LEARNING WORK

A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF WORK EDUCATION

ROGER I. SIMON,
DON DIPPO,
AND ARLEEN SCHENKE

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To Studs Terkel
who taught us so much about how to listen
and hear the expression of human dignity
upon which all productive work is founded

Preface

What is work education? In its most general sense, work education is a practice that emphasizes the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that relate to a student's future participation within the economic sector of one's community and nation. In practice, such intentions become manifest in a considerable variety of program forms including career exploration, world of work, adult re-training, work transition, and high school and college work-study courses that combine alternating periods of time in schools and workplaces.

During the last decade there has been a world-wide movement to establish work education as a central component of public schooling and community-based "life skills" retraining programs. The establishment of work education has been motivated by a variety of concerns, including lowering school drop-out rates, helping students define a "career," helping students gain a sense of pride and accomplishment, and developing a competent and reliable supply of labor for community economic enterprise. With a manifold sense of purpose, work education programs have become a feature of a vast number of school districts and community service agencies not only in Canada and the United States, but in Britain and Australia as well.

However, as school districts rush to establish such programs, new questions are being asked as to how work education can be justified within a project of public schooling. Representatives of community agencies have also been debating how to confront the contradictions they at times feel between serving community economic interests and the ed-

ucational needs of their clients. Such discussions signal the rekindling of an old debate regarding the relative balance between education and training both in public schools and community adult education. As both teachers and community-based educators resist turning their programs into training centers for existing corporate interests, concerns have arisen over how work education may proceed in a way that provides students with an understanding of "the realities" of life in the job market and at work, while helping them to increase their effective participation in determining the practices that will define their working lives. *Learning Work: A Critical Pedagogy of Work Education* directly addresses this concern. Through discussions of teaching practice and actual lesson suggestions we attempt to clarify how the viewpoint of a "critical pedagogy" can be used to develop a clear and principled practice of work education that directly addresses this concern.

We have assumed a multiple audience for this book. It will be of interest to teachers working in a variety of forms of work education programs, particularly programs that emphasize experiential components such as work-study or cooperative education. Community-based educators working in adult "life skills," "drop back," retraining, and literacy programs will also find many practical suggestions as well as a programmatic orientation for their work. However, there is a third, and equally important audience we have intended to address in our text: those educators and academics who have consistently complained about the lack of practical examples and overt concern for questions of teaching and learning in the literature which, over the last decade, has come to be referenced by the term "critical pedagogy and cultural studies." In our introduction, we provide a brief discussion of how we understand the project of a critical pedagogy and how it relates to work education. However, in this book we have emphasized questions of educational practice over abstract conceptualizations about practice. There is much theory in this book, but readers will find it encoded in the lesson suggestions and teaching notes that make up most of the following pages. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that this book could not have been written without our own participation in what is too often referred to as "academic abstractions," that is, the conceptual discussions of education as a form of cultural politics and the questions of power/knowledge such discussions generate.

This book has been a long time coming. It began as part of an extended ethnographic research project on the production of work identities. Many examples in this book have been drawn from interviews and classroom observations compiled during our research in a cross-section of urban, suburban, and rural high schools in southern Ontario. While this research was crucial to our understanding of the problems and challenges of work education, we have not provided methodological

details of this study here and the book should not be construed as a research report. The substance of this book reflects who we are and where we work. There is a definite Canadian (or at least an English-speaking southern Ontarian) character to the text. However, the majority of suggestions offered in this book can be used in different national contexts with small modification. Those lesson suggestions that do emphasize particular Canadian social contexts should be read for what they display as a particular approach, which can be adapted to local histories and economic realities.

Many friends and colleagues have contributed to this book. It could not have been written without the encouragement and labor of Jeff Piker. Jeff was central to the formation of the text and his draft contributions were invaluable in helping spur the constant process of revision. Many times it was his energy and enthusiasm that kept us going. Matt Sanger researched and wrote draft material for the chapter on unions. Alison Griffith provided analyses of research data which influenced the formation of many of the chapters. Diane Gérin-Lajoie provided an analysis that was helpful in drafting a portion of the chapter on social relations. Sam Serrano contributed useful commentary on draft material, and bravely tried out lesson suggestions in his own classroom. Many thanks also to Peter Phelan, Joan Ellis, and Danny Panzer for their comments and advice. Thanks also to Michael Chervin for a wonderful detailed edit of the introduction, and to Gael Tickner and Jo-Anne Hannah for comments on various aspects of draft material. Special thanks to Carol Broome, who spent many hours typing interview transcripts. This book is based on work supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.[1]

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Series Introduction: Reading Work Education as the Practice of Theory

The relationship between work and schooling has long been the subject of theoretical and political analyses in both North America and elsewhere. Not surprisingly, the ideological contours that have been generated in order to define the "work" experience for countless numbers of students do not fall neatly into traditional political parameters. For example, various groups of progressive educators have long argued that schools should provide all students with the work skills they will need to function in the larger economy. On the other hand, a noticeable number of radical critics have argued that work education involves what has been called "tracking" in the United States and "streaming" in Canada—a process that functions, in terms of class, gender, or race, to largely prepare students for low-skill, dead-end jobs. More conservative analyses have criticized the nature of work education while supporting the larger goal of educating students for the workplace as one of the primary tasks of schooling. Such analyses have been more inclined to fault schools for simply not providing students with the necessary attitudes, knowledge, and skills to fulfill successfully their future participation in the world of work. Of primary concern has been the role of the school in fostering character traits and dispositions that will produce workers who will value tradition and respect the virtues of the worksite such as obedience, punctuality, compliance, and deference to authority. While all of these issues are central to any discourse *about* work education, they too often operate at a level of abstraction that fails to produce a pedagogy *for* work education. Hence, the great majority of these positions speak to and for students engaged in work education, but they

rarely ever allow students to speak from the specificity of their own experiences; that is, from those places, practices, and spaces that frame their lives in particular ways. Within the dominant discourses on work education, children are positioned in a language that speaks for them rather than with them. Generally missing from these accounts are any analyses of how student identities are shaped in relation to the specificity of work education, and what implications this might have for expanding the theoretical and practical insights necessary for developing a pedagogy of work experience that is both concrete and transformative.

This should not suggest that work education programs have not been organized by educators to deal with the shifting demands for labor that have come to characterize most of the industrialized Western countries. Work education has, in some cases, become the new panacea for addressing the economic, political, and cultural crises that are threatening the political and economic stability of a large number of industrial nations. Rising levels of unemployment, lack of adequately trained workers for the increasing low-end service sectors of the economy, high dropout rates, and the changing cultural and demographic nature of the work force, have put the issue of work education high on the agenda of educational reform. The grim irony is that the theoretical models that frequently underpin these programs have a tendency to undermine whatever emancipatory potential they may have. Functional in nature and limited in vision, many educators and policymakers completely disregard how the pedagogical practices at work in these programs position students within shifting and often contradictory sets of experiences; and yet such experiences are integral to how students construct their senses of self and their relationships to others and to the world around them.

Learning Work is an important book both because it engages a broad range of debates and problems that have taken place around work education, and because it employs the term "practice" in a highly innovative and important way. Practice is used by Simon, Dippo, and Schenke to challenge the conventional manner in which theory and practice are understood by many educators, especially with respect to the relationship between the two. Practice, in this book, rewrites its relationship to theory in a dual sense. First, it "interrupts" the alleged autonomy of theory as merely a conceptual or abstract representational system by making visible the practices that construct theory, and by illuminating how theory can only be understood as a practice produced by the circumstances that structure its problems, possibilities, and inadequacies. Second, theory is not seen as the center of educational work, then assigning practice a marginal and secondary role. Practice is not romanticized as a sphere activity where truth, insight, and virtue automatically reveal themselves in experiential terms.

For the authors of *Learning Work*, critical pedagogy is important and potentially transformative to the degree that it re-invents theory as a practice rooted in self-reflection and as a critical awareness of its own historical and social formation. As part of a broader pedagogy of work experience, the authors illuminate this in a number of ways. First, the practice of theory in this book is grounded in both a recognition of its own partiality and a commitment to a radical democratic project. That is, practice, in this case, makes explicit the moral and political aims presupposed in the social relations that it structures as part of a broader attempt to deepen the possibilities for human dignity and democratic public life. Second, the authors rupture the binary opposition of theory and practice, while simultaneously challenging facile claims to an unproblematic cause and effect relationship between the two. Third, *Learning Work* makes clear that theory *as* a form of practice does not operate from the margins of a transformative critical pedagogy, but as a central and mutually constitutive aspect of a cultural politics that refigures the very problematic that constructs the history, meaning, and possibilities of work education.

Learning Work takes up the issue of a critical practice of work education as a basis for teachers, administrators, students, and others to rethink the most fundamental theoretical assumptions that render work education meaningful as both a critical pedagogy and as a cultural politics deeply implicated in the construction of citizens who will eventually occupy one of the most important public spheres in society. Practice in this sense becomes a basis for theorizing from a set of experiences, organized through the familiar ground of the particular, specific, and immediate.

By emphasizing the practice of a critical theory of work education, the authors have neither underplayed the importance of theoretical considerations, nor overemphasized the importance of experience in shaping work education. Instead, they have provided and privileged a set of pedagogical practices as a basis for teachers and other cultural workers to examine the diverse connections and complex conditions of work education that always necessitate a critical attentiveness to theoretical considerations and interventions.

The practices taken up in *Learning Work* serve as a brilliant attempt to make work education pragmatic and problematic—a practice that presupposes, affirms, and ruptures the often contradictory and shifting relationships between schooling as a form of social and moral discourse and the effects it has in either extending or undermining the capacities and competencies that students need to function as both workers and citizens in the twenty-first century. Work education, as it is presented by the authors, is not a master narrative for ethnographic research, critical pedagogy, or educational policy. On the contrary, while pointing

to the importance of these issues, it engages rather than ignores how they are taken up or given expression within a particular historical context and cultural location. *Learning Work* in this sense serves to demonstrate how critical pedagogy is practiced as a form of cultural politics that legitimates itself less through a series of reasoned abstractions than within a set of concrete practices. Practice in this sense becomes a form of writing, an act of cultural production that both produces and carries out the script it creates as it unfolds through the shifting contours of representation, power, and place that configure the relations between teachers, students, homes, workplaces, and daily life.

Learning Work is a book that is practical, accessible, and informative. This is a book that will surely animate a lively debate among a broad public over the meaning, purpose, and practice of work education. It serves as a striking example of how complex theoretical issues can manifest themelves in a discourse of practice that refuses both dogmatic reductionism and abstract reification. This is also one of the first books within the field of critical pedagogy that combines the language of critique and hope within a project of possibility that presupposes in its practice the grounds for a more just and humane notion of work, schooling, and society.

Henry A. Giroux

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I

Introduction

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Work Education and Critical Pedagogy

The question of how and to what extent curriculum and teaching in schools should be linked to the requirements of a local or national economy is of concern to youth, families, teachers, businesses, labor organizations, and government. Such concerns are being addressed through school programs that claim to prepare people for "successful" and "productive" participation in the working life of the community and the nation. This is an issue whose educational importance is obvious. Yet in moving from the rhetoric of success and productivity to the realities of classroom practice, we need to acknowledge the complexity behind the inevitable task of interpreting what is meant by "successful" and "productive" participation. What range of possible answers to this question exists? What social interests are served by different answers? What answers are being heard and by whom? Given different versions of what constitutes adequate preparation for working life, how will our commitments as educators help us to decide what to do in our classrooms?

This book is intended to serve as a resource for teachers struggling with these questions. Through discussions of teaching practice and actual lessons we offer suggestions on how the project of a critical pedagogy can be used to develop a clear and principled practice of work education.

Our starting point acknowledges that education is not a neutral enterprise. Schools are places where a sense of identity, place, and worth is both informed and contested. This is a process that happens within the daily, concrete relations among staff and students, relations that

affect the organization and regulation of what knowledge is to be made available and what meanings will be produced within the encounter of "going to school." Thus, how we do schooling really matters. It influences the way different people will answer questions such as: What knowledge is of most worth? What does it mean to know something? How might we construct useful or truthful representations of ourselves, others, and our physical and social environments? What modes of living are to be considered of value? In what direction should we desire? How might our efforts be directed, to adapting to the world "as it is" or to considering what would have to be done for things to be otherwise?

From this discussion we can see that the knowledge made available and the meanings produced within schooling are important events in our society for, at least in part, they define what we take to be our "horizon of possibility." The fact that what happens in schools influences our horizon of possibility gives what teachers and students actually do together a particular social significance. It means that schools are places within which a form of "cultural politics" happens. At first glance, this assertion may seem awkward and strange. However, if we consider politics as designating that process through which members of a group, community, or nation decide on ways they will live their common life together, the meaning of schools as a site of cultural politics becomes clearer. Certainly it is a form of politics when we are engaged in a process (and as teachers we are) that results in certain competencies and capacities being nominated as worthy of encouragement and development. And certainly it is a form of politics when we help construct an imagination that delimits the range of social forms within which we expect people to realize their capacities.[1]

It is our assumption that to develop an adequate conception of work education, one that will be coherent and capable of delivering on its promise to help prepare people for "successful" and "productive" working lives, we must be clear as to the cultural politics that will guide our pedagogy. This perhaps then signals the most significant contribution this book can make. While teachers will find many practical ideas that can be adapted for use in various forms of schooling for work in both high schools and community colleges, what is central to our efforts here is the clarification of a conception of work education organized within the frame of an explicit cultural politics. The broad outline of this politics and its realization as a critical pedagogy has been discussed elsewhere.[2] The aim of the rest of this introduction is to situate our approach to work education within the domain of critical pedagogy.

THE ONGOING POLICY DEBATE

In order to understand the distinctive character of our concept of work education it is helpful to first consider some earlier formulations of how