

Learning Experiences of Immigrant Women Workers Srabani Maitra and Hongxia Shanⁱ

Immigrant studies have revealed that in Canada many immigrant women, often with high educational credentials, end up in the service, processing and manufacturing sectors (Ng, 1988, Boyd, 1992). These jobs are low paid, with no benefits, social security, labour standards, or other state guarantees. Working in jobs that are unrelated to their professional backgrounds often entails a learning process for these women. In this paper, drawing on the preliminary interview data of “Skilled In Vulnerability: Work-related Learning Amongst Contingent Workers”ⁱⁱ, we present two types of informal learning undertaken by highly educated immigrant women working as call center workers, supermarket cashiers and garment sewers in Toronto. We call the first type *conformative learning*. In absence of proper training, the workers are made to learn on their own to conform to the workplace expectations so that they could continue the jobs for financial and survival reasons. The workers are not rewarded or acknowledged for the learning processes, and their learning ends up being appropriated by employers to maximize profits. The second type is called *transgressive learning*. As our data revealed, although subjected to exploitative working conditions, some workers do take learning initiatives to assert rights as workers and to make use of contingent work to better their life and work opportunities. The discussions in this paper is conceptually informed by Rikowski’s theorization of learning and labour power.

Theoretical Framework - Learning and Labour Power

Rikowski’s theorization of learning and labour power is based on an analysis of “labour power” as used in Marxist materialism. For Marx, labour power is “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description” (Marx, 1867, p.164). Rikowski argues that labour power is the fuel of labour, and that development of the labour power of the workers through training and learning can valorize labour power, hence the potential to maximize surplus value for the benefits of the employers (Rikowski, 1999, 2001).

Rikowski (2004) however does not see labour power or learning as totally subjected to the manipulation of the employers. He views that learning is not simply about meeting the interests of the employers. It should and can be for all aspects of life and meet a variety of needs and interests. That is, learning can generate the possibility of subverting the manipulation and exploitation of the worker’s labour power by catering to their personal and social development. Foley similarly notes (2001) that the workers’ intelligence and adaptability can be used against exploitative work situations. To a great extent, it is the workers who determine how the labour power could be used, and for what purposes. As learning is the very means to optimize labour power, it becomes an important arena where the workers could exercise their power to control the utilization of their labour. Our data shows that in the competitive Canadian labour market, in the present era of globalization, the responsibilities of learning have been increasingly downloaded to the individual workers who are investing in their own skill and knowledge enhancement in order to sustain themselves. At the same time, some workers also show potentialities for transgressing the limitations imposed by the manipulative and abusive work

structure.

Informal learning of immigrant women in contingent work

Conformative Learning

Capitalist exploitation of workers is inextricably linked with the production of surplus valueⁱⁱⁱ. Marx identifies two ways in which surplus value could be produced: making workers work longer hours for absolute surplus value, and using machineries for relative surplus value (Marx, 1867). Rikowski notes that in addition to the above two ways, labour power itself could be worked upon through education and training to further increase relative surplus value (Rikowski, 2001). That explains the provision of training at many workplaces. However, smaller firms, organizations, and organizations that depend on temporary, casual, or part-time workforces are less likely to provide training or adequate training for the workers (Senge et al., 1994), although the workers are still expected to provide quality performance. In particular, workers who are not in the top stratification are found spending an increasing amount of their own time and resources trying to acquire marketable skills. (Senge et al., 1994). In our data we found that the workers, with or without training have to learn to conform to the workplace standards. This type of learning is often 1) undertaken by the workers with minimal support from the employers, and 2) often under the threat of either “get it (read meet the quota, or be fast enough)” or “get fired”.

The need to learn, as revealed in our interviews, arises not only out of the fact that most of these workers did not have any prior experience in these sectors, but also that workplace training is not available or sufficient in every workplace. Of the interviews from the three sectors, we found that call centre and retail and few garment factories have provisions for some training, with varying length and intensity. However most of the workers that we have interviewed spoke about the inefficiency or lack of training. Workers were found to be left on their own devices to learn. In the interview data, we found that workers learn through different means such as *observation*, *co-coaching* as well as *home learning*. We will use quotes from the interviews to illustrate what we mean by these forms of learning:

Observation: Many of the workers reported that they learned to do their jobs by observing other workers. A garment sewer accounted their learning experience this way:

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

A call centre operator talked about how she picked up communication skills at work:

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

Co-coaching: In our data we found that workers are learning from each other as well as training each other. Without enough support from the employers, some of the workers count on their co-workers. A garment worker recalled,

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

Similarly a cashier commented,

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

Realizing the efficiency of this kind of learning among workers, many employers have co-opted this type of learning as part of their formal training system at workplaces. One worker commented on her training as follows:

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

This “formal” co-coaching system, to a great extent takes the responsibility off the employer’s shoulders and further increases the work burdens of the workers. Furthermore, the workers are not compensated for their added learning or training effort, as that is assumed to be part of their workload.

Home Learning:

Learning a job, that is not related to one’s own field takes time. As many of our interviewees were from different professional backgrounds, they needed time in learning call center, retail or garment work. We observed that the formal training period allowed at workplaces was not enough to meet the workers’ learning needs. Some workers reported having to study at home for work purposes. This is especially pronounced in the retail sector where workers are required to memorize all the codes of different products, something that is not possible to achieve within a limited time at work, when they have other responsibilities too. However the workers are not rewarded for this extra learning time. The following account by a cashier exemplifies this kind of home learning:

... I come back home and do some study...yes just... most of the English, it is your first time, you do not know the name in English, what's the name of the fruits, we didn't heard that, we didn't [have] that [back home], we may have used and called it something else.

In all the cases mentioned above, the learning responsibility is downloaded solely on the workers to improve their work efficiency and performance in order to maximize the profits for the employers. The only benefit that the workers receive, if they “learn”, is to be able to stay on the jobs. As a matter of fact, there is always a looming threat of getting fired if the right productivity (“target”) is not reached. In each of the sectors, we heard workers expressing the concern of losing their jobs if they do not learn to do the work. The following are three relevant quotes from a call center worker, a cashier and a garment sewer respectively:

They have a target, and you have to keep on getting the target; if you're not on target, your production is not high, then they will send you home.

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

He said that in first week of training I had to make at least one appointment, and then in every week I have to make 3 appointments. And if I will not make the appointment he sends me home

The vulnerability of the workers becomes evident from the above quotes. The contingent job market and the lack of job security tend to force the workers to compromise with the intimidating work atmosphere for survival reasons through conformative learning.

Transgressive Learning

As Rikowski (2001) and Foley (2001) rightly point out, learning is not merely being conformative or submissive to the employer's needs. Learning can also enable the workers to exercise their rights to overcome their exploitative work situation and improve their life opportunities. This kind of learning helps the women to transgress the limits and confinement imposed by the manipulative capitalist production processes. The interview data demonstrates that the workers' self-learning leads to assertion of their rights as workers and improvement of their job and life opportunities.

Learning to assert rights as workers: While dealing with instabilities and oppressive working conditions in various contingent jobs, these women also learn how to claim their rights as workers. An exemplary case comes from a garment sewer. This garment worker, along with a group of other garment workers at an embroidery factory, was lied about the financial situation of the factory and the employer defaulted on their salary for two months. This particular woman together with her colleagues went to community centers that provided information in their own language for legal advices. In addition, she also accessed Internet using her own language. Eventually, she approached the ministry of labour, and based on her complaint a case was set up against the employer by the ministry of labour.

Learning to make use of contingent work to better their life opportunities: Many of the women took up contingent work with a view to better economic and social conditions in the host country. Some immigrants treated these jobs as a starting point of getting to know their new country and culture before moving on to other jobs and hopefully in their own fields. A call center worker specifically described this job as a "stepping stone" for her. Another call center woman expressed a similar view,

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

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

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

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

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

In the above cases, although few, the workers intentionally turned their workplaces into a learning setting, to learn about what they want, and with a view to eventually get out of these sectors and start their career in their own field.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented that work-related learning has dual potentials. Learning can be co-opted to improve productivity and profits to reproduce and reinforce social inequality. It can also be emancipatory and enable the workers to reflect on and take action to ameliorate their exploitative work conditions. This paper shows that for the women working in contingent works at call centers, retail or garment industries, there is little use of the women's previous work or educational background. Instead the women have to learn anew to be "competent workers". Although there is training provided at some workplaces, the training is reported as insufficient. The workers have to make an extra effort to learn on their own in order to stay on the jobs. We have observed that their learning could also serve the purpose of the workers to gain more control of their work and life.

The preliminary findings of this project have significant implications for policy-making bodies, employers and workers' rights activists. First of all, it has to be noted that although the Canadian immigration policy promotes the recruitment of skilled workers and professionals, the immigrant women's previous professional learning has been systematically negated and invalidated, given the large number of immigrant women working in the low paid and dead end jobs. As such, it is the state's responsibility to address the issue around under-utilization of immigrants' skills and knowledge. Secondly, since work related learning directly profits the workplaces, employers should be encouraged to provide appropriate training and reward the workers for their learning endeavour. Thirdly, we have also found that some workers are better than others in controlling their work environment and life situation. However, a few workers' success in defending their rights does not change the disadvantageous circumstances that most of the workers find themselves in. To optimize their work and life opportunities in general, the immigrant workers need to come together, exchange information and knowledge, learn from each other, and form collective actions among themselves to deal with labour issues.

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ⁱ The paper is equally authored.

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³ For a discussion of surplus value, refer to *Capital Volume One* (1867) available on line
