



Transgressive vs conformative: immigrant women learning at contingent work

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper seeks to explore workers' learning in relation to the racialized and gendered organization of contingent work.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is informed by Marxist theorization of labour power and learning. It draws on the interview data of 24 highly educated immigrant women from the research project "Skilled In Vulnerability: Work-related Learning Amongst Contingent Workers".

Findings – The two types of learning that we have identified include conformative and transgressive learning. Conformative learning refers to the learning that workers engage in to conform to the workplace expectations. The workers are not rewarded or acknowledged for their learning endeavors, and their efforts end up being appropriated by employers to maximize surplus value. Transgressive learning refers to the learning initiatives undertaken by workers to challenge and transcend the depressing work environment and life conditions.

Research limitations/implications – This research was not able to capture what conditions facilitate transgressive learning versus conformative learning.

Practical implications – The study first calls on the state to deal with the systemic negation of professional immigrants' previous skills and learning experiences. Second, it encourages employers to provide appropriate training and reward the workers for their learning endeavor. Third, drawing on the research findings, work educators could help foster the forms of learning that are conducive to workers' better control of work and life. The authors also suggest that to optimize their work and life opportunities in general, immigrant women workers need to come together, exchange information and knowledge, learn from each other, and form collective actions amongst themselves.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the literature on workplace learning from a learning perspective. It is one of the first endeavors to look at how highly educated immigrant women learn to exercise agency to challenge contingent work structures.

Keywords Workplace learning, Women, Immigrants

Paper type Research paper

Recent studies on immigrants have revealed that in Canada, many immigrant women, often with high educational credentials, end up working in service, processing, and manufacturing jobs (Ng, 1988; Boyd, 1992; Owen, 2005) that are contingent in nature.

The project, "Skilled In Vulnerability: Work-related Learning Amongst Contingent Workers", is conducted by the Democratizing Workplace Learning (DWL) group at OISE/UT. Established in 1999 and comprising of researchers, community activists, union members and graduate students, the DWL group is dedicated to developing innovative forms of activism and learning amongst contingent workers. The project was funded by the Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada (PI: Kiran Mirchandani, Grant #501-2001-0080). We would like to acknowledge the intellectual contribution of the late Karen Hadley, who was the co-coordinator of the DWL research group.



By contingent work, we mean jobs that are low-paid, with no benefits, social security, labour standards, or other state guarantees (Vosko, 2003). These kinds of jobs, unrelated to their professional backgrounds, often entail various types of learning for these women. Drawing on the interviews with 24 immigrant women workers, we present, in this paper, two types of workplace learning undertaken by highly educated immigrant women working as call center workers, grocery store cashiers and garment sewers in Toronto: *conformative learning* and *transgressive learning*. Conformative learning implies that in the absence of sufficient training, workers are often made to learn on their own to conform to/meet up with workplace expectations. Workers are not rewarded or acknowledged for their learning endeavors, and their efforts end up being appropriated by employers to maximize surplus value. We also observed that although subjected to exploitative working conditions, some workers do take learning initiatives to challenge and transcend depressing work environments and life conditions. This is what we call transgressive learning. While we provide a working definition of both conformative and transgressive learning, it is not our intention to make two dichotomous categories out of women's workplace learning experiences; neither are we claiming an exhaustive presentation of the women's learning experiences. Rather, conformative and transgressive learning signify a continuum of adjustment/adaptability on one side and agency/transgression on the other.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section introduces the research, the research methods, and the working conditions. The second section elaborates our conceptualization of labour power and learning that is informed by the Marxist framework. The third section focuses on the two forms of learning and documents the ways in which learning is accomplished. We conclude with implications of our findings.

Research

In order to identify different kinds of workplace learning for contingent workers, a research group called "Democratizing Workplace Learning" at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of University of Toronto conducted a qualitative research project entitled "Skilled In Vulnerability: Work-related Learning Amongst Contingent Workers". In this project, we interviewed 50 women from three contingent and highly feminized sectors:

- (1) call centers;
- (2) grocery stores; and
- (3) garment factories.

To outreach to the workers, we used public postings and snowballing. Interviews were in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative conversations and respondents were encouraged to describe their backgrounds, career orientations, conditions of employment, training, feelings towards their jobs, family lives, and future aspirations. Most emphasis was on their work-related learning and training experiences.

Out of the 50 women, 42 were immigrants from Bangladesh, China, India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Trinidad, and Tobago. Close to half of the immigrant women (24) had university degrees from their home countries and had professional experience in such areas as administration, accounting, teaching, medicine, and engineering. Most of these women had no experience with the sectors in which they were employed in Canada.

The women reported that they joined these sectors as they were unable to get jobs in their own fields and because jobs in these sectors were easily accessible.

The research revealed that regardless of the sectors in which they were employed, and regardless of their previous educational and professional backgrounds, the women shared similar work experiences. All the women were employed as part-time, temporary or seasonal workers, and had low salary (\$7-8 on average), highly flexible schedules, and no job security. The employers often monitored their work and discouraged socialization among the workers. The work environments of some workplaces were also unhealthy. Individual workers often worked under stress, both physical and mental. Except for a few grocery stores and garment factories, most of these workplaces were not unionized. In fact, according to the interviewees, the presence of a union hardly made any difference to their erratic working conditions and low pay structure compared to those stores that were not unionized. That is, there was practically little social mechanism to which the women could resort if they had grievances or complaints.

Nearly all the women mentioned getting paid or unpaid training at workplaces. However, only a few of them thought that the training was sufficient. Most of them had to learn on their own to perform up to standard. We also observed that faced with constraining work environments, some of the workers managed to learn to overcome some barriers at work and retain certain control over their work and lives. In the following section, we will focus on the conceptual framework of labour power and learning that helps us to understand better the significance of the learning endeavors of the women.

Theoretical framework

In a capitalist society, one unique commodity for exchange in the market is labour power. According to Marx, labour power is “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description” (Marx, 1867, p. 164). Workers sell labour power for a living; employers depend on the labour power of the workers for surplus value.

Capitalist exploitation of workers is inextricably linked with the production of surplus value. Marx identifies two ways in which surplus value could be produced:

- (1) making workers work longer hours for absolute surplus value; and
- (2) using machineries for relative surplus value (Marx, 1867).

Rikowski (199a) notes that in addition to the above two ways, labour power itself could be worked upon through education and training to further increase relative surplus value. However, training is often provided on an uneven basis. Large and high-tech companies tend to invest in training. Smaller firms and organizations that depend on temporary, casual, or part-time workforces are less likely to offer training or adequate training for the workers (Senge *et al.*, 1994), although the workers are still expected to provide quality performance. Workers who are not in the top stratification are found to be spending an increasing amount of their own time and resources trying to acquire marketable skills (Senge *et al.*, 1994; Foley, 2001; Grace *et al.*, 2004).

Scholars further notes that enhancing labour power through training and learning can be both the source of capitalist surplus value and a source for its

detriment, depending on the subjective state or the consciousness levels of the workers (see also Braverman, 1998; Foley, 2001). Rikowski (1999a, b) particularly expounds the dual potential of labour power. On the one hand, he suggests, labour power is the fuel of labour, and training and learning can valorize labour power, hence the potential to maximize surplus value for the benefits of the employers. On the other hand, labour power is not totally subjected to the manipulation of the employers. As the very means to optimize labour power, learning becomes an important arena where workers can exercise their power to control the utilization of their labour and to transgress manipulative and abusive work structures. This is what we call transgressive learning. Transgressive learning can cater to workers' personal and social development and generate possibilities to subvert exploitation at work.

Akin to our notion of transgressive learning is the conception of transformative learning. According to Mezirow (1978, 1991), through critical reflection, individuals can manage "perspective transformation" and change their ways of interpretation and action. Mezirow's foundational work in transformative learning was further expanded by scholars such as Taylor (1998), who points out that learning is not only cognitive, but also "relational, affective, somatic, intuitive and spiritual" (Taylor, 1998, p. 36). Informative as it is, transformative learning theory has its focus on people's learning processes, rather than on the social or political interests of the learners.

Advocacy for the social and political interests of the learners has been the central concern for critical educators. For example, Freire (1984) advocates a "liberatory pedagogy" that seeks to break down barriers between teachers and students and empower learners by leading them to develop a critical consciousness and to take up social and political actions (Maitra and Shan, 2006). Following Freire (1984), Hooks (1994) also explores holistic pedagogical theories and practices that teach students to rupture oppressive social boundaries. Specifically in relation to workplace education, Simon *et al.* (1991) have developed a critical pedagogy that is geared towards enabling students to learn about how to work and critically reflect on work organizations as well as possibilities of change.

A number of empirical studies also illustrate that workers as well as students do engage in learning in order to deal with their oppressive social conditions. For example, Willis (1988) presents how working class 'lads' rebelled against school authorities and prepared themselves for working class jobs. In another study, Willis (2001) points out how through the form of "Tekin' the piss", new workers were oriented by their peers to their workplaces. In both studies, learners took the endeavors to create "counter-discourses" *vis-à-vis* what was expected by the teachers and the management. In other cases, workers learned to transgress their immediate work environment, sometimes by breaching community of practices and the value norms among employees (Loogma, 2004), or by getting out of the workplaces to pursue entrepreneurship (Fenwick, 2001).

The above studies are useful in helping us understand the complexities of learning with varying social consequences. However, there has been a lack of attention paid to people's learning experiences in relation to the racialized, gendered and contingent work organization in the post-industrial societies. This paper helps to fill in this gap in the literature by specifically focusing on the experiences of highly educated immigrant women working in garment factories, retail stores, and call centers.

Informal learning of immigrant women in contingent work

Conformative learning

Our study found that although majority of the workplaces in the three sectors provided training with varying length and intensity, most of the women spoke about the inefficiency of training. Thus, workers were left on their own devices to learn to meet their employer's expectations. This type of learning was often undertaken by the workers when there was minimal support from the employers, and often under the threat of either "get it" (read: meet the quota, or be fast enough) or "get fired". We observed that the common means through which workers learned were *co-coaching*, *observation*, and *home learning*.

Learning through informal interactions with coworkers is one of the most common ways in which people learn at work (Garrick, 1998; Boud, 1999). In our data, we found that without enough support from the employers, some of the workers counted on their co-workers to learn. For instance, a garment worker recalled:

When we don't know something about sewing, we would call and ask each other for help.

Similarly, a cashier commented:

Like when we actually start working and of our own, if we needed any help we like turn around and hope that cashier beside us to come around and help us.

Realizing the effectiveness of this kind of learning among workers, many employers co-opted this type of learning as part of their formal training system at workplaces. As a result, workers were not only learning from each other but also training each other. One of the women cashiers commented on this kind of training:

Our training is a buddy system. What happens is, when you're first hired, you're linked up with somebody that's been there for a while, that knows the ropes, and . . . you usually get, I think it's 6 shifts, training.

This "formal" co-coaching system largely took the training responsibility off employer's shoulders and further increased the work burdens of the workers. Furthermore, the workers were not compensated for their added learning or training effort, as that was assumed to be part of their workload.

Besides co-coaching, some of the workers reported that they learned to do their jobs mainly by observing other workers. For example, one of the garment sewers described her learning experiences in the following way:

He [a coworker] left the job without telling anything. Therefore, I had to work hard to learn . . . because I have seen. Sometimes I watched X [a worker who left], but I have never done it until he left. But I already knew threading [through watching him].

A call center operator picked up communication skills also through observation at work:

I saw people how they are talking, the people around me. I used to observe how they are talking, so in that way I just improved my communication skills.

Some women further related that learning to do these jobs took time. Since the formal training period allowed at workplaces was not enough to meet the workers' learning needs, they had to study at home for work purposes. This was especially pronounced in the retail sector, where workers were required to memorize all the codes of different

products, something that was not possible to achieve within their limited schedule at work. However, the workers were not rewarded for this extra learning time. The following account by a cashier exemplifies this kind of home learning:

... I come back home and do some study... most of the [names are in] English. It is your first time. You do not know the name in English – what's the name of the fruits, we [haven't] heard [about] that, we didn't [have] that [back home]. We may have used and called it something else.

From the above examples, we can observe that the learning responsibility was largely downloaded onto the workers to improve their work efficiency and performance in order to maximize the profits for the employers. The only benefit that the workers received, if they “learned”, was to be able to stay on the jobs. In fact, there was always a looming threat of being fired if the right productivity (“target”) was not reached. In each of the sectors, we heard workers expressing the concern of losing their jobs if they do not learn to do the work:

[A garment worker:] [when asked what will happen if she is slow, the worker replied] They will fire me.

[A cashier:] I just did the cashier. But I had to learn how to use the cashier machine. You had to learn how to give changes to customers. I might be fired [if] I am not fast enough.

[A call centre worker:] He [a supervisor] said that in [the] first week of training I had to make at least one appointment, and then in every week I have to make 3 appointments. And if I [do] not make the appointment, he sends me home.

While conformative learning was the predominant form of learning undertaken by the women, we also observed instances where the women purposefully acquired resources to strategically deal with problems and overcome barriers in their work lives, which is the focus of the next section.

Transgressive learning

As argued earlier, learning is not merely about being conformative or submissive to the employer's needs. It can also enable workers to exercise their power to ameliorate their exploitative work situations and improve their career and life opportunities. We use transgressive learning to refer to the learning experiences of the women challenging their confinements and constraints in their workplaces. Just as how the women learned to meet workplace expectations, the women learned how to exercise control over their own work both collectively with their peers and as individuals.

In the subsection above on conformative learning, we observed that workers primarily resorted to their coworkers in order to be effective at work. We noted that workers also significantly drew on resources and knowledge of their coworkers to optimize their work situations. During the interviews, many workers mentioned having informal discussions with their coworkers to learn from each other's experience. A worker described how she dealt with her frustrations at workplace by sharing with her peers:

When I have something in my mind (pent up with unfair treatment at work), I need to express it to somebody. So if this happens with me I just talk to my community people who are my co-workers ... we talk and learn [coping mechanisms] from each other

Sharing, communication and interaction enhanced the scope of informal learning among the women to a great extent. Being new in the country and not familiar with the system, many of the women lacked information, especially about labour laws and rights in Canada. However when their labour rights were significantly infringed, some women took initiatives to gather information on their own. For example, some of the garment workers at an embroidery factory were lied to about the financial situation of the factory and their employer defaulted on their salary for two months. One of the women we interviewed went to community centers for legal advice. She also accessed the internet to look for information in her native language. Eventually, she approached the Ministry of Labour and filed a case against her employer. Not only was she acting on her own, she was also sharing her information with other workers, many of whom subsequently followed her suit to seek the same route for justice. Another interviewee mentioned that when she started taking a course to learn more about labour issues and workplace rights, she would bring back the information to her co-workers who were not aware of these rights. She was hoping that these informal discussions with her co-workers would help them to better protect their own rights at work.

Informal sharing and chatting sometimes also led to collective strategizing among the workers. For example, one worker related how she and a few of her colleagues in a garment factory deliberately decided to sew slowly to get their employer to install an air-conditioner at their workplace. The informal strategy that emanated out of the women's collaborative efforts eventually forced the employer to heed to the workers' grievances.

Transgressive learning is not only about how women workers individually or collectively learned to contest the exploitative working conditions, but also about how they learned to chart their career trajectories by taking unique perceptions towards those contingent jobs. Some women specifically related that they saw the jobs they were doing as a learning opportunity that could lead to better life and employment chances. They treated these jobs as a starting point to get to know their new country and culture before moving on to other jobs, hopefully in their previous fields of training. For example, a call center worker specifically described her job as a "stepping stone" for her. Another call center woman expressed a similar view:

I think it is [a] start for me. It is a window for me to know Canada. Therefore, I think I cherish this chance. But as time passes, and as I know this country better, I might stop this job and find another.

Some women took these low-paid jobs in order to gain Canadian work experience as well as language proficiency to eventually enter their respective fields. A retail worker said:

Now, I will do this one; when I get better job, which is related, with my background, then I will quit . . . I would like to do bank teller. I think that now I am handling money, it is a good thing for me. I'm also getting cash experience.

Most of the people [who] work there, they are immigrants. The reason they work there is to [earn] money, and improve their language.

Another worker actually used call center work to accumulate experiences for the establishment of her own business:

I am in sales and marketing. I have my own business. That is what is needed in call centers. Mostly call centers will need customer relations and as I have my own business, I have customer relation experience. At that point, it coincides. I am learning from there [call centre] because we do marketing and business.

In the above cases, although few, the workers intentionally turned their workplaces into a learning setting, with a view to eventually get out of these sectors and start their careers in their own fields. The strategies discussed in this subsection may not necessarily be revolutionary or successful in bringing changes to the contingent work organizations. What is important is that they provide important insights into the ways in which immigrant women cope and deal with contingent jobs.

Before ending this section, we must mention one caveat. By differentiating conformative learning from transgressive learning, we are not indicating that some women are submissive workers because they make efforts to meet workplace standards, whereas other workers are proactive because they pose challenges to the adverse work environment. Rather, we observed that at different times, workers could engage in learning with different potentials. Understanding these different potentials of women's learning experiences helps us to see the women not simply as subjected to the contingent work structures, but also as makers and transformers of their work and life chances in Canada.

Implications

In this paper, we have presented that work-related learning has dual potentials. Learning can be co-opted to improve productivity and profits, and reproduce as well as reinforce social inequality. This paper shows that for the women working in contingent work, there was little use of the women's previous work or educational background, which was a significant wastage of human capital. The women had to learn anew to be "competent workers". Although training was provided at some workplaces, it was reported as insufficient. The workers had to make an extra effort to learn on their own in order to stay on the jobs that were hardly related to their own backgrounds. We have also observed that learning can be emancipatory, and that it can enable workers to reflect on and take actions to ameliorate their exploitation at workplaces. Learning could serve the purpose of the workers to gain more control of their work and life as well. Thus, the question arises as to what can be done so that workers' learning initiatives can improve their work situations.

The findings of this paper have implications for policy-making bodies, employers, work educators, and workers themselves. It has to be noted that although the Canadian immigration policy makes sure to recruit the best skilled workers and professionals from other countries, the majority of the immigrant professionals, especially immigrant women, continue to face major challenges in establishing their careers. Their previous professional learning is being systematically negated and invalidated in the host country. We argue that it is the state's responsibility to develop measures to fully acknowledge the skills and prior learning experiences of the immigrants. Governments can make provisions for special funding to promote learning and training opportunities among immigrant workers so that they can apply their skills to the Canadian labour market. Since work-related learning directly profits workplaces, employers should be encouraged to provide appropriate training and reward the workers for their learning efforts to adjust to the workplaces. Employers should also be

made to realize that immigrant professionals bring significant skills and education from their own countries, and non-recognition of that might lead to future brain drain for Canada.

The research further indicates that some workers are better than others in controlling their work environment and life situation. Faced with contingent work situations, workers often refrain from overt or mass confrontation with the employers and prefer to remain quiet even when they do not like the treatment at workplace (Maitra and Siddiqui, 2005). Nevertheless, it has to be noted that transgressive learning in the form of informal sharing and peer learning promises change, however small. As such, it is important for work educators to foster such learning in their program design and plan processes to promote workers' rights and benefits. To conclude, we believe that to optimize their work and life opportunities in general, workers need to come together, exchange information and knowledge, learn from each other, and form a coalition amongst themselves. It is through their collectivity and solidarity that workplace equity can be achieved.

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