Critical Perspectives on the Skills Debate: Implications for Adult Education

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Abstract

In this presentation I will raise some issues focusing on role of university adult education in educating the workforce. While many of my examples relate to the US American context, I think that European and US American universities are facing similar issues. More specifically, I will problematize the notion of “skills” and the complex choices adult educators face in addressing what at first glance seems to be a rather uncomplicated educational project: creating programs that teach work “skills.” It is my hope that reflecting on these issues will provide a basis for cooperation among university-based adult education in Romania and the US. I begin by addressing there interrelated questions: 1) Is there a skills shortage and how do we know? 2) What constitutes a skill and can they be objectively measured; 3) Who gets to determine what skills are and based on what assumptions?

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1. Inequality and the Skills Gap

Globally, the United States income inequality is troubling. The Central Intelligence Agency’s World Fact book notes that the United States ranks 91 (out of 136 countries) on the equality scale. The US trails such countries as South Korea (30), Canada (35), and China (84). Clearly, these are worrying statistics for a country that has prided
itself as a being the “Land of Opportunity,” leading many to wonder if the so-called “American Dream” of achieving economic stability has died. The question of what happened and what or who was responsible for this steep decline has occupied the popular press and conservative commentators since before the Great Recession of 2008. According to these commentators, one of the major causes is that American workers are deficient in the skills required to meet the demands of the new global economy.

Reinforcing the idea that there is a skills gap, popular media have reported that there are more than 3 million jobs (a few put the figure at 5 million) that cannot be filled because there are not enough skilled workers to fill them. James Manyika, one of the authors of the report *An Economy That Works: Job Creation and America’s Future* (2011), states: “There’s a tremendous mismatch in the jobs market right now, “It runs across skill set, gender, class and geography.”

In their survey, the study finds that nearly two-thirds of business executives say they routinely have difficulty filling certain positions. The top reason they cite is lack of specific qualifications or experience. This skills/experience mismatch is a potentially an even bigger problem in the future. Although half of the companies in the report stated that they would expand employment in 2011, 40% say they have also had positions open for six months or more because they cannot find the right candidates.

The reasons for these sobering statistics, according to these commentators, business leaders and some academics, is that a new globalized economic reality and a lack of certain skills required in this new reality have lead to these discouraging developments. Incredibly, some have also blamed the high unemployment rate, at least partially, on an overly dependent work force. Extending jobless benefits to 99 weeks, an article in the *Wall Street Journal* argues, gives the unemployed less incentive to search out new work.

While these arguments do represent a certain public understanding (although there is no evidence that extending jobless benefits results in less incentive to seek work), the main reason cited is the changing nature of skills in a globalized world. One of the most prominent proponents for this view has been Anthony J. Carnevale. For over twenty years, Carnevale has held prominent government, business, and academic positions dealing with workforce development and education. Carnevale summarizes the consequences of the “new economy” this way:

The fundamental change in skill requirements in the American economic system has been due to the shift from the industrial era to the postindustrial era of the knowledge economy.

As the structure of the U.S. economy has shifted from an industrial economy to a postindustrial service economy, new skill requirements have emerged. In general, the demand for specific academic and vocational skills has been augmented with a growing need for general skills, including learning, reasoning, communicating, general problem-solving skills and behavioral skills.

Workplace success also depends on workers who are motivated and able to set and meet reasonable goals. Workers’ lack of motivation or goal-setting skills can produce an organizational undercurrent of repeated errors, absenteeism and quality problems, or it can construct barriers along the path to change. Poor performance can often be lined to deficiencies in self-esteem or motivation.

This discourse is a troubling one. At this point it is important to note that while this example is taken from the United States context, the rhetoric of Carnevale and others is taken directly from the ideas expressed by the World Bank. An institution that, it needs to be remembered, is headquartered in the United States. Moreover, the blame for this skills shortage is placed directly on workers –the lack of self-esteem or motivation. Nevertheless this discourse is a troubling one. The fundamental question remains: Is there evidence that supports the notion of a skills deficiency? The next section takes a closer look at the so-called “skills gap,” a term used to describe the difference between skills required in the new economy and the actual skills of American workers.

### 2. What skills gap?

In order to understand the current debate over skills, it is necessary to place the debate in context. The entire debate over workers’ skills has a curious history. According to much of the popular literature, the reason for stagnant wages is simple: workers need to develop skills to meet the needs of the “new economy” (Henderson, 2005).

Yet Handel (2003,2004) in the most thorough historical analysis of the skills debate points out that in the 1970s scholars claimed that the American labor force was overeducated relative to labor market needs. From this perspective, American workers faced a difficult future in which their rising educational levels coupled with the
desire for meaningful work had outstripped the jobs available. By the 1980s the skills glut had become the skills deficit. Prominent scholars such as Daniel Bell (1976) and William Julius Wilson (1987), among others, argued that the labor market changes were contributing to the problems of the underclass, as skills of minority workers lagged behind rising employer requirements. They argued that this skills mismatch would only grow worse as the pace of globalization increased. An increased demand for literacy and technical expertise would lead to the demand for workers with higher levels of education, greater flexibility and more receptivity to change. The best known, and probably most controversial account was the 1983 National Commission on Excellence in Education report, which declared in its most famous statement: “Our nation is at risk…. If an unfriendly power had imposed on America the mediocre education that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.” Though not accepted by many labor economists, the skills deficit argument became the battle cry for educational reformers, leading to the call for lifelong learning in the 1990s (Bell, 1976; Wilson, 1997; U. S. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983 p. 1).

The problem with the skills deficiency argument has always been in the specifics. Namely, who lacks what skills? At various times, those cited as lacking in work skills included individuals educated since the 1960s, those unwilling to follow directions, young workers, older workers, minorities, job-seekers with high school education or less, and college-educated without a technical background. The range of skills identified as deficient is similarly vague and wide. They include inadequate reading, writing and math skills, reasoning skills, undefined “problem solving” skills, computer skills, soft skills such as interpersonal skills and teamwork, work related attitudes, poor worker demeanor, and so on. Many of these, of course, are attributes rather than skills with very little empirical research to support such claims.

What then is the real status of the skills of the American workforce? In his exhaustive review of the literature, Handell (2004) arrives at this conclusion “...it appears that the skills workers can develop and for which they are rewarded are partly a function of the jobs employers offer, and that the intrinsic capacities of individuals do not operate as a hard constraint” (p.23). In other words, the problem is not so much the capacity of the workforce, as it is a lack of opportunity to demonstrate and learn new skills. Employers do complain about the difficulty of meeting their labor needs with the workforce available to them, but it is not clear if the concerns are more with workers’ attitudes than cognitive skills and whether the complaints apply to many groups beyond young workers, for whom many of the problems may be transitory. There is no historical data against which to benchmark the current levels of expressed dissatisfaction.

In fact, the there is ample evidence that shows that there is no skill shortage. There is substantial evidence that there is instead a job shortage. In a speech given in September, 2010, Boston Federal Reserve President, Eric Rosenngren provides data that demonstrates that the net percent of small businesses planning an increase in hiring has dropped from a pre-recession high of about 20% in 2000 to 0% in 2010. The 0% is actually an improvement over the -5% decrease in 2009. Moreover, the percentage of one or more hard to fill jobs among small businesses has declined from more than 30% in 2001 to less than 10% in 2010. In other word, small businesses aren’t planning to increase hiring and, contrary to much of the popular press, there are relatively few high skilled jobs available. Rosengren shows that the structural job change in virtually all industries has declined dramatically, a process that began well before the Great Recession. Rosengren concludes:

... reflects a general decline in almost all industries. ...... in this recession there has been a peak loss of employment of 5 percent or greater in construction, manufacturing, retail trade, wholesale trade, transportation, information technology, financial activities, and professional and business services. To me, this does not suggest that the driver is structural change in the economy is increasing job mismatches – although no doubt some of that exists – but instead I see here a widespread decline in demand across most industries.....given this far-reaching decline in labor demand, job vacancies are remarkably low. p 4.[italics added]

Even in those job sectors where a widespread skill shortage is an unquestioned, there is little or no evidence to support the notion of a skill shortage. Over the last few years there has been a widespread believe that there is shortage of Information Technology (IT) workers. Newspapers and business executives have bemoaned this crisis for years. As early as 2007 one report stated:“(t)his is a massive and devastating skills shortage, and it is coming when there is a surge in the number of projects that are required from IT.”
Vivek Wadhwa, a professor in Duke University’s Master of Engineering Management Program disagrees. He states, “This whole concept of shortages is bogus, it shows a lack of understanding of the labor pool in the USA.” In numerous studies, Wadhwa and his students’ findings have so far shown no indication of skills shortage.

In one study Wadhwa illustrated the disconnect between industry leadership’s opinions about skills shortfalls and the quantitative data that contradict these opinions. He and his students at Duke went straight to the hiring source, the human resource department, at a number of top companies employing IT workers. They asked HR professionals a number of questions that would speak to the availability of qualified workers, about topics such as the number of applicants received for IT jobs, the speed with which these positions are filled and the overall satisfaction with the employees eventually hired.

The portrait painted by the answers were very different from their executive’s opinions on skills shortages, explaining that each indicator showed there was no lack of qualified applicants.

Wadhwa’s studies are not the only studies that question the notion of an IT job shortage. In fact, the evidence arguing against an IT job shortage is overwhelming. In testimony before the United States Congress, Dr. Michael Teitelbaum, vice president of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation stated: “…No one who has come to the question with an open mind has been able to find any objective data suggesting general ‘shortages’ of scientists and engineers….

The RAND Corporation has conducted several studies of this subject; its conclusions go further than my summary above, saying that not only could they not find any evidence of shortages, but that instead the evidence is more suggestive of surpluses.”

In short, there is no evidence to suggest that American workers are skill deficient. On the contrary, the reason for unemployment is structural: There simply are not enough to go around.

3. Implications for adult educators

The idea of a skills gap and a radically changing world has been much discussed, including two papers by US American collogues at the Third International Conference of Adult Education in 2010 (Boucouvalas 2010; Kasworm, 2010).

One of the central claims is that we need to adjust our view of the world and see things differently and prepare see things differently. No one can, I believe argue against this claim. Yet when has that not been the case? I argue that very few societies have had to adjust their view of society more than Romania. Not just post 1989, but the entire 20th demonstrates that adjusting to change and seeing the world differently has been the hallmark of Romanian society. Thus I think one of the central questions facing adult educators, not just in Romania, but in the United States as well is to understand and recognize the “skills” that citizens of our countries have developed in order to survive in an every changing world. Fascism, war, occupation, the decades long rule of the one of the most repressive regimes in European history, revolution, mass migrations (a trend that continues today) - the ability of Romanian to survive the massive changes over the last hundred years has been nothing short of miraculous.

That brings us back to then notion of “skills.” Rather than focusing just on the absence of skills, the question central question for adult educators is really what skills have Romanian citizens acquired that has allowed them to survive this massive changes? As I have tried to argue, the notion of skills is not an easily defined concept. This, of course, raises the question of who gets to decide on what constitutes a skill and what skills are important in a society. I think that in both in the United States and Romania we need to provide an alternative to the OECD and World Bank notion of skills and become active in building on the skills the citizens of our respective societies have developed as means to survival in an ever-changing world.