaining the perpetual possibility of their reform.

Although the human capital discourse considers learning a lifelong process, its emphasis on employability skills and technical competence threatens the idea of education for general intellectual growth, critical understanding, and praxis. When the scope of learning is restricted in this fashion, the possibility of students becoming agents of social change is undermined.

Perhaps the most worrisome aspect of this particular description of lifelong learning involves the imperative that students must inevitably "prepare themselves for a future work reality unlikely to include financial security and employee benefits." The justification for imposing human capital assumptions on lifelong learning presupposes that learners and workers as citizens in a democracy are unable to influence the conditions affecting their vocational lives.

This naturalizing of social reality, as Eagleton (1995) points out, sends powerful ideological messages to students about the value and possibility of their future political participation.

Reclaiming Lifelong Learning as Human Ontology

Lifelong learning is presently interpreted in two distinct ways: a) as a tool that continues to narrow the meaning of learning and restrict educational objectives to labor market expectations that enable governments and corporations to exploit the idea of human capital; or b) as a means of liberation that can allow learners to break the bonds of human capital, become agents of change and reclaim their ontology. As educators, we can re-appropriate the lifelong learning discourse from narrowly construed training programs to broaden the career and adult learning experience toward a praxis that respects human ontology. Although Freire's pedagogy is not a method per se, he offers suggestions to achieve his primary learning objectives of freedom and humanization. For example, he suggests 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" (1974, p. 48). When educators open themselves to the risk of *conscientization*, they enable their students to embrace change as well. 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" (1974, p. 32) as a first step toward transforming their world.

In the modern world, problem posing in education encourages adults to seek new job skills as venture capital perpetually seeks new sources of cheap labor causing continual worker displacement. Freire believes that the world is not a "static and closed order" but a "problem to be worked on and solved" (2000, p. 14). Problem posing, and the subsequent transformation it inspires, relies on the human capacity to recognize, assess, and critically reflect upon the world to understand and influence its historicity. In the classroom students should be encouraged to pose questions about the problems affecting their lives, explore the structural causes of these problems, and seek solutions that may require social transformation. Although very 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. Learning is exploratory, research oriented and directed toward transforming the situation generating the problem. When discussing labor market instability, for example, the emphasis is 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 more social understanding than from traditional academic courses and situate themselves as subjects participating in history. The culturally imposed myths and ideological assumptions are brought to the surface where they can be explored and critiqued through the light of other 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. While career and adult education students might initially focus on local employment losses, they would gradually expand their inquiry to consider the global economic practices that cause such suffering. Career and adult education programs that view lifelong learning as praxis utilize 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 and adult 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 impact on employment, and question the social benefits of its profit-driven development and implementation.

Conclusion

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 agents of social change. Freire's pedagogy of hope and freedom views humans as unfinished and the material conditions of experience as continually evolving, subject to evaluation and transformation. As subjects in history, career and adult education students, respected as lifelong learners, have a right to influence these conditions and create a more just and caring world. From a Freirean perspective, we should no longer ask our students in career and adult education to accept an ahistorical view of the world that presents social reality as fixed and unchangeable. We can no longer expect our students to conform their existential and ontological requirements with the human capital precepts demanded by corporations. The choice before us, then, is a relatively simple, but critically important one: 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?

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