**Review Article The Knowledge Economy and Lifelong Learning: A Critical Reader, Edited by D. W. Livingston and David Guile, 2012, Rotterdam, Sense Publishers.**

**ISBN 978-94-6091-913-8 paperback USD54/GBP39**

**ISBN 978-94-6091-914-5 hardback USD99/GBP65**

**ISBN 978-94-6091-916-2 e-book**

This is an important text that brings together a range of diverse papers addressing constructions of the knowledge economy and the particular challenges that this poses for workplace learning. The majority of the papers have been, or are revisions of previously published work. This carries both costs and benefits. It has enabled the editors to draw together a selection of significant papers that complement one another. Whilst on the other hand a number of these papers appear to have been written before the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent intensification of neo-liberal policies of austerity. The editors helpfully write an introduction to the book and to its two sections as well as a conclusion in which they draw out what they take to be the key insights of the book, suggesting the direction for future research and policy. What unites the chapters is their critical stance, albeit as readers would expect this is accented differently by the various contributors. Thus we encounter analyses rooted in Marxism such as those of Kennedy and Sawchuk set alongside those that seek to acknowledge and validate workplace learning and workers knowledge, as in Fuller et al and Bakker et al’s contributions.

The first section of the book, *General Critiques*, comprises seven chapters. It offers the reader a number of critiques of the knowledge economy which serve to problematise the term and illustrate its rhetorical qualities which are drawn upon in policy debates. The argument of the book is set within a context in which the claims of the pundits of the knowledge economy are debunked. It is argued, as Carlaw et al do, that knowledge and its application have been a longstanding feature of economic and social life. Policy makers associated with the state and supranational bodies who buy into the rhetoric of the knowledge economy argue that there is a requirement for workers to continually enhance their human capital, which is allied to a need for constant up-skilling and acquisition of qualifications. Such ideas have been expressed by the OECD, the World Bank, the EU and many other transnational organisations. Contributors to the book suggest that in the current conjuncture such claims can be seen at best as an exaggeration or at worst simply wrong. This is evidenced by the extent to which many workers are overqualified, over skilled, underemployed, and who encounter precarious working lives interspersed with periods of unemployment. Importantly, Livingstone directs our attention away from a deficit, near pathological evaluation of worker skills to the organisational conditions in which people labour. He suggests, as do other contributors, that many workers are over skilled for work they do and consequently these skill and the related knowledge are not fully mobilised in the workplace to the detriment of workers and their organisation.

Austerity and neo-liberalism provide a backdrop for this edited collection. One might also add financialisation, the use of money to accumulate more ‘money capital’ whilst avoiding an engagement with the productive economy. Jessop refers to this as finance dominated accumulation and is allied to processes through which capital seeks to secure new markets and commodities in the accumulation of capital. We can observe such processes in the way in which parts of the welfare state have been commodified and marketised. Kennedy points towards the manner in which capital seeks to move into new products and services in the pursuit of surplus value. The search for expanded commodification can also be seen in capital’s concern with the appropriation of intellectual property rights whereby knowledge is reduced to a commodity with the attempted enclosure of the ‘intellectual commons’. Carlow et al in their contribution explore these and related questions that are concerned with intellectual property, entrepreneurship, knowledge and science as well as the manner in which the knowledge economy can be understood. The appropriation of intellectual property by entrepreneurs can be both a bulwark against uncertainty and risk but can also limit the broader application of new technologies to wider society – enclosing the ‘intellectual commons’. There is an affinity between Carlow et al’s argument and that of Brown and Lauder’s, with both discussing the affordance offered by digital technologies which lead to new ways of working and the compression of time and space across the globe. As with other contributors Brown and Lauder also question the ‘hype’ surrounding the knowledge economy and the presumption of up-skilling. As with their later work Brown and Lauder raise questions about the social justice implications of these developments in which there are moves towards the standardisation of ‘knowledge work’ and an increasing differentiation between knowledge workers who are effectively being deskilled and an elite of privileged workers (Brown, Lauder & Ashton 2011). These authors also pose the spectre of a low wage high skills nexus for workers in the global north that is reflected in increasing precariousness. They, as with Warhurst and Thompson, problematise the ‘hype’ surrounding the mobilisation of Information and communication technologies (ICT) in waged labour and its ready association with upskilled work.

For Warhurst and Thompson the assumed association of ICT and its use as a proxy for knowledge intensive industries, allied with the requirement for upskilled labour, is deeply misleading. They suggest there is a disjunction between the rhetoric of the knowledge economy and its ‘materiality’ in the workplace. However, such processes need to be placed within a broader socio-economic and cultural context which acknowledges competitive strategies, skill formation systems, external and internal labour markets and so on. Jessop similarly seeks to locate the debate within a broader ‘cultural economy’ approach in which our attention is drawn to the hegemonic position of the ‘imaginary’ of the knowledge economy which, at best, is only a partial representation of material relations.

Duguid’s contribution seeks to explore and question economists understanding of knowledge as information. This discussion is placed alongside an exploration of tacit and codified knowledge, as well as communities of practice. He draws attention to the manner in which practitioners, through their engagement with communities of practice, draw upon tacit knowledge when mobilising codified knowledge. It is here that issues of becoming, identity and learning arise that extend beyond narrow conceptions of codified and disciplinary knowledge. This chapter provides a link with the second section of the book. Duguid alerts us to the sociality of knowledge, a theme that is addressed by Young in the final chapter of the book. Young is concerned with the way in which knowledge is emptied of content in debates surrounding the knowledge economy. He and Duguid are concerned with knowledge being viewed simply as information. Young argues that this has resulted in the marginalisation of the ‘voice of knowledge’ which therefore restricts access to what he describes as ‘powerful knowledge’. For him, disciplinary knowledge carries with it epistemic gains that are not readily accessible to other forms of knowledge. Importantly, he emphasises the sociality of knowledge, its fallibility and the importance of critique and the making of judgements in its mobilisation and development.

The second section of the book, *Specific Challenges*,explores workplace practices and comprises eight chapters which draw on a range of perspectives from activity theory to social semiotics. The editors point out that the aim of this section is to “consider the diverse and often new ways in which occupations use the forms of disciplinary knowledge they were introduced to during their professional and/or vocational formation, in conjunction with the knowledge developed from participating in workplace practice, to sustain and/or develop products and services as well as occupational expertise” (p187). Fuller et al relate the development workplace knowledge and learning to the productive system within which an organisation is placed. Thus a range of factors, pedagogic, organisational and cultural, may lead to more expansive or restrictive learning environments, with the authors’ providing a number of illustrations of the situational and organisational specificity of such processes. Nerland consider the affordances for professional learning facing school teachers and computer engineers. She draws on Knorr Cetina’s concept of ‘epistemic cultures’ as well as Nespor’s discussion of the way in which the spatial and temporal organisation of knowledge constituted learning opportunities. Nerland points to the differences between the two occupational groups concluding that professional cultures will be characterised by distinct heuristic practices and knowledge relations. What Bechky’s contribution adds to this discussion is an analysis of workplace occupational boundaries between engineers, technicians and assemblers in an organisation manufacturing semiconductor equipment. Not only does she point to the competition for control, legitimacy and jurisdiction between these groups but also alerts us to the manner in which artifacts, in this case drawings and machines, mediate the relationship between these three occupational communities.

The above contributions raise questions about the specificity of workplace processes and affordances for learning and knowledge creation, a theme addressed by Bakker et al who draw on activity theory and semiotics in their analysis. They explore techno-mathematical literacies in an ethnographic study of a biscuit manufacturer. Here the concern is with the ‘process improvement team’ whose aim is to enhance efficiency and profitability. Participants are volunteers drawn from within the organisation, including management and assembly line workers. Importantly they note that techno-mathematical literacies have to be understood in their situational specificity. Mathematical symbols have to be related to the manner in which they are mobilised in the institutional context with all the difficulties and contradictions that surround this process. What Guile’s contribution adds to this discussion is an examination of knowledge and learning in the creative/cultural sector which is characterised by short term project based working, a large number of small and medium sized enterprises and an external labour market. In the latter case this means that workers and aspirant entrants to the sector are positioned, in Guile’s terms, between capital and labour as ‘workers/entrepreneurs’. This requires the mobilisation of what he calls ‘Moebius-strip’ expertise that involves the development of social capital and networks alongside the flexible deployment of vocational expertise to suit particular projects. Guile considers the manner in which young people could gain access to the sector through the activities of intermediate organisations that facilitate the development of such expertise.

In some respects Sawchuk and Casey’s contributions are rather different to the preceding papers because of their respective examination of use value and industrial democracy. Yet at the same time these ideas could usefully be mobilised to engage with the other contributions in the book. Sawchuk draws on cultural historical activity theory, Marxist labour process theory and use-value theory with the latter both complementing and adding to the other theories through its emphasis on use value. Use-value theory draws our attention to the longstanding finding of the sociology of work that workers seek to satisfy individual and collective needs through their labour. Sawchuk’s paper provides a case study of welfare workers struggling to meet their own and collective needs and the contradictions this throws up between use and exchange value. The concern with use-value and meaning making can be seen in Casey’s contribution which addresses worker participation and industrial democracy, which in turn is in part concerned with the humanisation of work. Over the last thirty years this current has become increasingly marginalised as a result of the reassertion of managerial power. This has carried with it a strategic model of organisational learning and the increased significance attached to human resource management whereby workers learning and engagement is to be centred on the goals of the organisation. For Casey such conceptualisations of the worker and learning are truncated, necessitating the reassertion of a moral ideal and a much broader understanding of lifelong learning. This could lead to the development of innovative organisations that would be better placed to address the societal, political and economic difficulties we currently face. I am reminded of Winch’s (2015) discussion of ‘civic virtues’ that surround not only the professions but also other occupations.

As with many of the other contributions to the book Casey argues that workers’ capacity for the development of knowledge and skill frequently exceeds that required by production. Throughout the book there is a tension which reflects the contradiction between use and exchange value and those surrounding the development of the forces of production. Underpinning these tensions rests the notion that through our labour we can express our species being, with waged worked being central to this. Such an analysis is rooted in a productivism that plays down the manner in which our lives outside waged labour contribute towards the development of surplus value – the provision of free labour. To be fair within the book there is, albeit limited, recognition of the importance of labour external to the wage relation. This can be seen in the acknowledgement of women’s domestic labour but also more widely in a reference to *Operaismo* (Italian workerism). This in turn poses questions about the way in which we make sense of the current stage of capitalism and its demand for labour. Whilst one of the key themes of the book concerns the over-qualification, under and unemployment of labour; a number of writers have taken this further by drawing attention to the existence of a pool of surplus labour in both the global north and south (Blacker, 2013; Davis, 2006; Marsh, 2011). These writers go beyond traditional Marxist analyses of the industrial reserve army of labour, with Blacker drawing on the metaphor of ‘elimination’ to describe these processes whereby workers are made redundant to production. In conjunction with workerism such analyses ask questions about the way in which capital responded to worker resistance to Fordism and the manner in which this is articulated in the ‘knowledge economy’. For example, Cederström and Fleming have argued that “self-exploitation” has become a key feature of many working lives and that a “meaningful workplace politics ought not to be calling for fairer work, better work, more or less work, but *an end to work"* (2012, 8). Such an analysis serves to problematise the radicalism of some of the accounts in the book. But perhaps rather more importantly it would have been really stimulating if there had been at least some engagement with these issues, if only to dismiss them. Since the publication of Livingstone and Guile’s edited collection, Graeber, (2013) and Glaser (2014) have discussed ‘bullshit jobs’ or what could be described as ‘busy work’ that serve to tie us into capitalist relations. Our enmeshment in capitalist relations may occur through our ‘commitment’ to waged labour or through fatigue following the intensification of meaningless labour. ‘Busy work’, with the intensification of meaningless labour and concomitant fatigue, raises questions about the manner in which we can express our species being through waged labour. Whilst the editors would undoubtedly point out that this debate was not the focus of their book, nevertheless these questions do spill over into the politics of the text and its stance towards social justice.

I have already commented on the tension between use and exchange value which is played out not only in relation to discussions of surplus labour but also to debates surrounding the varieties of capitalism. There has been a longstanding discussion addressing the differences between particular forms of capitalism and their relationship to social formations, with some forms being more benign and others more oppressive. Contrasts have been made between Anglo-Saxon models of capitalism and those of continental Europe with the latter articulating more closely to expansive workplace learning environments. Here the brutalities of the market are somewhat softened with workers being able to make a greater contribution to production and efficiency. However, it is important to acknowledge, as do Fuller et al and many of the other contributors to the book, that learning environments vary between organisations and within and across social formations. In addition these are set within particular socio-historical conditions that may be more of less benign, with the current neo-liberal conjuncture with its politics of austerity being a case in point.

A number of the contributions to the book illustrate the manner in which worker skill and knowledge can contribute to organisational efficiency and improved production. Lying behind this is the question of how far this is limited by the current configuration of socio-economic relations, or if you prefer capitalist relations. Some of the contributors acknowledge this tension and develop a critique of the present that looks beyond neo-liberalism. Yet this can point in two rather different directions - towards a version of social democracy or in the direction of a transformation of social and economic relations. In the case of the former a revised social democracy holds the potential for a form of corporatism that acknowledges the active participation of workers in production together with a social formation characterised by less extreme inequalities of income and wealth etc. Such a politics offers clear benefits but it will nevertheless be rooted within and constrained by capitalist relations and the spectre of domestication. Unless, that is, it is conceived as part of an on-going struggle to transform society – a revolutionary reformism. It is important to bear in mind that both social democracy and neo-liberalism were the outcome of struggle with the former reflecting concessions won by the working class and the latter reflecting the attempt by ‘capital’ to reassert its authority and undo the gains won in the earlier period.

I hope that I have given readers a flavour of the book and some of the issues it raises. In a short review it is only possible to hint towards some of the questions the chapters pose. Each warrants a substantial review which space has mitigated against but I trust I have written enough to encourage readers to engage with this important book. I do however have one major quibble. The book presents itself as a critical reader and as such I would have expected it to have an index. This would have made the book more user friendly and increase its ‘use value’ by enabling readers to readily explore a particular issue across a number of chapters.

The book will be of interest to those who seek to explore debates addressing the knowledge economy, Lifelong Learning and workplace learning, that is to say - undergraduates, postgraduates, academics and researchers.

James Avis

HUDCRESS

University of

Huddersfield

**References**

Blacker, D. (2013). *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame.* Winchester: Zero Books.

Brown, P., Lauder, H. & Ashton, D. (2011). *The Global Auction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Cederström, C. and Fleming, P. (2012). *Dead man working*, Alresford: Zero Books.

Davis, M. (2006). *Planet of Slums*. London: Verso.

Glaser, E. (2014). Beyond bullshit jobs. *Soundings*, 57, 82–94.

Graeber, D. (2013). On the phenomenon of bullshit jobs. *Strike! Magazine*. Retrieved from http://strikemag.org/bullshit-jobs/ on 1 September 2014.

Marsh, J. (2011) *Class Dismissed,* New York, Monthly Review Press

Winch, C. (2015) Assessing Professional know-how, paper presented at International perspectives on policy, pedagogy and practice in higher vocational education part of the ESRC-funded seminar series, HIVE-PED: higher vocational education and pedagogy in England, School of Education and Professional Development, University of Huddersfield, 30 October