

Workforce Development Rhetoric and the Realities of 21st Century Capitalism

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Abstract

Increasingly, the provision of adult education (including literacy and training programs) is influenced by a rhetoric of workforce development that tasks education with closing a supposed 'skills gap' between the skills that workers have and what employers are looking for. This deficit model of education blames adult learners for their own condition, as well as for larger problems in the economy. In addition to arguing for broader goals for adult education, those in the field also need to question the economic premises of this rhetoric. A review of current economic conditions points to fundamental aspects of capitalism as the source of instability, which means that education and training programs have a limited ability to move large numbers of people out of poverty. For this reason, students and teachers in adult education should focus on developing structural analyses of the situation and push for substantive changes in the economy.

Introduction

As with education more broadly, adult education has long been contested ideological territory. For example, efforts that stress the need for adult education to support the economy by developing human capital clash with those focused on helping learners realise political liberation. Proponents of critical pedagogy believe that the ideological nature of education should itself be part of the curriculum, with students and teachers working together to examine and resist the dynamics of oppression, whether in Brazil (Freire 1970), the United States (Eubanks 2012) or Japan (Osawa 1990). By contrast, approaches that focus on economic development typically present themselves as a non-ideological response to an evolving labor market. Alongside the rise of neoliberal discourse, it is this economic model that has increasingly come to dominate adult education practice and

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policy. The rhetoric of workforce development holds that education should be about meeting the needs of the employers, rather than helping individuals or communities realise a wide variety of goals they set for themselves. Programs are given legitimacy when they are perceived as contributing to the greater economic good. Furthermore, this rhetoric takes a deficit approach to education, beginning with the assumption that adults (as workers) have problems with skills that need to be addressed.

For example, in the United States, federal support for training and adult basic education is now provided under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Passage of this act in 2014 was accompanied by expected proclamations about the nation's workforce not being competitive with other workforces around the world (US Department of Education 2015). This same alarm has been raised repeatedly over the last few decades – the nation is said to be at risk economically because of adults' limited literacy, numeracy and job-specific skills that industry demands. Politicians of the two major political parties in the United States (Goldstein 2012) and many adult literacy advocates (e.g., National Commission of Adult Literacy 2008) frame their calls for funding in economic terms. This workforce development rhetoric is not only shaping employment-training programs, it is also increasingly influential in adult basic education, as well. For example, under WIOA adult literacy and high school equivalency classes are now expected to be part of a 'career pathway' leading to employment in particular industries or sectors of the economy. The effectiveness of all federal-funded adult basic education programs is now primarily judged according to economic outcomes (e.g., the number of learners who found work) rather than educational ones.

Of course, there have been vocal critics of policies that have prioritised the workforce development model (e.g., Greene 2015, Rivera 2008, among many others). Not only have people continued to champion the cause of adult literacy and education for civic participation and social justice (Nash 2006, Ramdeholl 2011), there have also been analyses that focus on structural issues within capitalism that call into question assumptions about the ability of programs to deliver on the promise of employment or promotion (Mayo 2009, Nesbitt 2006). In keeping with this tradition, I will focus on specific aspects of the rhetoric of workforce development and how this rhetoric serves to dissemble the realities of 21st century capitalism. I will suggest that confronting this rhetoric not only calls

for a continued commitment to a liberatory ethos, it also necessitates directly questioning the economic premises that support a workforce development approach that blames the workers for their own conditions. The paper will challenge claims about workers' supposed lack of skills and will critique discourse that blames workers for economic crises. The paper will also address the limited impact education has had on poverty reduction. Although advocates should argue for a robust adult education system, the economy remains the defining location of class struggle.

The crisis in the workforce

In their white paper *Reach Higher America*, the National Commission on Adult Literacy (2008) provides a rigorous critique of the United States' system of adult basic education and workforce development, suggesting that without a complete transformation the system will not produce desired outcomes. At the root of the problem, they suggest, is that a failure to address 'America's adult education and workforce skills needs is putting [our] country in great jeopardy and threatening [our] nation's standard of living and economic viability' (p. v). The fact that this report was released in June of 2008, just months before a devastating world-wide economic crisis, means that it would not take long for the focus on workers' skills to be shown as misplaced. Worries about an under-regulated financial sector were abundant before the crash (due to its increasingly risky behavior), but here workers are posited as the vulnerability in the economy.

As noted above, the suggestion that the limited skills of the workforce are a threat to the country is not new. In the United States there has been a long history of 'crises' founded on the idea that the public school system is not providing students with the skills they need to be successful in the world (e.g., National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). These warnings about the threat posed by low-skilled workers are not limited to the United States. For example, in the United Kingdom, the *Skills for Life* initiative was based in part on reports of the damage low-skilled workers were thought to be doing to the economy (Department for Education and Employment 2001). In Australia, the *National Foundational Skills Strategy for Adults* was driven by the perception that a 'crisis' in workers' skills was a serious threat to that nation's economy (Black & Yasukawa 2011, Black, Yasukawa & Brown 2013). Brine's (2006)

review of European Commission policy statements on lifelong learning suggests that, ‘low knowledge-skilled workers are not only those *at risk*, they are increasingly constructed as *the risk*’ (p. 649). Rather than addressing how larger economic and sociopolitical structures create instability and vulnerability for workers, in adult education discourse and policy the workers themselves are blamed for economic volatility and underperformance.

This crisis is often framed as a ‘skills-gap’ between what employers want and what workers possess (The White House 2015). This has become such a ‘common sense’ (Gramsci 1987) appraisal of the economy that proponents are not often asked to provide evidence that such a gap exists. In fact, there is evidence that the ‘skills gap’ is mostly a rhetorical device. For example, Shierholz (2014) explains that if there were a shortage of workers that met industry’s needs, incumbent workers would be asked to work longer hours to make up the difference. There is no evidence that is happening. Additionally, if there were a limited supply of workers, companies would have to raise wages in order to compete for the staff they need. Shierholz suggests that at the present time there is no evidence of this, either. Instead, Shierholz suggests that finding work is difficult for many people due to a decrease in the aggregate demand – businesses do not need more workers – not because they lack skills. Shierholz concludes that, ‘More education and training to help workers make job transitions could help some individuals, but it’s not going to generate demand.’ Carnevale (cited by Goldstein 2012:79) reminds us that, ‘Jobs create training, not the other way around. And people get that backwards all the time. In the real world, down at the ground level, if there’s no demand for magic, there’s no demand for magicians.’

Not only does there not seem to be a generalised lack of skills, there are studies that point to larger numbers of workers who have higher levels of skills than their job requires (Goldstein 2012, Pellizzari & Fichen 2013). For example, Levine’s (2013) study of the labor market in the state of Wisconsin in the United States concludes that the skills gap is the inverse of what is typically promoted – ‘it is a mismatch of too many highly educated workers chasing too few “good jobs”’ (p. 5). Additionally, it may be company actions that are keeping positions unfilled, not a lack of potential employees. For example, Cappelli (2012, cited by Popp 2013:41) notes, ‘When I hear stories about the difficulties in finding applicants, I always ask employers if they have tried raising wages, which have not gone up in

years. The response is virtually always that they believe their wages are high enough.’ Even when there is an abundance of skilled workers (thus driving wages down), if a company is not willing to pay qualified workers a reasonable wage that position may remain unfilled. In one case, a company expressed frustration over not being able to find workers while offering a wage that was nearly 33% lower than the average wage for that position (Popp 2013:41). Along these same lines, Gilpin (2014:17) reports that, ‘When pressed, one manufacturing CEO acknowledged that for him, the ‘skills gap’ meant an inability to find enough highly qualified applicants, with no ‘union-type experience’ willing to start at \$10 an hour.’ This is very different than the way the ‘skills-gap’ is typically presented and lays bare capital’s desire to maximise profit and find workers who will not organise and advocate for better working conditions.

By placing the blame on workers’ skills, workforce development rhetoric keeps the conversation at the individual level rather than the socioeconomic. Larger structural problems in the economy are thus rendered invisible, in particular how the capitalist economic system itself creates crises. Indeed, crises would appear to be endemic to capitalism (Brenner 2006, Harvey 1999). For example, Kunkel (2014) notes several consistent elements of economic crisis within capitalist economies— an overproduction of commodities (that cannot find a market), an over-accumulation of capital (that cannot realise its expected return on investment), and the vulnerability of the system to speculation (leading to cycles of collapse and stagnation). It is these structural problems, rather than a lack of skill in the workforce, that lead to periodic crises. In fact, when skilled workers in a given area develop the necessary leverage to negotiate for higher salaries, companies will often move to locations where they can keep labor costs low. When those new workers eventually request higher wages, the company will move yet again. Harvey (1999) suggests that this ‘spatial fix’ is necessarily temporary and is thus bound to produce instability when companies lay people off or close up shops when they move their operations. This cycle arises from the nature of profit in capitalism, rather than any deficit on the part of a worker or workforce.

The National Commission on Adult Literacy (in the US) seems to take the wrong lesson from this situation. They write, ‘States must invest in the skills of their workers so that increased productivity helps offset the effect of low-cost labor furnished by developing countries. Business must be an active partner in this effort’ (2008:viii).

To begin with, the wages paid to those workers in other countries should be called out as exploitative. But more directly to their point, the suggested answer to deal with the movement of capital looking for more profitability (through lower labor costs) is for workers in the United States to do better work. However, productivity is not an issue. In fact, between 1973 and 2011, productivity was up by 80%, while the real hourly wages grew less than 4% (Mishel & Gordon 2012). This is a gap of a different kind – workers are not being fairly compensated for the profits their increased productivity is creating.

Despite the fact that the capitalist economic system creates instability in the job market, the rhetoric of workforce development increasingly holds adult basic education and training programs accountable for the state of the workforce and for helping students find jobs and increase their earnings. If they accept the concept of a ‘skills gap’ to explain problems in the economy or as the reason adult education programs should get funded, adult learners and teachers are letting capital define the nature of the crisis. In this formulation, workers are being held accountable for crises in the system, rather than capitalism itself.

The trouble ahead

While the current situation is defined by a supposed gap in skills, projections about the future tend to be just as dire. The Office of Vocational and Adult Education (2013) in the United States analysed the results of the Program of International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) and suggested that, ‘Adults who have trouble reading, doing math, solving problems, and using technology will find the doors of the 21st-century workforce closed to them.’ The pervasive idea is that breakthroughs in technology and the organisation of work are sparking large-scale changes in the skills needed to be successful. It is common to hear that young people will end up working in jobs that have not even been invented yet and that to negotiate this uncertain future, learners need to develop a higher level of skills. One report concludes that by 2018, 63% of new job openings will require workers with at least some college education (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl 2010:13). The suggestion is that those without credentials will be left out of an evolving workforce.

However, to date the 21st century workforce doesn’t appear to be moving in a positive direction. Rather than technology leading to growth across the labor force, the economy is being restructured in unequal ways. Although it is true that there has been increased

demand for highly skilled, white collar workers, Autor (2010) notes the United States has experienced a disproportionate growth in low-skill, low-wage work that started in the 1990s and has continued to accelerate (p. 3). This is not only the case in the United States, an analysis of 16 European Union countries (Goos, Manning & Salomons 2009) found that from 1993-2006 most of the nations studied experienced a growth in low-wage occupations (11 out of 16) and high-wage occupations (13 out of 16), and that all the nations experienced a decrease in middle-wage occupations (cited by Autor 2010:4). The simultaneous increase in demand for high-skilled, white-collar workers and low-skilled workers has led to what has been called a polarisation of the workforce. That is, job growth at both ends of the skills and wage spectrum accompanied by a hollowing out of the middle.

This polarisation is ignored when leaders trumpet the future of IT and technology related-fields. Those industries are fast growing, but that rate is calculated by percentage increases in the size of that particular sector of the workforce, not by the raw number of new positions that are now available. For example, in the United States from 2002 to 2006 there was an increase ‘of 4.7 million jobs paying a poverty-level wage’ (Roberts & Povich nd:2). The fact that this doesn’t represent as dramatic a change in rate of growth as in IT industries means that there was already a large amount of poverty-level jobs. In the United States, ‘more than one in five jobs, or 22 percent, is in an occupation paying wages that fall below the federal poverty threshold. In eight states, more than one third of all jobs are in poverty-wage occupations’ (p. 4). These are the conditions for programs that are being judged by how quickly they can get learners into the workforce. The pressure is on to get any job, whether or not it will pay above poverty level wages.

Indeed, supporters of the workforce development approach do seem to ignore the prevalence of poverty level work. In a briefing designed to promote the effectiveness of investment in workforce training, Ridley and Kenefick (2011) note increases in wages for those who have gone through training programs as evidence the programs are working. One study they reference (Hollenbeck et al. 2005) found that participating in training was associated with an \$800 per quarter rise in median income (in 2000 dollars). A closer look at the study reveals that with that raise these workers were now earning roughly \$18,000/year. This clears the US governments’ (often criticised) poverty threshold of \$8,794 (circa 2000), but comes

nowhere close to meeting other calculations of requirements for economic security. For example, the Basic Economic Security Tables (BEST) index developed by Wider Opportunities for Women concludes that a single individual needs nearly 300% of the US government's target to make ends meet (McMahon & Horning 2014). Adding any dependents moves the person further below the real poverty line. A raise of \$800 is welcome, but not enough to move out of economic vulnerability.

In addition to an increase in jobs that don't pay enough to move out of poverty, there are other shifts in the economy that negatively impact low-wage workers. Competition for jobs may be coming from those who have traditionally held higher wage positions. Beaudry, Green and Sand (2013) suggest that there has been what they refer to as 'a great reversal in the demand for skill and cognitive tasks.' Their analysis of trends in the workforce suggests that up until 2000, there had been an increase in the demand for skills, or 'cognitive tasks often associated with high educational skill' (p. 1), but since that time there has been a steady decline. In part they attribute this to a model of 'skill-biased technological change...[that] can create a boom-bust cycle in the demand for cognitive tasks along with a continuous decline in the demand for routine tasks' (p. 6). Without jobs that demand and compensate for their abilities, highly skilled workers find themselves forced to take jobs that were traditionally filled by low-skill, low-wage workers. Beaudry, Green and Sand (2013:i) note, 'This deskilling process, in turn, results in high-skilled workers pushing low-skilled workers even further down the occupational ladder and, to some degree, out of the labor force all together'. The approach of 'upskilling' learners in adult basic education or training programs into the labor force now runs into the reality that there are fewer jobs that demand mid-level skills and that students will be in competition with individuals who may already have higher levels of skills. Thus, training alone cannot overcome a polarised economic structure that is rewarding fewer workers with higher pay and increasing the number of people getting lower wages. After a mid-twentieth century in which some gains were made in terms of income distribution, the 21st century is trending back to earlier patterns of wealth concentration and wide-spread economic insecurity. The rhetoric of workforce development speaks of the need for adults to join the labor force and contribute, but it doesn't address what the prospects actually are for learners and workers.

Education, training and moving individuals out of poverty

One reason the rhetoric of workforce development is so persuasive for many is that it is consistent with analyses that point out the connection between literacy skills, education and income. At the demographic level, it is clear that lower levels of skills are associated with economic vulnerability. In their policy briefing about the need to upskill the workforce, the Obama administration notes that adults scoring below a 1 on the PIAAC assessment of literacy earn an average of \$20,000, while those at levels 4/5 earn an average of \$55,000 a year (The White House, 2015). Reder (2010:1) points out that high school dropouts are more than twice as likely to be living in poverty as high school graduates (24% to 11%). The US Census reports that in 2014, those with less than a ninth grade education had a mean income of \$25,028, those with a high school diploma (or equivalent) earned a mean income of \$34,099, while those with a bachelor's degree earned a mean of \$62,466 (US Census nd). The clear advantage gained by graduating from college is one reason adult basic education systems in the United States are developing transition programs for adults moving onto post-secondary education (see the work of the National Transition Network at <http://www.collegetransition.org/home.html>).

However, moving from the individual as the unit of analysis to the larger society provides a different picture of the impact of education. For example, Marsh (2011) points out that starting in the late 1960s, the United States enacted policies that supported the education of young children (with programs such as Head Start) and also grew the numbers of people graduating high school and college. In 1972, when federal programs were firmly in place, the poverty rate was 19.2% percent, and in 1980 (when the programs should have been demonstrating long term effects) it was 19.5% (p. 118). He suggests that, 'the consensus seems to be that these programs, although they may have expanded equality of opportunity, did relatively little to reduce poverty' (p 118). Marsh concludes that we cannot educate our way out of poverty given the types of economic inequality and exploitation built into capitalism.

In a similar fashion we can look at poverty during the era of the Workforce Investment Act (the precursor to WIOA in the United States). When it was enacted in 1998, 12.7% of the US population lived in poverty, and in 2013, 15.8% of the population did. Granted, these have been turbulent times for the US economy, marked by

unfunded wars and tax-cuts and a deregulated financial industry, but it would seem clear that the workforce training approach is not enough to overcome these large structural problems and reduce poverty rates. Rather, Marsh (2011) notes that data from the 1990s indicate that people fell into poverty because of a reduction in paid working hours, the loss of work, changes in personal situations (like divorce or separation) and ill-health. He concludes that more education might reduce the risk of experiencing poverty, but ‘so long as the economy produces jobs that pay poverty- and near-poverty level wages, somebody must take those jobs. Without a change in wages or job security, those who occupy those jobs will remain at risk of falling into poverty’ (p. 87). We can’t educate or train *everybody* out of poverty-level wage jobs if poverty-wage jobs are pervasive.

This point appears to be lost in some analyses of the role that education can play in addressing economic vulnerability. For example, Bruno, Jin and Norris (2010) suggest that adult basic education and training programs should focus on giving learners the skills they need to get jobs that pay \$10.50/hour (the rate they conclude needs to be met to move beyond being working poor). However, since these jobs are in limited supply, not everybody can upskill into such positions. Somebody moving into such a job will potentially be displacing somebody else rather than filling a recently created new position. In turn, the dislocated worker may be in the position of having to take a job that pays less than \$10.50/hour, joining a large number of people who cycle in and out of poverty. As Marsh (2011) suggests, with this approach you may change who is living in poverty, but not the number of people doing so (p. 88). An alternative solution would be to ensure that all jobs pay a living wage, not just selected ones. Thus, rather than keeping with the neoliberal model of having workers compete with each other to make ends meet, the focus should be on making sure all workers are compensated at a rate that moves them beyond being working poor.

This guarantee of a living wage regardless of the type of employment is essential because workers at the lower end of the skills continuum experience a great deal of job churn, due to rapid changes in industry and markets (Eubanks 2012:61). They may indeed train for a job that pays \$10.50, but even if they secure employment there is no guarantee how long that job will last. Their next job may pay less, and then to regain lost earning power they may be encouraged to enter another training program. Adults in this position end up on with what seems like a Sisyphian task of never ending training with little

hope of breaking out of the cycle. The loss of employment can create a downward trajectory that is difficult to stop simply with education. One study of dislocated workers who went to college for training in new fields found that they actually were less likely to be employed and had lower earnings than those who did not go back for training (Goldstein 2012). This could have been for a number of reasons (such as those less likely to be rehired in the first place ended up going to training), but it points again to a fundamental truth – if there is no work or jobs that pay well, no amount of education or training will help individuals secure employment with life-sustaining wages.

A focus on measures of individual success, in terms of leveraging education for higher wages, serves to divert attention from the class structure of capitalist economics and larger trends in the number of people in living in poverty. Rather than addressing the conditions that lead people to fall in and out of poverty, the adult basic education and training system is predicated upon working with individuals as they come through classes and apply for services. Referring to racial disparities regarding enrolment in higher education, specifically for African American men, one college student criticised approaches that work with individual students who need support in getting to college. He concluded, ‘You can’t keep putting a band-aid on a big wound. We need to figure out why people keep falling in the river. You don’t just keep jumping in and saving that one individual. You run upstream, and you figure out why they are falling in’ (Center for Community College Student Engagement 2014:30). This is also a necessity for adult basic education classes and other efforts to support the poor and working class. We cannot train our way out of poverty one worker at a time.

Yet despite these built-in limitations, the training continues. The rhetoric of the ‘skills gap’ crisis helps drive money into subsidised programs that train workers, relieving companies of the need to provide on-the-job training. Those who work in the provision of services get paid for parceling out money, for setting up accountability regimes, and for engaging in quality assurance activities. Even if these programs do not move people into jobs that pay a living wage, the focus remains on the skills of the workers rather than the structure of the system. The rhetoric of workforce development limits the scope of adult basic education and perpetuates competition between workers for scarce resources. Some critics have long held that public education efforts work to reinforce social class inequalities rather than counter them (Bowles & Gintis 1976/2011,

Graff 1991). When education provided by the state is focused on the needs of capital rather than individuals it is part of the problem, not part of the solution. Along these lines, Greene (2015) believes that current adult education efforts have a ‘domesticating educational agenda that prepares adults exclusively for the job market and the submissiveness required to insure [*sic*] their social control’ (pp. 33-34). That agenda might not always be realised, as there are students and teachers who work to conduct adult education classes on their own terms, but trends in policy and discourse are not promising.

Implications

To be clear, ending centuries of systemic exploitation and inequity will require a fundamental transformation of the economy rather than small-scale alterations or adjustments.

As noted above, education alone is not enough to move a whole class of people out of poverty, nor will it be sufficient to create a break from capitalism. However, generations of adult learners and educators have recognised the ideological nature of literacy and have connected their work to larger struggles for social and economic justice (Greene 2015, Purcell-Gates & Waterman 2000). The history of such efforts is not typically part of teacher or tutor training or ongoing professional development. That means that teachers do not necessarily hear about slaves teaching themselves to read at the risk of death, workers organising labor colleges (Altenbaugh 1990), or revolutionary literacy campaigns in places like Cuba. Rather than having opportunities to think through and discuss multiple goals and approaches, those working the field are encouraged to develop what Macedo and Bartolomé (1999) describe as a ‘methods fetish.’ That is, professional development activities focus almost exclusively on technical answers to improve education (e.g., better teaching methods, better curriculum, better evaluation) rather than addressing the socioeconomic and sociopolitical conditions that education takes place in.

The issue is not solely related to teacher training. For example, teachers in Japan with a long-standing commitment to adult literacy and social justice work believe that younger teachers coming into the field do not easily make connections between the classrooms they are working in and movements for social justice because they did not enter the field when such activities were common (Jacobson 2015). Veteran teachers believe that these younger teachers do not know alternate models of pedagogy are even an option. Of course,

this may not just be a function of age, for teachers of any age might enter programs with little experience of social justice work. It is also the case that not all adult basic education students want their classes to focus on or connect to social justice issues and they may embrace the workforce development rhetoric themselves. Thus, teachers need to navigate the difficult terrain of inviting critique of current socioeconomic conditions without negating student agency.

Bowles and Gintis (1976/2011) in their own critique forcefully conclude, ‘We cannot move forward through the band-aid remedies of liberal education reform. The people of the United States do not need a doctor for the moribund capitalist order; we need an undertaker’ (p. 288). Yet they also suggest that the process will be long and arduous and that ‘socialist educators should take seriously the need to combine a long-range vision with winning victories in the here and now’ (p. 287). To that end, I will suggest two strategies that focus on concrete ways to push back against the dehumanizing effects of the workforce development rhetoric described above. The first is to focus on students’ and teachers’ abilities to think at the structural level and the second is to identify structural reforms to advocate for.

A- Focus on thinking structurally

Brookfield and Holst (2011) suggest that adult education programs aiming to work against oppression need to ask a series of questions about their approach. For example, they believe programs should ask - ‘Does our work help the dispossessed understand the historic nature of their existence, and does it expose the growing contradictions within existing sociopolitical economic relations?’ (p. 100). With regards to rhetoric of workforce development we can ask - do programs help learners understand the nature of the polarised economy, how the prevalence of poverty-wage jobs makes it difficult for large numbers of people to move beyond poverty and how workers themselves are blamed for the crises that capitalism creates? Additionally, do programs help students understand the contradictions involved in castigating people for being unemployed in an economic system that depends upon a standing army of the unemployed to suppress wages and maximise profits? For most programs the answer would be ‘no’. For example, over the last few decades many adult education programs have developed ‘financial literacy’ courses for their students. Although there are exceptions (see United for a Fair Economy in the United States at <http://www.faireconomy.org/>), these courses tend to focus on topics

like managing bills, shopping for deals and managing credit rather than the nature of economy and workers' roles in it.

Analysing these socioeconomic relations demands what Brookfield and Holst (2011) term a 'structuralised' worldview that interprets 'individual experiences in terms of broader social and economic forces' (p. 60). This holds for both teachers and students, and each can model structural thinking for each other. Indeed, it is not the case that the teacher is in the position of lecturing learners about the systemic oppression they face. Rather, learners and teachers can work together to identify how all of their experiences are shaped by larger socioeconomic forces (Purcell-Gates & Waterman 2000) and how they should respond to inequality and oppression. Similarly, Freire asserts the need for learners and teachers to work towards political clarity, which he describes as the ability to think through fragmented bits of information to achieve a 'rigorous understanding of the facts' (Freire & Macedo 1987:131).

Recently an adult educator told me about a training project she was working on. Through her program immigrant adults had been placed at a factory that wrapped lettuce for distribution. One of the trainees approached her and said, 'I was a farmer in Vietnam. Now I work all week wrapping lettuce and after I get my paycheck I cannot even afford to buy lettuce. What I am doing here?' It is a good question and one that programs should be encouraging students and teachers to ask. Prioritising structural thinking can help teachers question the terms of a workforce education system that continues to blame workers for their own vulnerable economic status and qualifies securing a job with poverty-level wages as a successful outcome of training. In the case just noted, the teacher decided to connect the student to people involved in a community gardening project where he could put his agricultural skills to good use and to help him find other work that paid better than training wages.

B- Advocate for policies that address structural issues

Greene (2015) suggests that teachers and others involved in adult education should not be afraid to be radical because the solutions to the problems facing society are too large to be fixed with small steps. When budgets for adult basic education and training are cut, advocates rally to restore them, sometimes quite effectively. However, that often results in a return to the status quo of limited opportunities for individual mobility and little change in the overall amount of poverty. Since we cannot educate or train our way out of

systemic economic insecurity, not only do we need to want more from education, we need to demand more on the economic level. Those who make a connection between their work in adult education and their commitment to social justice should join efforts that are pushing for the type of radical change that would have a profound effect on their students' lives.

For example, rather than hoping to train some learners to move out of poverty wage jobs, students and teachers should join efforts to raise the pay of all low-wage workers. In the United States this has taken the form of arguing for raising the minimum wage to \$15/hour. Many different groups of people have taken this up as an issue, particularly unions and advocacy groups, including those in adult basic education. For example, students and teachers at Make the Road New York (see <http://www.maketheroad.org/>), a community-based education and advocacy organisation, combine ESOL classes with planning and carrying out outreach and protests that speak directly to raising the pay of workers in a variety of industries.

For adults who currently don't have work, the demand should be for jobs programs, not training programs. As has been said, employment, not employability. To address the economic meltdown of 2008, the Obama administration initiated a stimulus program that has been criticised as being too small, rather than too large (Krugman 2010). Indeed, it left unaddressed large issues with the United States' economy and infrastructure that should be addressed with a large and sustained federal jobs program. For example, calculations suggest that a jobs program focused on a concerted effort to deal with the many dangerous bridges, tunnels and roads in the United States would create millions of jobs and pay dividends by making the transportation system more efficient and reliable (Brun et. al. 2014). Political opposition to anything that calls for federal involvement has stymied efforts in the past, but requests for small increases in funds for jobs training should not serve to obviate the need for a profound effort to address both the economy and the environment. In this area the demands have to be larger, not smaller.

Finally, as Marsh (2011) notes, education efforts did not make as much of a difference in reducing poverty as other government programs that provided direct support. He argues that it was aid in the form of food subsidies (Food Stamps), medical support (Medicare and Medicaid) and increases in social security that reduced the number of people living in poverty. However, it is just these kinds of programs that are reduced when governments cut budgets. Those

concerned with the lives of adult education students and the community as a whole must push back against the type of austerity measures that have wreaked havoc on communities and economies. As with the misleading rhetoric of a skills gap, it is not those who are reliant upon social welfare that are causing economic volatility, and blaming them is a way to move attention away from systemic problems within capitalism.

To make progress towards a more just society, those involved in adult basic education should reject the rhetoric of workforce development and the illusory economic premises that it is based upon. We need to stop working on capital's terms by accepting the notion that workers are the problem, rather than capitalism itself. We cannot be satisfied if education and training move a few people out of poverty when more people continue to join the ranks of the working poor. In the face of calls for austerity we need to ask for more, not accept less. This may seem audacious, but as Brookfield and Holst (2011) note, an embrace of audacity has sustained many successful social justice movements over the years.

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