
Lifelong learning for labour power production

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Although adult education has a long history that goes back to Robert Owen's educational projects at New Lanark mills and the establishment of the Workers' Education Association in 1903, its conceptualisation as lifelong learning with a clear social purpose based on social justice only recently emerged, in the 1970s.

Influenced by a Marxist focus on class inequality and a Freirean approach to conscientisation (1), radical adult educators rejected the neutrality of education and argued for a 'liberating' educational approach addressing the structural inequalities that impacted on people's lives. Reflecting on the participatory

pedagogy and experimentation of that period, Alan Tuckett captured that sense of joy and possibility when he wrote about his first teaching job at a liberal arts centre in Brighton in 1973:

I discovered an astonishing mix of provision. A politics class on the Arab-Israeli conflict engaged some seventy adult learners, alongside classes on the nineteenth century novel, advanced Russian, and a WEA philosophy tutorial; a group were looking at the impact of planning on the urban environment, and pensioners were planning to paint the night away. Not much later, Allen Ginsberg and Yevgeny Yevtushenko led sessions reading and debating their poetry. (2)

The Labour prime minister James Callaghan's speech at Ruskin College in 1976 was a watershed moment in the history of education policy. Criticising the traditional liberal approach to education, he claimed there was insufficient focus on numeracy and literacy, accusing the curriculum of being out of step with the 'needs of industry' (3). He wanted an increasingly narrow focus on courses with an explicit utilitarian labour market value.

Callaghan's questioning of the post-war education settlement was a precursor to a full-frontal assault by consecutive Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997. Neoliberalism became the dominant form of capitalist social relations, positioning education as a conduit for developing workers for the globally competitive economy. Although further education was expanded under New Labour, Norman Lucas noted a sharp division that emerged between academic and vocational education, with the latter seen as the best route for those who are branded as 'failures' in the academic arena:

The system serves the elite well, while those who do not succeed either drop out of education altogether, or are marshalled into forms of vocational education that offer no real chance of employment, or into apprenticeships that lack meaningful substance. (4)

The neoliberal repurposing of education shifted the discourse in lifelong learning from 'learning to be' to 'learning to be productive and employable'. Lifelong learning has been imbued with a strong meritocratic impetus so adults are therefore expected to invest their own money on continuing their education. But education policy has also ignored the dynamics of the labour market that have eroded the living conditions of working-class people, so many adults cannot afford to access lifelong learning: a 38 per cent cut in spending on adult education between 2011 and 2021 was accompanied by a 50 per cent reduction in numbers taking qualifications at Level 2 and below (5).

Labour power production

In his *PSE 112* article, Martin Allen discussed the significant influence that human capital theory has had on education policy (6). This reduction of people to capital, bought by employers in the form of wages and contracts, is analogous to Karl Marx's theory of labour power: 'the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises when he produces a use value of any description' (7). Put simply, our labour power is comprised of our knowledge, skills, capacities, and abilities which have become regarded as economic commodities linked to productivity.

Marx was clear that education produces labour power. Vocational courses in FE, for example, focus on specialisation through emphasis on the knowledge, skills, attitudes and other labour-power attributes to work in a specific industry. A person's potential to learn becomes quantifiable in terms of their knowledge and skills that can be bought on the labour market. As education and training are essential elements in the social production of labour power, they are complicit in what Glenn Rikowski calls the 'capitalisation of humanity' (8).

As the neoliberal logic and globalisation of capital progresses, the drive to enhance the quality of labour power has been ratcheted up. Successive UK governments have sought to make capital more competitive by emphasising labour power production in lifelong learning. This policy focus gained momentum following the Brexit referendum decision, when there were heightened concerns that the UK was facing a shortage of skilled and unskilled labour when they withdrew from the EU. Rikowski argues that this narrow, economic focus on 'upskilling' and 'reskilling' represents a form of 'learning unto death' (9), an alienating representation of what well-rounded educational experience should be.

Employer-led learning

The introduction of the *Skills and Post-16 Education Act* in 2022 limited policy discussion of lifelong learning to labour market considerations in Britain's post-COVID economic recovery. Although employer investment in training has fallen 28 per cent since 2005 (10), the Act states that employers should be at the heart of lifelong learning. The formation of employer-led Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) will play a leading role in setting standards, designing vocational qualifications and shaping local FE provision so that it fulfils the needs of the local labour market. Rather than lifelong learning being a community function controlled by people in the locality, the Act elevates employers

as 'experts' and gives them unprecedented influence over adult education.

The Act states that skills provision should be better aligned with local needs, which are defined as delivering technical qualifications to meet the skills employers need. It is notable that local and learner needs such as health and wellbeing and community participation, and essential skills such as communication and critical thinking, are not directly addressed in the Act. The reduction of lifelong learning to skills ignores the importance of community adult learning as a lever for supporting social justice and social cohesion.

The lifelong learning entitlement (LLE) is the flagship policy of the Act. From 2025, this will entitle adult learners to four years' worth of post-18 education (Levels 4 and 5) to use over their lifetime. Embracing neoliberal values, it explicitly positions learners as consumers making rational choices to optimise their own economic potential in response to labour market demands. They can do this by accessing loans to fund smaller periods of study such as modules in a degree programme, as well as a full qualification alongside existing work commitments. The LLE, worth the equivalent of four years of post-18 education, will burden learners with a loan that roughly amounts to £37,000 in today's fees.

The Level 4 and 5 qualifications that will be funded through LLE have an emphasis on skills upgrades that are more aligned to labour power needs. This lopsided focus on skills development and gaining higher level qualifications will benefit those who left school with good GCSEs or equivalent qualifications. The LLE provides no funding support for learners studying below Level 4. With no restoration of public funding for low-level qualifications on the agenda, the Act will create a two-tier system (11). Instead, the main interventions for helping those with few qualifications are through untested programmes like Multiply and Skills Bootcamps. Both are unlikely to lead to formal qualifications.

Transforming education to transform society

The Act further bolsters the realignment of post-16 technical education to employers' skills needs to boost productivity and economic growth. The establishment of employer-led LSIPs highlights the current policy viewpoint that education's primary value lies in its economic utility to capital. That is not to say that lifelong learning should not focus on employability skills, but the reduction of the 'human' to 'capital' prevents us from recognising our obligations to our fellow citizens. For critical educators the challenge is to shift lifelong learning beyond a univocal concern with labour power production and capital accumulation, and to repurpose it as supporting active citizenry and developing political literacy.

While educators are complicit in the production of labour power, we also have an important strategic role in disrupting its production and developing an educational 'politics of resistance'. We can treat adult learners as critical agents by supporting them to think dialectically and to critically question, reflect and act. Recalling Tuckett's first experience of radical adult education, we need to secure the public space for the debate of alternatives to the destructive social relations of capitalist society. Educators acting alone possess little capacity to transform social relations, so we need to collectivise our grievances and fight for publicly funded education that 'serves the interests of communities, not just capital' (12). Achieving this aim requires educators to play an active role in the struggles for a radical transformation of society.

References

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