

# **Post-Fordist Workplace Model As A Learning Environment For Vulnerable Workers**

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## *Abstract*

*In the world of globalization and new technology, fragmented, prescriptive work requires workers to perform narrow tasks in flexible, part time contracts. Flexibilization has become the watchword for efficiency in the post-Fordian type workplace that requires individual workers to be readily available and accessible to perform tasks in workplaces. Consequently, contingent workers need to be adaptable, continually learning about something new, which they incorporate in their work. As responsibility for learning is increasingly being transferred from educational establishments to the workplace, this study examines whether the contemporary workplace is an appropriate learning environment for contingent, flexible part-time workers. Findings from the SSHRC<sup>i</sup> funded research, "Trained in Vulnerability," based on interviews with 15-20 low-wage, contingent, women workers, from the grocery retail sector in Toronto, indicate that the post-Fordist workplace learning environment, although it affords agency for some workers, is generally a restrictive learning environment that contributes very little to the concept of lifelong learning for the majority of contingent workers.*

In the world of globalization and new technology, flexibility, associated with the post-Fordist model workplace (Magatti and Monaci 2001) has become the watchword for efficiency. It is constituted of two elements: functional flexibility and numerical flexibility. Functional flexibility allows the widening of job classifications, hours of work, assignments and work structures and is usually allocated to a small percentage of workers. Numerical flexibility consists of work practices that are fragmented and prescriptive, requiring the majority of workers to perform and engage in narrow tasks in flexible, part-time contracts. Numerical flexibility requires the individual worker, who is generally low paid, non-union, migrant, 'flexible woman' (Castells 2002:95), to be readily available and accessible to perform tasks in workplaces. Consequently, contingent workers need to be adaptable, continually learning about something new, and quickly modifying their skills and practices that they incorporate in their work or transfer to other jobs (Garrick and Usher 2000).

Lifelong learning, in its recent conceptualization (OECD 2001), is a requirement and the responsibility of many, contingent, flexible workers in order to participate and negotiate the new work arrangements in the economy. Although many highly educated, elite workers are able to exert agency and choice to navigate and exploit flexible conditions of the workplace, there are others for whom the demands of flexibility afford little time to access educational resources that would enable lifelong education. These workers, in their pursuit of self-development, encounter inflexibility due to barriers of inconvenient time, exclusion, pressures of family life, low literacy and inadequate training.

Concurrent with the post-Fordist style workplace structures and practices, flexible work and lifelong learning, there is the revived notion of workplace learning (Lee 2004). Increasingly, the idea of transferring learning from educational institutions to the workplace is accepted (e.g.

learning organization Senge 1990), as part of the lifelong learning strategy. However, among workplace theorists, there is little agreement as to what constitutes workplace learning. The term is “elastic” (Stern and Sommerlad 1999), stretching over differing objectives: (1) the development of the goals of organization and (2) the development of individuals through contributing to knowledge, skills and capacity to further their own learning (Boud and Garrick 1999).

Moore (2003, 2004) argues that despite the many definitions, the characteristics of the workplace as a learning environment are: learning, curriculum and pedagogy. Taken from academic discourse and applied to the workplace, he describes learning as a change in shared knowledge –use through considered action toward a shared goal; extends pedagogy to include access or pathways to activities or resources; and defines curriculum as the socially constructed organization of knowledge in use. Billett (2001) also describes the curriculum as learning through work.

The dominant discourse promotes the notion of the workplace as a learning environment. This paper argues that Post-Fordist workplace models are inadequate learning environments for some contingent workers. The argument is based upon the reality of ‘lived’ situations captured through interviews and perspectives of 15-20 low paid, contingent, women cashiers in the grocery retail workplaces in Toronto (a section of a larger SSHRC funded study on contingent workers conducted by the Democratic Workplace Learning work group (DWL), entitled “Trained in Vulnerability”). The research data, grounded in the everyday learning experiences, practices and perspectives of the workers, are examined through Moore and Billett’s classification of learning, pedagogy and curriculum.

### **Learning – Whose Goals?**

On examining the learning, there is evidence that interviewees are critically aware that the goals of the retail workplace determine the practices and content of tasks. They report that learning in the grocery retail workplace environment is structured to promote the goals and agenda of retail organizations, often to the detriment of the employee identity and development. “Although they appear to be helping the person [worker] in reality they are not...they are taken advantage of” (RW 201). The workplace goal of shaping an ideal flexible personality is conducted through brief, formal training sessions (an average of 3 hours) on how to become cashiers; learning of codes, how to cash, how to setup, display how to punch codes and how to scan items. According to the interviewees, this type of learning is extremely limited, as it does not represent the breadth, complexity and scope of the job.

Cash is really one-dimensional but if you look at one cashier job, you are dealing with more than one-dimensional. You are dealing with customer’s service, you are dealing with the computers, you are having more contacts with the customers than anybody else. They [cashiers] are the one who are giving them the shopping experience (RW 201).

Many claim that in order to acquire additional knowledge, “you learn by yourself” (RW 215) and by observing others and through networking and the buddy system. They observe that appropriate employee skills extend beyond handling cash, because “as a cashier we have to do

more than just cash. Cash is like the last thing” (RW 201). They point out that the job also requires interpersonal skills in dealing with customers and customer service, but they rarely learn how to deal with the stress of customer behaviour. A cashier noted that, even though her grocery store has access to central training centres for stress management, her company “does not send staff [because] franchisers do not spend money on training” (RW 8).

This lack of guidance and support is stressful, especially for some minority workers as they have the additional problem of adjusting/not adjusting to unwanted racial attitudes and attention from customers. One interviewee describes the daily harassment of a customer who comes to her counter, enquiring “how is Pakistan today.” Another interviewee reports that she is the object of an uncalled for customer complaint for “not smiling” and attributes this targeting due to her ethnicity, as she was wearing a scarf or Hajib (RW 9). Cashiers learn that the rule “customers are always right” (RW 207), does nothing to alleviate the affront one experiences as a person. From a cashier’s perspective, the grocery retail workplace is an inadequate and negative learning environment, as the focus is exclusively on the company goals and agenda, which are narrowly restricted to developing and controlling the actions of bodies and not with the developing of the mind, confidence and empowerment of employees on the frontline.

### **Curriculum – Learning through work**

The workers report further inadequacies in the workplace environment. One observes, “the workplace is divided by gender, race and class, and age too” (RW 201). They point to the visual evidence that is particularly noticeable in public spaces of grocery retail areas, and describe the situation as a ‘ghettoization’ or specialization of work. They detail their assertions by pointing to the work arrangement of the grocery retail sector where “only Black people were in front, ”Italians and Irish are in the bakery” and “they have mostly Asians in the flower shops” and in the back. The configuration in retail is then of Black cashiers on the perimeter, located near cold entrances in the winter, other ethnic groups in the centre (and maybe in the back) and white management and supervisory staff in the interior at their surveillance positions. This work segmentation by racial groups creates a hierarchy that disadvantages specific groups, and which is visible to both workers and customers alike. As one interviewee remarked, “Even the customers come to the store and say that they can see it.” She queries, “Is it coincidental that all of us Blacks should be working as cashiers?”

The workers learn that the segmentation of work by difference betrays management practice or “hidden curriculum” of dividing workers into functional flexibility and numerical flexibility. A deeper look beyond the visual reveals that a small percentage of full-time, functional, flexible, workers are white, male, with seniority. They occupy supervisory, managerial and decision-making positions while the majority of part-time, numerical, flexible workers are mainly women of colour on the periphery. This might suggest that the workplace is deeply divided along the Cartesian theory of disembodiment; dividing mind from body, in a hierarchical arrangement in which less knowledge, less skill, less pay, and less time and opportunities are allocated to the bodies of the majority of casual and contingent workers.

The cashiers from this sector surmise from this initial and obvious visual representation that the flexible workplace is organized around management practices of racialization. Although

a visible representation of racialization contradicts official company policy, if challenged, there are token appointments that belie general appearances. The segmentation by race and content of work and tasks are sustained and maintained by practices that are not effectively challenged, as many 'migrant' workers are in transition. Due to the high turnover in this type of work, temporary workers are under-represented by unions in their ability to bring equality to the workplace. The transitory nature of the job leads some workers to conveniently ignore the signs of racialization, preferring rather to exploit the flexibility of the workplace by using this type of job as a convenient "stepping stone" to school, other careers, and as a way to gain Canadian experience, supplement family income or manage family life. Those who are trapped in the everyday life of flexibility tend to endure their circumstance or find ways of resisting or coping with their situation in order to survive.

### **Pedagogy –Access to Resources and Activities**

In addition, workers in this study learn that the curriculum through work puts them at a disadvantage in access to training resources and promotions. They learn that the pathways to resources are affordances or benefits for some and constraints for others Billet (2004). Some of these constraints are attributable to cultural norms of covert racial practices that result in lack of access. Interviewees speak of their encounters with workplace practices that are exclusionary, preventing certain racial groups from access - recruitment, information and advancement to positions - deemed not suitable for particular groups. For example, cashiers learn that recruitment for some groups depends upon whether a 'Hajib' is worn or not. In the case of promotion, they also learn the futility of applying for service jobs that are deemed off limits to certain racial groups, as shown in the following incident.

201: I wanted to do the photo lab but they won't put me into that. I thought about it and how come there are no black people at the front desk...I heard that positions were opening and people were leaving and they needed help. I went and spoke to my supervisor...She said O.K. When the time comes we will let you know and all of a sudden I saw a bunch of people around the photo lab and I thought what's going on. They said, oh we are training.

KH: Was there a majority of white people in that area:

201: You know when I had told her about the photo lab she told me oh you are not going to get it. I knew I wasn't going to get it but I thought let me try it. Now it is so open. We just joke about it.

The service staff incident provides another example of how access is prohibited by race and age:

202: "There is a whole bunch of us...like [name] we wanted to apply for the service staff. She is a South African Indian. But she didn't get it maybe because she is older; she also applied for the front desk. But none of us got it" (RW 202).

These experiences concur with the findings of workplace commentators (Billett 2001; Ashton 2004 quoted in Lee 2004) who point out that workplace affordances for learning are generally not evenly distributed within the workplace. They note that employees tend to be differentially

placed within an organization based on a variety of values such as perception of an individual's competence, the worker's race and gender and personal relations.

The cashiers in this study (from their positions of inequality) are deeply aware of how the practices of segmentation of work and glass ceilings serve to prevent access to opportunity. They are critically attuned to the underlying attitudes and representations that shape workplace culture and ultimately influence access. Interviewees describe and sometimes internalize, the culture that labels or represents the character of certain groups. They note that some racial groups are represented as confrontational, noisy, complaining, gentle or obedient. For example, "Black women are very confrontational, they will talk right back at you" and "Asians have nimble fingers. They are so gentle with things, they can do that paper thing like origami"(RW 202).

Interviewees also indicate that certain types of performances are valued, based on the level of obedience, passivity and how well an employee aligns herself with the company's goals and expectation of the ideal flexible personality. Those who comply are most valued and gain better access to management and resources. For example, one cashier, whose identity seems close to being an ideal flexible personality, prides herself on doing extra things as if she were at home. When there is a lull in customer activity, "I take the buggies...I return the basket...then I say can I do the bread section?" (RW 215). She even gets mad when the other cashiers do not do as she does. This behaviour is valued and rewarded. Although she has been at the top of her scale for the past 4 years, when she spoke of this to her boss, requesting a raise, he said, "no problem, because when you are here you work" (RW 215). She now receives extra pay for her performance that is a little above the level of her pay scale.

Another worker who seems to be approaching some degree of passivity, shares what she has to do to practice/or appear to practice a flexible attitude by programming herself to adjust to mindless work. "I can turn off my brain ...and still be doing my work, like, I don't even pay attention to the computer anymore, it's so mindless" (RW 208). But the worker with the ideal flexible personality indicates that learning flexibility occurs easily when there is little prior education. "I left school when I was 17...started my own family...so I don't really have much of an education but you know you learn every day...every day you learn something" (RW 215). However, our study finds that those who struggle with the idea of adjusting to an ideal flexible personality are mainly immigrant workers who have prior educational and work experience. From this one might surmise that they find it extremely difficult coping in working environments that seem disembodied, disempowered and deprofessionalized.

## **Implications**

The 'lived' experience of grocery cashier workers in Toronto varies somewhat from the dominant discourse on the workplace as a learning environment. For many, the work arrangement described above, seems to discourage learning. The implication is that this type of workplace is not an adequate and positive learning environment if your goals are not entwined or aligned with the employer. Cashiers are not in the position to aspire to higher goals within the retail grocery chain. Generally, gaining knowledge is usually assumed to be a positive experience, but in the case of many of the cashiers in this study, learning was generally negative. The learning environment exposed them to multiple vulnerabilities, experienced through the

structures of globalization, technology, flexibility and workplace power relations that affected their identity and attitude to learning as prescribed by the workplace. They learned that the process of workplace learning was set up from the standpoint of the employer's agenda, and to paraphrase Ng (2002), in the context of the garment industry, they probably questioned, "learning for whom? For what?"

This study argues that the post-Fordist workplace model is an inadequate learning environment, a conclusion that matches Hager's (2004) findings that "contemporary work arrangements discourage learning, let alone lifelong learning" (p.23). The cashiers' expectations for learning seem much closer to the broader humanistic approach espoused in the Faure Report (1972) in which all citizens would participate fully in learning than to their experience of the neo-liberal narrow view set forth in the OECD (2004) manifesto, "Lifelong Learning." The experience of the latter view succeeds in viewing the workplace as a learning environment that is instrumental in restricting learning and deepening the segmentation of grocery retail workers by race, content of work and skill.

Based on the preliminary results, the paper contends that the notion of the workplace as a learning environment is market-driven, from a neo-liberal management perspective. Lifelong learning in this context, is a question of privilege (Tamblin 1997), which, as our study shows is not enjoyed by low-paid cashiers who are disempowered, controlled and excluded by negative, workplace experiences and practices. Their learning is limited to the performability of simple tasks that are very seldom portable. Such inequalities and paradoxes confound the notions of workplace and lifelong learning, suggesting that there is a need for an alternative, flexible, creative, effective and liberatory approach to learning that includes the contingent worker perspective. Strategies include Wiesenberg's (2004) recommendation for a closer and more purposeful collaboration between Adult Education and Human Resources faculties to develop and teach in workplace learning programs. Jorgensen (2004) also proposes modernized dual system of vocational education. This paper recommends an academic curriculum that (1) communicates an awareness of the role and impact of workplace learning and training on low paid contingent workers. (2) identifies or delineates specific acts of flexibility that should be addressed by unlearning techniques. (3) identifies instances of learned resistance that are empowering. (4) empowers the frontline; (5) stimulates the mobilization of knowledge through the creative dissemination and production of content that may lead to collective action.

However, many questions remain. Who gains access to learning? Who benefits from learning? Who controls and administers learning? From whose perspective is the learning? What is the nature and purpose of the learning? Can learning be efficient and at the same time effective for low paid contingent women workers?

The paper concludes that such actions, grounded in research, offer ammunition and opportunity for universities and other educational establishments to revisit their roots or recognize their responsibilities of adult education by collaborating with communities and workplaces to provide intervention tools – that may serve as a bridge out of the trap of vulnerable work. Such intervention must include a people-centred perspective that envisages the contingent worker as a citizen, able to enjoy the promise of lifelong learning and equity in everyday life.

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