

Reviews / Comptes rendus

Working and Learning: An Introduction

By Bruce Spencer and Jennifer Kelly
(Toronto, ON: Thompson Educational Publishing, 2013, 130 pages)

If you're like me, when a topic I know little about crosses my desk, I go directly to my computer and do a Google search. And that's exactly what I did when I reflected on the topic of Bruce Spencer and Jennifer Kelly's book, *Working and Learning: An Introduction*. It examines how context and perspective influence students' learning. Together, Spencer and Kelly have crafted an insightful literature review of the socioeconomic beginnings of work and vocational training. It's a compact book. In 130 pages the authors have jammed in eight chapters on the dimensions of work and learning. One can thumb through the book and select chapters of interest to read, or one can read the book cover to cover and come away with a deeper appreciation of the complexities of how the workplace and union collectivity have shaped what we know today as professional development and skills training.

Chapter 1 is built on the premise that the learning people do at work is "managerialist" (p. 1). Managerialist learning makes organizations better by strategically providing employee learning that results in the work being completed more efficiently and effectively. The other seven chapters cover such topics as organizational culture and learning, workers' rights, school to work learning, and the challenges of democratizing work in a global economy.

Chapter 5, "From School to Work . . .," is a must-read chapter for learners who want to explore transitional spaces. But, in my humble opinion, this chapter would have been better placed closer to the start of the book because it provides the fodder for responding to today's key instructional queries. For example, What exactly is workplace learning? What is the role of industry in driving the business of continuing or contingency education? How should the curriculum be selected and taught? Chapter 5 raises provocative questions on the role of authentic education versus teaching the curriculum, the merit of teaching the hidden curriculum (rules, routines, and regulations needed to survive the educational system), and the fundamental question of who is responsible for providing the building blocks of human capital.

In Chapter 6, ". . . And Workplace Learning to School," Spencer and Kelly provide insights into a process known as PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition), whereby university credits are earned by recognizing workplace learning. They argue that critical assessment

is required of any potential recognition of workplace professional development that is to be applied as university credits because "what has not been learned . . . may be as important as the knowledge claimed" (p. 78). Readers who become engaged in this chapter may feel cheated when no challenge is made to the ethics of assessing workplace professional development by university faculties and continuing education departments for recognized university credits.

Chapter 8, "The Challenges of Democratizing Work and Learning in a Global Economy," is a well-crafted editorial on pressing questions raised in previous chapters of the book. Unfortunately, this is the final chapter. Readers more familiar with workplace learning may have grown tired of the review material well before reaching this chapter, resulting in missing one of this book's most informative chapters.

To get the equivalent amount of information that Spencer and Kelly have compressed into this book from the Internet would require numerous searches and clicks. That's way too much time to invest when one can get the equivalent information by scanning through *Working and Learning*. Print is not dead! If you're like me and want to become conversant with the key understandings around work and learning, read Spencer and Kelly's book from cover to cover. It is more efficient and less frustrating than investing your time surfing and clicking around the web. Still, let's be clear about the use of a literature review. It presents "what was," and that's an appropriate place to start. But is it an appropriate place to end? While literature reviews have merit, the reality is that they often become mired in providing the historical trail of what transpired at the expense of hypothesizing about critical questions of what could be.

Marshall McLuhan stated it best: "if the present is seen through a rear-view mirror, we march backward into the future."

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