



Adult Education and Social Transformation

Zelda Groener

Every day I witness poverty, as I have since I was a child. As I leave my home for work each day—in one of the world’s most beautiful cities, Cape Town, nestled in the lap of Table Mountain—the beauty of sea and mountains is breathtaking. Yet as I navigate my way through the central business district, driving past imposing glassy skyscrapers and emerging up-market New York-style apartments, I see adults eking out an existence, salvaging the most edible refuse in bins, begging for money, and pleading a sale at traffic lights. Ten kilometers later, shacks line a three-kilometer stretch on the freeway to Cape Town International Airport—home to hundreds of families who live in squalor and poverty.

At the birth of the democracy in 1994, there was an anticipation among many adult educators that a democratic government, a democratic constitution, and a bill of rights would prompt extensive adult education programs and that transformative adult education would flourish in South Africa. The neoliberal globalization of South Africa’s market economy, however, was not anticipated. The historical coincidence of democratization and globalization has created particular challenges for adult education. The government’s employment-equity and skills-development policies and initiatives have created opportunities for workplace learning. A closer relationship of these policies provides insights into the potential relationship of policy and adult education. A number of questions guide this discussion: Whose needs are served by these policies? Can these policies possibly facilitate transformative workplace learning? Policies may

facilitate redress of inequality through employment equity and equal opportunity, but can they affect income inequality and poverty?

INEQUALITY IN SOCIETY AND THE WORKPLACE

As a young activist since the 1970s, engaged in the struggle against apartheid and the fight against poverty, I expected that eradication of sociopolitical and economic inequalities would proceed with great alacrity. Reflecting on the past ten years of democracy, I see that inequality remains and in some instances has deepened; little has changed the material conditions of half the country's population, twenty million people who live below the national poverty line.

Under the apartheid government, sociopolitical and economic inequalities were reflected along the lines of class, race, and gender. These inequalities persist and reflect similar class, races, and gender patterns in contemporary South Africa. As inequalities in the broader society and in the corporate workplace shape the nature of adult education and workplace learning, some are examined in this chapter. Statistics paint a grim picture of historical, political, and economic inequality continuing to persist in a democratic South Africa. The United Nations Development Programme 2003 report on South Africa places it "in the ranks of the most unequal societies in the world" (UNDP, 2003, p. 43).

As statistics indicate, inequality in income distribution, employment distribution, and skills level in the labor market, exemplified in some corporate workplaces, reflects the sociopolitical and economic inequality inherited from the apartheid government. The UNDP report indicates high-income differentials between white and African people. In this regard, the UNDP report reveals that the average income of 68.6 percent of African workers was less than 1,600 rands a month; the average income of 65 percent of workers within the white population was between R3,201 and R25,600. Accordingly, "1.4 percent (3 million) of all workers (9.6 million) and 41.8 percent (2.5 million) of all African workers (6.1 million) had an average monthly income of less than R801" (UNDP, 2003, p. 148).

Related to the high-income differentials and unequal distribution of income, the UNDP shows, through its research on income poverty, that the number of poor people has increased. The report states that "the extent of income poverty where absolute poverty and the poverty gap marginally declined between 1995 and 2002, from 51.1 percent of the population in 1995 to 48.5 percent in 2002, using the national poverty line. However, given that the population has grown in the same period, the total number of poor increased from 20.2 million in 1995 to 21.9 million in 2002" (UNDP, 2003, p. 41).

The composition of South Africa's poor population reveals that African people are the poorest in the world. The UNDP report shows that poverty in South Africa continues to have gender, race, family-type, and spatial dimensions;

11.9 million of the poor (54.4 percent) are female, compared to 10 million poor males. As expected, Africans are the most impoverished segment of the population, constituting 91.1 percent of 21.9 million poor in South Africa.

Compared to the size of their population, 56.3 percent of Africans, 36.1 percent of colored people, 6.9 percent of white people, and 14.7 percent of Indian people were estimated to be living below the national poverty line in 2002 (UNDP, 2003). For the purpose of their study, the UNDP used “the Income and Expenditure Surveys of 1995 to establish a poverty line of R354 per month per adult equivalent for 1995” (p. 41).

Poverty has a strong association with the high unemployment rate experienced in South African society. According to the Labor Force Survey of March 2003, “the working-age population (aged between 15 and 65) was estimated at 29.6 million. Approximately 16.8 million of this group was economically active, with 11.6 million employed and 5.2 million unemployed” (p. 20).

Reflecting on the period since the first democratic elections, the UNDP report reveals that “after nine years of democratic government, the primary problems of poverty and unemployment remain enormous. While important strides have been made towards overcoming past inequalities in the labor market, employment opportunities remain inadequately low and are, therefore, unable to reverse or even slow the dominant trend of massive unemployment. Moreover, the distribution of jobs, occupations and income correlates strongly with race, gender age, disability and spatial factors” (p. 19).

In addition to the high rate of unemployment, especially among black people, it has been shown that the level of skills among this group is low. Statistics show that out of the total of approximately 7.3 million adults in formal employment, 1.1 million are highly skilled, 2.7 million are skilled, and 3.4 million are semi-skilled and unskilled (UNDP, 2003). Although statistics do not reflect the level of skill among unemployed people, the assumption is made that they are low.

The UNDP report proposes that

rapid growth and high elasticity of employment potential can, together, ensure that economic activities create greater opportunities for workers to increase their income through a combination of greater employment and higher earnings for labor, however . . . greater opportunities do not necessarily mean opportunities for poor workers or the unemployed poor. Thus, even a combination of rapid growth and a related high response of job creation does not guarantee a rapid rise in the employment of the unemployed poor. If the new opportunities are such that the capabilities they demand do not match the capabilities of the poor, then non-poor workers will either seize those opportunities or the opportunities may be lost altogether. [UNDP, 2003, p. 154]

The high rate of unemployment and the skills deficit among black and poor people are alarming. In response, the government has since 1994 placed enormous

emphasis on skills development as a means to redress inequality by promoting skills development opportunities for the employed and the unemployed. Although it may seem that a skills deficit warrants provision of opportunity for skills development, the challenge to provide skills is complex in itself and especially in relation to the poor.

The UNDP report warns that “much depends on the correspondence between the structure of the opportunities that are opened up and the structure of the skills possessed by the poor” (UNDP, 2003, p. 154). In summary, the UNDP states, “The poor have benefited little from this expansion thus far, as they do not possess the skills needed by the expanding sectors” (p. 154).

The information presented here shows clearly that historical sociopolitical and economic inequalities, reflecting apartheid class, race, and gender disparities, continue to prevail in contemporary South African society. Given this reality, can the corporate workplace transform itself? Can it contribute to redressing these inequalities? Can it furnish skills development that redresses these inequalities?

Faced with the stark reality of persisting inequality, I concede that ten years is too short a period to significantly reduce the expanse of the inequality prevailing in our society. At the same time, however, I ask whether government policies and strategies are geared toward redressing the deep-rooted and deep-seated sociopolitical and economic inequality that this government has inherited from the apartheid government.

Introduction of the Skills Development Act 97/98 created opportunities for skills development and workplace learning (Office of the President, 1998b). In concert with the Employment Equity Act 55/98, the government’s Skills Development Act and its various skills development initiatives propose to create opportunities for skills development and workplace learning among historically disadvantaged groups (Office of the President, 1998a). Beginning in 1999, these developments prompted my exploration of the possibilities for adult education implied in the skills development policies, and those implied by the latter in its relation to employment equity policies.

THE CORPORATE WORKPLACE: EMPLOYMENT EQUITY AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

A Site for Transformation?

Given the sociopolitical and economic inequality in the broader society and workplace, the democratic government has, since 1994, enacted various policies and initiatives to redress inequality in the workplace. For the purpose of discussion and illustration, the corporate workplace is used here as an example,

merely to set context. These policies and initiatives necessitate that the corporate workplace transform itself and that it contribute to redressing inequality in its context.

Through the Employment Equity Act and Skills Development Act, the South African government legislated redress of inequality in the corporate workplace. The act is emphatic about the role of the employer in transforming the workplace, which promotes employment equity, stating that “every employer must take steps to promote equal opportunity in the workplace by eliminating unfair discrimination in any employment policy or practice” (Office of the President, 1998a, p. 14).

The main purpose of the Employment Equity Act is to achieve equity in the employment policies and practices in the workplace. The latter is achieved by “promoting equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through the elimination of unfair discrimination; and implementing affirmative action measures to redress the disadvantages in employment experienced by designated groups, in order to ensure their equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce” (p. 12).

Designated groups, according to the act, include “black people, women and people with disabilities” (p. 8). The act, which is quite wide-ranging in its purview of discrimination and extends beyond race and gender, captures the scope as follows: “No person may unfairly discriminate, directly or indirectly, against an employee, in any employment policy or practice, on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, family responsibility, ethnic or social origin, color, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, HIV status, conscience, belief, political opinion, culture, language and birth” (p. 14).

The Employment Equity Act establishes a relationship between employment practices and employment equity, stipulating that “suitably qualified people from designated groups have equal employment opportunities and are equitably represented in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce of a designated employer” (p. 18).

The Employment Equity Act and Skills Development Act also establish an important, and possibly crucial, relationship among employment practices, employment equity, and skills development. The former stipulates that persons from designated groups should be targeted for skills development (Office of the President, 1998a). Similarly, the latter states that skills development should be used as a strategy to “improve the employment prospects of persons previously disadvantaged by unfair discrimination” (Office of the President, 1998b, p. 8).

The synergy between the acts establishes a relationship among skills development and three key elements of employment equity: equal opportunity, removal of unfair discrimination, and employability. The Skills Development Act, however, promotes skills development not only as a means to improve the

employability of historically disadvantaged persons but also to improve productivity in the workplace and the competitiveness of employers (Office of the President, 1998b).

The government's skills development initiatives, regulated by skills development policies, are aimed at redressing skills inequalities among historically disadvantaged persons and creating employment equity to redress inequality in the racial and gender composition of the labor force and remove all forms of discrimination. Skills development is therefore regarded as a means to eliminate discrimination and promote employment equity; employment equity is regarded as a means to eliminate discrimination against designated groups in respect to skills development opportunities.

It is clear that government policies, which promote and legislate social transformation in the workplace, necessitate that the corporate workplace become a site for social transformation. However, it is evident in the Skills Development Act that government has dual commitments to redressing inequality in the workplace and improving productivity and competitiveness. In this instance, the imperatives of social transformation and those of the neoliberal market economy have both created skills development opportunities for adults. The combination of these commitments potentially transforms the corporate workplace into a site in which the imperatives of redressing inequality interact with the demands for higher productivity and competitiveness, potentially prompting synergy, tension, contradiction, and dilemma.

It seems that the South African government has established the policy and legislative framework to facilitate transformation of the corporate workplace, which in turn, could facilitate transformative adult education. How do I, as an activist adult educator committed to transformative adult education, relate to the corporate workplace, which, given the new policies, could offer opportunities for redressing inequalities but also requires attention to improving productivity and competitiveness? How do I position myself in respect to the relationship among workplace adult education, social transformation, and neoliberalism in a democratizing and globalizing society? Would I have to compromise my values and commitment to redressing deep-rooted sociopolitical and economic inequality in South Africa?

THE PROSPECTS AND POSSIBILITIES FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CORPORATE WORKPLACE LEARNING

With some reservation and critical questions looming, but acknowledging that implementation of the Skills Development Act potentially creates opportunities for workplace learning for historically disadvantaged persons, I decided to turn

my attention to developing responses and strategies. The component of skills development that offers opportunities for adult learning in the workplace or workplace learning is referred to as “learnerships” in the various skills development policies and initiatives. In brief, learnerships are intended to replace apprenticeships but are considered as a workplace route to a qualification. Implementation of learnerships has generated a group of professionals, known as skills development facilitators, and learning facilitators, learning managers who are involved in implementing skills development and workplace learning. Learnerships offer opportunities for learning in the workplace, which is similar to the kind of learning that is described as workplace learning by Marsick (1987), Garrick (1998), and Boud and Garrick (1999).

As a university professor in adult education, I felt that our Centre for Adult and Continuing Education (CACE) had a responsibility to respond to the learning needs of practitioners and the learners involved in the emerging learning practices in workplaces. Leading the initiative in CACE, we developed a qualification—a diploma in education, training, and development: workplace learning—and commenced delivery in 2002. Conceptualized in a critical and transformative theoretical framework, the contexts of employment equity and skills development became cornerstones of the curriculum of this qualification. The government policies and initiatives related to skills development and employment equity furnished the transformational context that made it possible to explore transformative workplace learning, premised on transformative adult education.

This exploration resonates with similar challenges in Canada. Bratton, Mills, Pyrch, and Sawchuk (2004) summarize the crossroads: “This chapter places into historical context the current fixation with the concept of workplace learning as an extension of trends in the modern adult education movement that commenced in the early part of the twentieth century. This opens up our understanding of workplace learning beyond our position in previous chapters where we introduced the possibility of ideology of workplace learning serving the economic needs of business organizations and strengthening managerial hegemony. Here, we introduce the ‘possibility of the impossible’ (Woodcock, 1992, as cited in Bratton, Mills, Pyrch, & Sawchuk, 2004), workplace learning as a vehicle for practicing democracy in the workplace (Bratton, Mills, Pyrch, & Sawchuk, 2004, p. 134).

Although these authors spell out pessimism, it might be possible that the transformational context of the South African workplace affords an opportunity to conceptualize workplace learning as a vehicle for social transformation and democratization. As argued earlier, government policies necessitate transformation of the workplace and in this way create possibilities for transformative workplace learning. Wangoola and Youngman’s notion of a transformative political economy of adult education constitutes a framework for exploring transformative workplace learning. In their conceptualization, “The central issue for a

transformative political economy of adult education is how to adequately conceptualize the interconnections between the four main systems of domination in society, namely, those deriving from imperialism, class, gender and race-ethnicity” (1996, p. 7).

Transformative workplace learning in South Africa must be premised on the values, ethics, and purposes of a transformative political economy of adult education. The elements of employment equity, equal opportunity, elimination of discrimination, and affirmative action regarding black persons, women, and people with disabilities resonates with Wangoola and Youngman’s earlier statement. Although these elements may be related to imperialism, it is necessary to note that the acts under discussion do not make this link. These elements can also be likened to the struggle for human rights and the values of antiracism, antisexism, and antiharassment.

Given the neoliberal globalization of South Africa’s market economy and its emphasis on productivity and competitiveness, two questions are posed: (1) Can the corporate workplace offer the space for transformative workplace learning? (2) What kind of transformative workplace learning is possible in this context? Evidence suggests that in South Africa the neoliberalization of the market economy, combined with the government’s employment equity and skills development policies and initiatives, has created opportunities for workplace learning. Although the Skills Development Act stipulates that designated groups should be targeted, historically privileged persons are not excluded from these opportunities. It is evident that the elements of employment equity and equal opportunity further some values upon which transformative workplace learning can be premised. But transformative workplace learning in a corporate environment has to function in a context that is geared primarily toward productivity and competitiveness. The case of South Africa therefore illustrates that government policies facilitate possibilities for transformative workplace learning, but the latter would be challenged to mediate the tensions and dilemmas between employment equity and equal opportunity and at the same time address the needs of the neoliberal globalized corporate workplace.

Other critical research questions arise related to the potential of transformative workplace learning. What is happening in the workplace at this time? Has employment equity improved? Has skills development had an impact on employment equity? Have employment equity and skills development been compromised by productivity and competitiveness? Answers to these critical research questions could yield evidence to determine whether the workplace is transforming and to what extent. This would offer a perspective for considering further the possibilities for transformative workplace learning in the corporate workplace.

Because these developments are relatively new, and little research has been conducted, I cannot be conclusive about the transformation of the workplace in respect to the possibilities for transformative workplace learning.

CHALLENGES IN EXPLORING TRANSFORMATIVE WORKPLACE LEARNING

As I look to the future, to the possibility of exploring transformative workplace learning, I am reminded that the broader notion of transformative adult education has a history in South Africa. Although transformative political economy of adult education was articulated in the 1990s, it represents the perspective that has shaped my practices for nearly thirty years. In reflecting on the history of my involvement in adult education, I am reminded that I became involved in community adult education in the 1970s as an activist because it offered space for transformational education. Although it was not named as such, transformative adult education, during the 1980s, found expression in civil society organizations such as the trade union movement; the night school movement; and popular organizations such as civic, youth, and women's organizations, organized under the democratic movement, such as the United Democratic Front. Similarly, and around that time, transformative adult education was expressed in the popular education movement in many countries in Latin America.

As I reflect on the first five years of the new millennium, I wonder what the future holds for the notion of transformative workplace learning. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the Employment Equity Act and the Skills Development Act are opportunities for workplace learning to contribute to transforming the workplace. It is evident that employment equity policies can enable affirmative action, elimination of unfair discrimination, and equal opportunity. Skills development policies and initiatives can facilitate skills development as such, and through these mechanisms contribute to achieving the purposes of employment equity. These policies, however, are not aimed directly at redressing inequality in income and income distribution in the workplace. Given the extent of inequalities in income distribution and poverty in South Africa, it would seem that these are pertinent issues in the corporate workplace and the broader society.

Given the persisting sociopolitical and economic inequality that impoverishes half the country's population, it would seem that an exploration of transformative workplace learning cannot ignore this reality. It therefore seems that transformative workplace learning would find resonance with the broader notion of transformative adult education, located in a possible framework of the political economy of adult education. The notion of transformative adult education has to be considered in relation to issues of political, economic, and social justice.

Although we still walk the road toward a political economy of transformative adult education, we have learned from the South African experience that democracy may facilitate equity in some respects, but it cannot by itself redress the expanse of political and economic inequalities that the democratic government has inherited. My journey continues as an activist adult educator; each day I wonder about the future of people living in shacks on the N2 freeway to Cape Town International Airport.

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