

# Principles for Democratic Learning in Career Education

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Secondary-level career education, designed to prepare students for their occupational lives, generally adopts a human capital approach to learning. We critique this approach by comparing a range of career-education policies and programs with three key principles for democratic learning. We identify areas that would be enhanced by introducing these principles: avoiding the ahistorical depiction of labour-market and working conditions, expanding current conceptions of lifelong learning, offering students alternative viewpoints on occupationally related issues, respecting moral reasoning in character development, and strengthening critical thinking strategies.

L'éducation au choix de carrière au secondaire adopte généralement une approche de l'apprentissage axée sur le capital humain. Les auteurs font la critique de cette approche en comparant un éventail de politiques et de programmes à l'aide de trois principes clés de l'apprentissage démocratique. Ils identifient les aspects qui seraient améliorés par l'introduction de ces principes : la prise en compte du contexte historique dans la description du marché du travail et des conditions de travail, l'élargissement des conceptions actuelles de l'éducation permanente, la diversification des points de vue sur les questions reliées au choix d'une carrière, le respect du raisonnement moral dans le développement du caractère et la consolidation des stratégies en matière de pensée critique.

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Modern industrialized nations have experienced significant growth in the number of public education programs that prepare secondary-level learners for their occupational lives (Spring, 1998). Many career-education programs, consistent with policies espoused by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), emphasize generic employability skills, approach critical thinking as an instrumental and decontextualized problem-solving strategy, and promote a view of the learner and worker as a passive object. We argue that by adopting *principles for democratic learning* (PDL), career-education programs would be strengthened, critical thinking would be expanded to consider the entire context of a particular problem, and students and workers would be better situated to participate in shaping labour-market and working conditions.

Principles for democratic learning help students to critique prevailing social conditions, to appreciate the possibility of ongoing social reform, and

to recognize the central importance of human agency to any meaningful democratic context. The knowledge and dispositions required to foster student agency are developed only through learning that encourages student critique of social and economic conditions (Kelly, 1995). Based on this understanding, then, we contend that career education needs to embrace at least three fundamental democratic principles:

- a. Career-education programs based on PDL respect student rationality, that is, the capacity of students to critique curriculum content. When students are deprived of opportunities to question what they are learning, they become the passive objects of education rather than participatory subjects in learning.
- b. Career-education programs based on PDL provide students with alternative viewpoints and perspectives on issues relevant to vocational experience. If students are expected to make informed, critical, democratic choices, they require some exposure to different perspectives on occupationally related matters.
- c. Career-education programs based on PDL do not depict social reality as fixed or predetermined, but explicitly recognize the legitimate right of students to transform economic, labour-market, and working conditions through informed political participation.

Education based on PDL contrasts sharply with learning that is indoctrinatory and non-democratic. Non-democratic learning prevents students, intentionally or otherwise, from assessing the grounds on which various positions or viewpoints are founded, and expects students to uncritically accept social reality. Some elements of career-education programs are non-democratic because they encourage students to accept program content in a seemingly non-rational manner. This non-dialogical arrangement reduces the role of students and workers to mere social adaptation rather than social engagement. Cogan (1997), emphasizing the role informed independent thought plays in democratic education, has proposed that schools reconceptualize the socialization objective.

We are suggesting a redefinition of both the socializing and academic functions of the school. Although schools have always played a socializing role, generally understood as the maintenance of traditional values and norms for societal continuity and stability, we believe the school's socialization function must also be understood in terms of encouraging students, as well as adults, to critically evaluate societal norms, and to develop the attitudes, skills, and abilities to help change global trends that lead citizens and their communities in undesirable directions. (p. 17)

In this article, we argue that this same view, consistent with the PDL we have identified above, should apply to the work-related components of

secondary-level career education to promote democratic dialogue and political action among students.

#### NEO-LIBERALISM AND EDUCATION REFORM

Neo-liberalism is a term frequently used to describe the present economic and political milieu within virtually all modern industrialized democracies. Whereas liberalism denotes a significant degree of state involvement in shaping domestic social and economic policy, with neo-liberalism governments adopt a far more passive role in areas of public administration. According to McLaren and Farahmandpur (2000), governments from developed countries are aligned with global industrial interests to promote the economic well-being of the corporate elite at the expense of economically disadvantaged workers. A more moderate account of neo-liberalism, however, might simply view it as an ideological shift that applies market economy principles to public policy development (Faulks, 1993).

Crouch, Finegold, and Sako (1999) maintain that public hostility toward the welfare state, coupled with corporate lobbying, triggered the rise of neo-liberalism. Industrialized states were unable to insulate their citizens from the damaging consequences of the economic recessions that occurred during the 1970s. These recessions contributed to the rise of neo-liberal ideology by undermining welfare state assumptions (Young, 1990). Domestically, these recessions exposed the Canadian government's inability to lessen the deleterious impact of global economic decline, and cast public doubt on the efficacy of welfare state policies. Statistical data from the period reveal the practical impact of the government's inability to respond effectively to international economic decline. Between 1965 and 1974, the unemployment rate in Canada climbed from below 7% to almost 10% of the available labour force (Statistics Canada, 1975). The lending rate offered by Canadian chartered banks hovered between 5% and 6% in 1971, but by 1979 the Bank of Canada rate had spiraled to over 16%, forcing the lending rate of chartered banks even higher. Higher interest rates translated into a dramatic increase in the number of Canadians who lost their homes and property to personal bankruptcies, which more than doubled from 7,469 in 1976 to 16,311 in 1978 (Statistics Canada, 1979).

Governments from most industrialized countries endorse neo-liberal assumptions and, consistent with these beliefs, increasingly expect education to address labour-market needs (Taylor, 1998; Taylor & Henry, 2000). The OECD (1997) claims that employers expect the education system to provide the high levels of skill they require, and actively encourage governments from industrialized nations to address this expectation: "The amount and

quality of a country's human capital is becoming vital for many western democracies in the context of global economics" (p.13). Within this expanding neo-liberal context, then, successfully competing in the global market is considered contingent on the quality of education, and the goals of education increasingly emerge from perceived labour-market requirements (Greider, 1997).

#### HUMAN CAPITAL EDUCATION: THE GENERIC SKILLS APPROACH

The current neo-liberal emphasis on meeting the labour-market demands of industry ensures that human capital education plays a major role in shaping international secondary-level curricula. Human capital education is an instrumental learning process in which students master the skills required by industry, and the primary purpose of schools becomes that of preparing students for their occupational lives. Both industry owners and students are considered self-interested individuals seeking to maximize return on their respective financial investments. Industry requires skilled workers to increase profits while students optimize return on their education costs by improving their own marketability. Students are regarded as future workers who believe the acquisition of work-related knowledge and skill translates into enhanced economic return (Davenport, 1999).

Human capital theory begins with seemingly reasonable assumptions. It contends that workers are more productive when they receive training, which theoretically translates into higher wages for the worker, increased profits for the entrepreneur, and in general creates a more productive society.

The effect of training is very similar to the effect of providing a worker with equipment. Just as a worker with a bulldozer is more productive than a worker trying to move dirt with his or her bare hands, a worker with skills is more productive than a worker who can't apply knowledge to the job and is forced to use raw sweat and guess work. The productivity-enhancing power of skills induce economists to refer to them as human capital. (Cohn, 2000, p. 80)

Although they are popular among neo-liberals, the central assumptions supporting human capital education are potentially problematic. Human capital education understates labour-market complexities to students by exaggerating the role skill acquisition plays in securing employment opportunities. Vocational opportunities and income levels are more accurately determined by a complex interaction among various subjective, political, and economic forces acting in concert with individual capacity and educational attainment (Cohn, 2002; Crouch et al., 1999). For example, in his analysis of sex-based income discrepancies, Cohn (2000) found neither

education or experience noticeably reduced gender differences in job access, promotion, or income levels. Perhaps even more critical to the present discussion, an education program emphasizing human capital preparation for projected labour-market conditions may undermine student participation in shaping those conditions. Human capital education, with its focus on labour-market preparation, potentially undercuts the traditional social, ethical, and democratic objectives of schooling by viewing students as passive learners being prepared for globalization (Robertson, 1998).

Contemporary human capital education emphasizes generic employability skills rather than specific technical abilities to address current labour-market needs. Unlike narrow technical capacities — potentially dangerous anachronisms in a dynamic and unsettled labour market — employability skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, or adopting a positive attitude toward occupational change are not job-specific, but are supposedly transferable among a range of occupational contexts (Buck & Barrick, 1987). In a labour market lacking long-term employment stability, the idea of skill transfer elicits widespread support from a variety of educational stakeholders. Unfortunately for the advocates of generic employability skills, this approach suffers from considerable epistemological and ethical shortcomings.

Critical-thinking and problem-solving strategies in career education are predicated on a misguided notion of skill transfer. Two different categories of skill transfer exist (Woolfolk, 1998). Low-road transfer involves applying acquired skills among various contexts in a manner not requiring additional knowledge acquisition. The knowledge, understanding, and mechanical procedures required to master various applied technologies or operate similar machinery offer examples of low-road transfer. Transfer occurs in these cases because the shift in context involves a simple change of location rather than significantly altered epistemic requirements. High-road transfer, on the other hand, requires applying abstract knowledge, procedures, or heuristics learned in one context to some entirely new situation. The cognitive competencies of critical thinking and problem solving — ubiquitous objectives within career education — provide examples of employability skills requiring high-road transfer.

A significant epistemological problem occurs with the efficacy of high-road transfer when applied to critical thinking and problem solving because substantial background knowledge is an antecedent condition to their successful application. The ability of a pilot to resolve some technical crisis on a commercial airliner reveals no unique knowledge, ability, or insight, for example, that would allow the same individual to properly diagnose and correct a neurological defect. A successful accountant who helps a client

resolve a serious tax problem might be unable to diagnose and repair an automotive problem. Effective problem solving and critical thinking require precise knowledge about procedures, processes, and consequences specific to the problem in question. The generic employability skills adopted by human capital education to master these competencies frequently disregards this basic epistemological point, and hence reduces these studies to alluring educational slogans.

From a democratic learning perspective, an even more dangerous misunderstanding involves the persistent categorization error in career education that classifies personal attitudes and characteristics as employability skills. When personal attitudes and characteristics are classified as skills, important conceptual distinctions with significant ethical consequences may be disregarded. The idea of an employability skill embodies certain normative connotations that imply these capacities are necessarily beneficial to students. Following from this perception, it may be assumed that employability skills are inherently valuable personal characteristics for students and workers to possess. A critical moral distinction exists, however, between teaching students generic employability skills, and expecting them to adopt particular attitudes, values, and beliefs. In a learning context based on PDL, legitimate concerns should arise over what attitudes and whose values are being taught in public education. Hyland (1998), for example, attacks the employability skills approach to character development in career education because he believes it reflects a concerted corporate strategy to ensure that students adopt personal beliefs and qualities beneficial to industry.

#### SHAPING GLOBAL EDUCATION: THE OECD

The OECD was initially established in 1960 as the administrative successor to the Marshall Plan, the U.S.-sponsored effort to reconstruct war-torn Europe after the Second World War. Its role has changed over the last several decades from a predominantly European focus to one influencing international economic and education policy development. Although OECD responsibilities, realms of inquiry, and policies are diverse, its primary mission is providing member countries with a forum to develop international economic policy within a co-ordinated administrative structure: Member countries "compare experiences, seek answers to common problems and work to coordinate domestic and international policies that increasingly in today's globalized world must form a web of even practices across nations" (OECD, 2000, n.p.). The OECD has extended the objective of initiating uniform practices between member countries into the realm of human capital

education. Taylor and Henry (2000), for example, observe that "Education as an activity within the OECD has been broadly legitimated on the basis of its contribution to economic growth" (p. 488).

The OECD's (1977) publication of *Education Policies and Trends in the Context of Social and Economic Development Perspectives* helped establish the present context for many of the assumptions, policies, and priorities propelling contemporary international career-education reform. The OECD's secretary-general at the time, Emile van Lennep, supported human capital education by calling for fundamental changes to all levels of public schooling on the grounds that existing investment was generating inadequate economic return. This early OECD publication also identifies various cross-curricular competencies that workers will require to achieve future labour-market success, and arguably represents the genesis of domestic career-education programs such as the Conference Board of Canada's (1992) *Employability Skills Profile* (ESP) and (2001) *Employability Skills 2000+*.

The original OECD (1977) cross-curricular competencies include such employability skills as the "ability to learn and go on learning" and "the ability to cope with uncertainty and complexity" (p. 23). The OECD's cross-curricular competency of the "ability to cope with uncertainty and complexity" is virtually identical to the CBOC's (1992) adaptability skill of "coping with uncertainty" (n.p.). Both program objectives implicitly encourage the passive adjustment of students to dynamic social, economic, and labour-market conditions. Career education that portrays occupational uncertainty to students as an inevitable feature of contemporary working experience by reducing their role to labour-market adaptation is inconsistent with PDL. Indeed, curricula that naturalize prevailing social conditions to students may constitute a form of ideological manipulation. Eagleton (1991), for example, maintains that "naturalization is part of the dehistoricizing thrust of ideology, its tacit denial that ideas and beliefs are subject to a particular time, place and social group" (p. 59).

An apparent connection also exists between the OECD's initial cross-curricular competency of "the ability to learn and go on learning" (p. 23) and various formulations of lifelong learning found in contemporary career-education programs that depict this concept in entirely instrumental and/or inter-occupational terms. OECD policy statements seemingly view lifelong learning as analogous to labour-market adjustment.

Many individuals will find that the skills they acquired during their initial education will no longer last them a lifetime. Instead of making one key transition from education to work, they are more likely to find that life has become a seamless process of education, training and work. (OECD, 1996, p. 7)

Barrow and Keeney (2000) have expressed concern that lifelong learning is a response by industry to unstable labour-market conditions that demand increased worker flexibility. They believe that current constructs of lifelong learning simply mask a corporate-controlled schooling agenda where employability skills are emphasized at the expense of liberal education. Regardless of whether such a conspiracy actually exists, narrow constructs of lifelong learning implicitly reduce the role of students to passive labour-market adjustment, and undermine their democratic right to transform working conditions that preclude a reasonable measure of occupational security.

OECD education policy is inconsistent with PDL on at least two key fronts. First, it fails to recognize the democratic right of students and workers not only to adjust to changing social, economic, and labour-market conditions, but to participate in constructing those conditions as well. By ignoring this possibility, the OECD implicitly encourages students to accept as inevitable a future of occupational uncertainty. To eliminate this threat to PDL, the OECD should explicitly acknowledge the right of students and workers to consider alternative labour-market conditions. Second, the OECD's narrow construct of lifelong learning undermines democratic learning by once again implying that occupational instability is inevitable and that the role of workers is restricted to labour-market adaptation. The idea of lifelong learning should be expanded in career education to foster autonomous personal growth, active social engagement, and enduring democratic participation. The international influence of OECD policy is visible in many of the career-education programs developed within its member countries. In Canada, the OECD's influence is reflected in the CBOC's (1992) *Employability Skill Profile* and (2001) *Employability Skills 2000+*.

#### HUMAN CAPITAL EDUCATION: THE CONFERENCE BOARD OF CANADA

The CBOC is the central lobbying force for Canadian business in the area of domestic education policy development. Taylor (1998) observes that the employability skills programs developed by the board correspond with those created internationally by private lobbying interests among other OECD countries. The CBOC initially established two privately funded councils, the National Council and the Corporate Council, to influence public education policy in Canada. The National Council was comprised primarily of CEO-level corporate members, but included officials from education, government, labour, and community organizations. The now-disbanded Corporate Council, seemingly unconcerned with alternate sector consultation, was comprised exclusively of senior-level executives from



CBOC member companies. The CBOC's influence on Canadian public schooling has been significant with the board playing a pivotal role in more than 20,000 business-education partnerships (Robertson, 1998).

One current example of the CBOC's involvement in secondary-school training is the *New Brunswick Youth Apprenticeship Program* (Kitagawa, 1998). This program's objectives include improving the employability skills of students, encouraging co-operation between New Brunswick's business community and all levels of public education, co-ordinating the academic aspirations of students with labour force requirements, and providing "employers with a talent pool of well-motivated, academically prepared potential employees who possess up-to-date skills and have relevant work experience" (n.p.). The attempt to synchronize student learning in secondary education with perceived labour-market requirements is consistent with the human capital assumptions adopted by CBOC-sponsored programs.

The purpose of the CBOC's now-defunct Corporate Council on Education was to "act as a catalyst to engage business and education in partnerships that foster learning excellence and thus ensure that Canada is competitive and successful in the global economy" (CBOC, 1992, p. 3). To identify the approach most likely to achieve this aim, the Corporate Council initiated a study during the early 1990s to investigate the labour-force skills required by Canadian workers. In response to its findings, the council drafted the *Employability Skills Profile* (ESP), an extremely influential single-page document that identified a list of generic employment competencies. According to the CBOC (1992), "The Employability Skills Profile is a generic list of the kinds of skills, qualities, competencies, attitudes and behaviours that form the foundation of a high quality Canadian workforce both today and tomorrow" (p. 3).

The CBOC's influence on Canadian public education through *ESP*, and various secondary-school curricula that include the document, has been considerable. The board distributed seven million copies of *ESP* among Canadian secondary schools and businesses following its initial publication in 1992 (Bloom, 1994). In addition to the New Brunswick program described above, Alberta and Ontario have developed similar secondary-school initiatives based entirely on CBOC recommendations (Robertson, 1998). Alberta's 1996 *Framework for Enhancing Business Involvement in Education* borrows exclusively from CBOC and other corporate-sponsored initiatives (Taylor, 1998). In British Columbia, secondary-school students are expected to master the employability skills identified by *ESP* as part of the *CAPP* and *Business Education* programs.

The CBOC recently replaced *ESP* with *Employability Skills 2000+*

(CBOC, 2001). This latter document identifies three different categories of employability skills employers require in their workers: Fundamental Skills, Personal Management Skills, and Teamwork Skills. Subdivided into the categories of communication, managing information, using numbers, and thinking and solving problems, Fundamental Skills include capacities such as reading, writing, mathematics, using technology, problem solving, and critical thinking. Personal Management Skills incorporate the attitudes, dispositions, and behaviours believed necessary for student growth. This category is further subdivided into demonstrating positive attitudes and behaviours, responsibility, adaptability, continuous learning, and working safely. Faithful to its OECD genealogy, the document also stresses personal characteristics such as the capacity to cope with uncertainty and a disposition toward lifelong learning. The third and final category, Teamwork Skills, endorses such qualities as understanding and working within the dynamics of a group and managing group conflict.

*Employability Skills 2000+* promotes the personal management skill of coping with uncertainty under the subheading "adaptability." For students to cope effectively with labour-force change, however, they obviously require more than a mere directive to achieve that objective. *Employability Skills 2000+* portrays the ability to cope with change in the abstract as if this inclination could be developed in the absence of material considerations and applied strategies. A more effective program to help students cope with change might include a labour-force survival component, fostering student awareness of the psychological and practical impact of job loss and unemployment. This strategy could also provide students with information on available labour and political avenues they might pursue to lessen the impact and possibility of job displacement. Further, as highlighted during the previous discussion of OECD policy, merely suggesting to students that they cope with change may undermine their democratic right to help shape labour-market conditions and, hence, conceivably create a far more stable working environment.

In *ESP*, under the heading Teamwork Skills, students are expected to "understand and work within the culture of the group" (n.p.). Clearly, the ability to work effectively with others constitutes an important character disposition within many different occupational contexts. Unless CBOC programs explicitly recognize the right of individual dissent, however, simply expecting students "to work within the culture of the group" (n.p.) may impede the rational exchange consistent with PDL by promoting individual acquiescence in collaborative learning activities. Blunden (1997) expresses concern, for example, that group activities stressing co-operation at all costs "do not acknowledge such things as the experience and expertise

of people. . . . [T]here is tacit denial of difference which may be read as political" (p. 278). From a democratic learning perspective, effective group work does not necessarily secure a general consensus, but promotes rational collaborative inquiry, and accepts the legitimacy of individual dissent.

Under the *ESP* heading *Adaptability Skills*, the program expects students to "demonstrate a positive attitude toward change" (CBOC, 1992, n.p.). An education program that identifies "a positive attitude toward change" as an employability skill commits two serious mistakes: one conceptual, the other evaluative. First, as we have previously argued, attitudes are not skills in any traditional sense and categorizing them in this manner simply avoids the morally preferred process of providing acceptable reasons for their inclusion in public education. Second, obviously nothing inherently positive, or for that matter negative, exists in the concept of change itself. Any reaction to change will invariably hinge on the context, implications, and consequences of the transformation in question. The expectation that students will adopt a positive attitude toward abstract change may be legitimately criticized as an ideological strategy to condition them to passively accept lives of occupational instability.

Based on the above analysis, then, we believe several areas of CBOC programs can be strengthened to protect principles for democratic learning:

1. Rather than simply conveying attitudes and values as employability skills, moral reasoning must be respected in pursuing character development objectives.
2. CBOC programs should not portray student collaboration as working within a pre-established group culture, but rather overtly recognize the democratic importance of dialogue and dissent.
3. CBOC programs should develop strategies and identify applicable resources to help students deal with or prevent job displacement rather than merely expect them to cope with occupational uncertainty.
4. More generally, students, as future labour-market participants, will understand they possess a democratic right and responsibility to influence working conditions, rather than simply prepare for them.

#### THE EFFECT OF HUMAN CAPITAL EDUCATION ON CURRICULUM

Although international secondary schools conduct career education under a range of headings such as "school-to-work" in the United States and "work studies" in Australia (Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 2001), the workforce preparation units within these various programs reveal consistent patterns in their aims, rationale, and content. The general aim of secondary-school career education is preparing students for a

rapidly and perpetually changing labour market, and for an increasingly competitive global economic milieu. Western Australia's *Work Studies* reflects this emphasis:

Society is faced with technological, economic and social influences which are causing significant changes in vocational roles. The ability of individuals to adapt to and capitalise on these changes is widely recognised as imperative to the fulfilment of a satisfying and productive life. (p. 73)

The rationale offered for Canadian career education typically mirrors that of other countries by citing global competition and rapid labour-market change as the impetus for curricular reform. In Ontario, for example, *Guidance and Career Education* (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1999) considers its primary aim to play "a central role in secondary school by preparing students for a complex and rapidly changing world" (p. 1).

Similarities greatly outnumber differences among international career-education curricula; nevertheless, noteworthy exceptions in program design occasionally occur. Western Australia's *Work Studies*, for example, adopts a far more balanced approach than North American career-education programs. *Work Studies* establishes a worthy benchmark for democratic career education by providing students with a range of knowledge and perspectives consistent with PDL. For example, the Australian program devotes an entire unit to industrial relations, including subsections on arbitration and conciliation, work determination, trade union and employer organizations, government regulations and industrial laws, human rights and the labour market, and the legal rights and obligations of individuals and interest groups in a democratic society. Comparatively, Ontario's *Guidance and Career Education* includes a single lesson on the history of labour unions and proposes some discussion of the collective bargaining process. In British Columbia, *Career and Personal Planning* (British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, 1995) and *Business Education* (British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, 1998) ignore both the issues of labour organizing and labour history, and there is only a minimal reference in the former program to the subject of workers' legal rights.

During the past decade, the British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills and Training (1995, 1998) introduced both *CAPP* and *Business Education* into provincial secondary schools with the rationale that schools should prepare students for dynamic social, economic, and labour-market conditions. *CAPP* courses are mandatory for graduation because, the ministry contends, "students [should] understand the relevance of their

studies and acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes that can help them make appropriate personal decisions and manage their lives more effectively" (p. 1). *Business Education* suggests that "The mandate of the B.C. school system is to enable learners to develop individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy" (n.p.).

Consistent with international concerns about occupationally relevant curricula and a hyper-competitive economic milieu, *CAPP* sounds the familiar alarm on the contemporary challenges confronting students.

The curriculum for *CAPP* has been designed to help students prepare to deal with a world of complex, on-going technological change, continuous challenge, expanding opportunities, and intricate social evolution. Learning opportunities that are relevant and experiential help students make informed choices, and take responsibility for their personal and career development. (p. 4)

*CAPP* also addresses topics such as healthy living, family-life education, substance abuse, and a range of other personal-planning, psychological, and health issues. The aim of *Business Education* compares to *CAPP*'s because its objectives similarly respond to rapidly changing social and economic conditions. According to *Business Education*, "To develop an effective and prosperous economy, British Columbia requires people who understand economics and business principles and possess the creativity and skills to apply them in inventive ways" (n.p.). The document maintains that globalization requires students to understand the international economic forces shaping their lives and appreciate the ethical impact of those forces. Although currently unarticulated in *Business Education*, the idea of students exploring the ethical impact of market-economy practices raises interesting possibilities in career education, consistent with PDL. Ethical issues related to economic globalization, for example, could include class discussion of the trend's environmental impact, its effect on labour and human rights, and its threat to state jurisdiction over public-policy development.

Aside from the previously identified epistemological problems, critical thinking strategies in career education typically adopt an instrumental approach to problem solving. *Business Education* contends, for example, that "Critical thinking is an important aspect of all courses. Instruction should include opportunities for students to justify positions on issues and to apply economic and business principles to particular circumstances" (n.p.). Instrumental approaches to critical thinking in career education imply that the only remaining issue in business decision making is determining the most effective means to arrive at predetermined ends. Within a learning context that respects PDL, however, economic and business principles should

not comprise the sole criteria for thinking critically about career-related matters. Critical thinking consistent with PDL ought to encourage students to explore the entire social context of a problem, and to evaluate related economic and vocational ends as well as means.

The ahistorical presentation of current economic, social, and labour-market conditions that pervades *CAPP*, *Business Education*, and other contemporary career-education curricula poses the major challenge to PDL. The curricula's depiction of labour-market conditions, while perhaps descriptively accurate, consistently neglects the possibility of students reconstructing these conditions. Similar to the OECD's approach, for example, *Business Education* portrays lifelong learning as an instrumental adaptation strategy to cope with unstable working conditions, rather than continual critical engagement with vocational experience.

The rapid rate of technological change affects families, workplaces, communities, and environment. For example, individuals frequently change jobs to adapt to changing working conditions. In such a world, students need to be increasingly entrepreneurial and flexible. Business education and economics prepare students for this new *reality* [emphasis added] by fostering the concept of lifelong learning. (n.p.)

*CAPP* and *Business Education* generally mirror the democratic shortcomings of the other career-education policies and programs we have examined:

1. Both programs omit crucial content on labour history, labour organization, human rights, and criticisms of global economic practices.
2. Both programs portray existing economic and labour-market conditions to students in an ahistorical context, and fail to recognize their legitimate democratic right to critique and transform the material circumstances influencing their lives.
3. Critical thinking strategies offer epistemologically problematic generic approaches for instrumental problem solving.
4. Lifelong learning is narrowly construed to encourage students to accept personal responsibility for job retraining in the face of labour-market instability.

#### PROTECTING PRINCIPLES FOR DEMOCRATIC LEARNING IN CAREER EDUCATION

Career-education policies and programs, and the human capital assumptions on which the employability skills discourse is based, often fail to reflect the capacity of students or workers to transform their social circumstances. When the potential for social change is ignored by career

education, student agency and participatory citizenship is correspondingly undermined. This impediment to PDL might be removed from career-education programs by emphasizing the crucial distinction between brute facts and social facts (Searle, 1995). Brute facts are independent of social relationships because they convey empirical, propositional truths about the natural world. It is a brute fact that water freezes at 0° C, or that objects, regardless of their weight, fall at a constant velocity. Social facts, on the other hand, and the social reality they describe, are constructed from intentional human actions. It is a social fact, for example, that smoking marijuana in Canada remains a criminal act, or that current labour-market conditions require a significant measure of worker flexibility. Within a context animated by PDL, students will appreciate that social facts are always contingent propositions because they describe situations that can be changed through social critique, human agency, and political action.

We have suggested that career-education programs adopting a generic skills perspective on critical thinking and problem solving reflect a basic epistemological error. When appropriately conceived and implemented, however, critical thinking could provide an effective democratic tool to help students understand and influence the material forces shaping their vocational experience. Numerous critical approaches to career education exist that would strengthen the democratic participation of students in determining their working lives. Students could interview long-term employees at various places of business, asking such questions as how jobs have changed since they started working for the organization; how these changes have affected the occupational skills they require; what these changes have meant to them, their families, their community, and their colleagues; and how these changes have influenced the general working environment. The responses students collect from their interviews could form the basis for subsequent classroom discussion of the impact of contemporary working conditions on the lives of Canadian workers (Simon, Diplo & Schenke, 1991). Consistent with PDL, students might be further encouraged to evaluate these conditions and consider political strategies to improve or transform them.

A critical approach to career education begins with the question: "What knowledge, skills, and abilities do students need in order to understand and participate in changes which are taking place in the work world?" (Rehm, 1994, p. 156). In a career-education unit on labour history, for example, students might critically explore the function of labour unions within contemporary society. Similar investigations could be conducted during classroom discussion on the role and purpose of corporations within democratic societies. Such questions emphasize that both union and

business objectives, and the contextual circumstances in which they are framed, are socially contentious questions with multiple perspectives and a range of possible responses. This approach to critical thinking in career education uses research and discussion to enhance student understanding about various work-related issues, and help them consider the impact of these issues on vocational experience and social organization. Unlike the instrumental strategies currently pursued in career education, these approaches to critical thinking empower students to engage democratically the forces shaping their contemporary working experience.

Career education often portrays lifelong learning in entirely instrumental terms (OECD, 1996; British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, 1998). Ecclestone (2000), for example, complains that, despite an espoused commitment to diverse perspectives on lifelong learning, "education policy continues to focus almost exclusively on learning for economic competitiveness" (p. 78). Lifelong learning might be reconfigured in democratic career education to reflect Dewey's (1938) conception of personal and social growth as a lifelong phenomenon. In his view, education creates learning conditions not only to stimulate vocational development in the form of evolving technical skills, but also to foster enduring personal, intellectual, and social growth. This objective cannot be achieved by merely teaching technical skills to students. A democratic model of lifelong learning requires cultivating intellectual dispositions in students that encourage learning that is continuous, autonomous, and critical in a more general sense throughout their entire lives. This objective may be achieved by empowering students with the understanding that they can influence their life experience through a lifetime dedicated to critical learning and democratic social transformation.

With few exceptions, perspectives running counter to those of the business community are noticeably absent from domestic career-education policies and programs. As we have suggested, students require knowledge from a range of different sources to make informed and democratic choices about career-related matters. The prevailing approach in career education neglects the views of labour, environmental movements, and others with relevant perspectives on global economics, labour-market conditions, and workplace structure. To address this deficiency, career-education programs could include units on labour history, workers' legal rights, and the relationship between global economics and sustainable development. Orr (1992) suggests, for example, that all education is inextricably connected to ecology because no life experience can be divorced from environmental concerns. He poses an important question for all educators: "Do we equip



students morally and intellectually to be part of the existing pattern of corporate-dominated resource flows, or to take part in re-shaping these patterns toward greater sustainability?" (p. 146). In response to Orr's question, career education respecting PDL might explore vocations such as sustainable forestry, community-supported organic farming, environmental clean-up, and energy-efficient building construction as alternative occupational choices.

The categorization error in career education that classifies personal qualities, attitudes, and values as employability skills threatens democratic learning by precluding student critique of the characteristics they are expected to adopt. Indeed, the critical deliberation consistent with PDL requires values to be justified by providing impartial reasons, or reasons beyond unsubstantiated arbitrary preferences. When addressing character development objectives in career education, teachers could offer alternative viewpoints to students on how the value in question might be interpreted and then explore the underlying assumptions of these various perspectives (Thomas, 1993). This approach to career education engages the moral reasoning of students by encouraging their critique of the values they are expected to adopt. If students are asked to adopt a positive attitude toward change, for example, they could also consider why changes to vocational experience might not always elicit positive responses from workers. More generally, career education should present personal values and attitudes to students not as abstract employability skills, but as qualities to critically evaluate on the basis of their personal, workplace, and social implications.

A further negative consequence of the employability skills approach to character development is its probable lack of actual effectiveness. When students in career education are expected to adopt pre-established moral "truths," they do not grapple with their corresponding justification. Consequently, students may not internalize character dispositions acquired in a non-rational manner into an enduring system of moral values. Kohn (1996) explains:

The only way to help students become ethical people, as opposed to people who merely do what they are told, is to have them construct moral meaning. It's crucial that we overcome getting compliance and instead bring students in on the process of devising and justifying ethical principles. (p. 67)

A career-education program that fosters the moral reasoning of students, then, not only adheres to PDL, but is likely to prove more pedagogically effective as well.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have traced the current emphasis on human capital education to two intersecting factors: a) the collapse of welfare state policies in the 1970s, with the ensuing rise of neo-liberal ideology; and b) economic globalization, the highly competitive labour market it generates, and increased emphasis on human capital preparation. Human capital education considers learning an economic investment and schooling an instrumental process where business is supplied with a highly trained labour force and students acquire marketable skills. We have expressed concern that a monolithic human capital perspective on career education threatens schooling objectives consistent with PDL. We have also suggested numerous approaches that would allow career education to achieve its full democratic potential by allowing students and workers to influence labour-market, economic, and social conditions. These approaches respect PDL by creating learning opportunities for students to explore a variety of perspectives on current issues affecting the global and regional marketplace, and to critique and evaluate labour-market and social norms. We maintain that career-education programs respecting PDL will enable students to become politically informed subjects in the democratic construction of their vocational experience rather than the mere objects of economic globalization.

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