

“Education Keynote”

Offered at the ALARA & WAL World Congress

‘Learning for Innovation and Social Change’

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Thank you for inviting me to speak at this important Congress; I’m honoured... In a way, it feels a bit like ‘homecoming’ into familiar territory – not so much to the Hilton, but to the ALARA-side of this joint Congress, as the organisation I am part of was very much involved in the organisation of 2010 World Congress in Melbourne... But then it also feels less familiar - and therefore probably more interesting - because of the combination with the Global Centre and its focus on “*work-applied learning*’, adventurously and promisingly declaring the Congress to be about ‘*social change and innovation*’... which is all the more actual, since we now have an Australian Prime Minister who used to badge his approach to governance (and himself) as ‘innovative’ and ‘agile’... once upon a time, that is... and boy, did we want to believe him...!

First a few bits of information about me; I have been a social worker and social work educator for over 51 and 46 years respectively, ranging from social work professional education in Flemish/Belgium (in a School of Social Work dedicated to the rather ‘innovative’ social changes wrought under Pope John 23rd); followed by three years of voluntary community development work in the Congo (as an alternative to military service); ten years of social work academic work in then West-Germany (especially involved in innovative, project studies-based curriculum development); five years of teaching, researching and doctoral studies (Social Work and Sociology) in the US; eleven years teaching in Schools for Social Work in two universities in Melbourne (especially research, community development and international development); becoming a ‘lapsed’ academic in 1996 as I could not imagine myself continuing to work in corporatizing universities (naively thinking that education was something a modern, prosperous society *owed* to itself and its younger generations...) and not wanting to get all ‘bitter and twisted’ and waiting for my ‘Super’ to tick in...; still - for about 15 years - casually involved with Social Work education in Hong Kong and internationally via membership in the International Consortium of Social Development; in 1997 – with friends – starting the learning and research-oriented Borderlands cooperative and - a few years later - an independent accredited Graduate School, the OASES Graduate School; which is now – rather sadly, after somewhat more than ten years – being deregistered by the Federal Regulator (TEQSA) because we haven’t ‘grown’ during the last three years – which we couldn’t because we didn’t get access to Fee Help... which prevented us from ‘growing’... etc.

I’m not so much offering this condensed CV-story to impress you – after all, looking around, quite a number of you have likely also accumulated many years in the fields you’ve been working in... - but I am offering this summary of my work-trajectory because it mostly occurred in the context of a type of professional education in which ‘*practice-learning*’ is

considered paramount, with more than 25% of the required learning occurring in any of the variety of professional fields... And within the discourses which govern that part of the learning experience, the concept of '*work-applied*' learning would not really cover even half of the *intended* learning experience; rather, many would suggest that the intended experience would be better qualified as '*work-generated learning*', recognising the power and enduring influence of the *experiential and relational dimensions* of the time spent in '*the real world of social work*'... In fact, there's a real tension between the proposition that the practice or work experience is 'mere' application of what has previously been conveyed as 'theoretical' knowledge and the proposition that the work and practice experience generates its own 'knowledge' and that this knowledge is possibly more essential... (the common request to new job applicants just coming from training or education to detail their 'experience' is indicative). Donald Schön's '*espoused theory*' and '*theory in use*' conceptual pair evolved about 40 years ago and should be well-known by most ... and there's many more important and well-known contributions to this dialectic, especially for those amongst us who were part of the '*project-studies*' excitement in vocational and professional education during the seventies and the PAR paradigm certainly keeps this dialectic as a central or core aspect of its craft...

But I'm running ahead of myself and before I share some of the thoughts and insights I have gained and developed from my half-century worth of teaching and learning, I'd like to briefly summarise the three areas I would like to cover, however minimally that can happen in now even less than ½ hour...

- I first would like to – ever so briefly – refer to the broader political-economic and socio-ecological context within which any of our talking about work-applied or work-generated learning – and in my talk here, of '*education*' - should be located;
- I then want to spent a few minutes thinking about what we may mean with '*work*' and address some of the reductionism in the use of that and associated concepts and words and relocate them into a much wider set of activities and relationships within which the social reproduction of our lives and living – as well as their 'sustainability' – is 'grafted';
- And then finally, I will be looking at some of the characteristics of 'learning' in the dialectic of 'head – hand – heart – and feet'....

1. the broader political-economic and socio-ecological context

I don't think that it can be thought adventurous or outrageous or not-evidence-based any more to suggest that the global capitalist political-economy has been and continues to be in a long-term and crisis-laden decline... the last 30 or so years have produced enormous misery, shocking disasters – especially when one includes the impact of what a former US president called the 'industrial-military complex' (Eisenhower's 1961 pronouncement, during and after which he went about destroying the emergent democracy in Guatemala and some other assorted things that 'complex' will have been rather happy about...) and that 'complex' accompanies the spread of globalising capitalism to this day and certainly is one of its drivers...

Add the continuing refusal of those who profit from and govern that ‘complex’ to fully admit what their actions help to cause in terms of ecological destruction... and I am sure that I don’t need to detail all the aspects and facets of the destruction of what should be rightfully considered the home that sustains us as a species...

And what these ‘developments’ in the global economy – particular then capitalist version - do to ‘work’, especially ‘work’ understood as that set of activities which humans are ‘obliged’ to engage in to ensure our livelihoods and which has also become very much part of our moral/normative individual and collective make-up via the ‘work ethic’ and the entire set of our ‘mutual obligations’... Let’s briefly listen to a recent article by Richard Denniss, the chief economist for the Australia Institute:

Between the late 1980s and the early 2000s the coal companies shed more than 20,000 jobs. The halving of the coal mining workforce had nothing to do with cutting greenhouse gas emissions and everything to do with cutting costs. Changes in technology allowed the mine owners to buy bigger machines and employ a lot fewer workers so they jumped at the chance. New mines, like the one proposed by Indian company Adani, would naturally bring the latest technology, meaning fewer jobs per tonne of coal. The mining industry is spending up big on robot trucks and remote-controlled trains so that they can employ a lot less mine workers. Multinational resource companies are as keen to ship Australian jobs offshore as they are to shift their profits offshore. But somehow, despite the fact that their plans to replace workers with machines are completely public, mining companies manage to depict themselves as the workers' friends, and those who care about the environment as selfish. No government can prevent the fact that over the coming decades millions of people will lose their jobs and millions of people will find new ones. And no economist can predict exactly which jobs will come and which ones will go.

There are several recent books and research which predicts massive changes to the world of ‘jobs’ and it’s not just robots and artificial intelligence and 3D printing ... it’s things like ‘work from home’, the need to think about several careers in a life-time for most of us and, especially, the growing grassroots movements everywhere working and thinking towards a ‘social and solidarity economy’ ... Borderlands with other organisations and locals organised a ‘social economy’ conference in rural Castlemaine in Victoria last year October, together with the *Economics of Happiness* – now *Local Futures* – organisation and network... mailing out a request for presentations to then ‘alternative’ networks, in 2 weeks we received more than 70 proposals for presentations and well over 300 people attended the conference ... And that’s just one of the many stories world-wide...!

So ‘**Change and Innovation**’ go indeed much deeper and wider than being contained within the confines of the existing political economy and the existing corporate paradigms and what they make out of ‘jobs’ and - therefore - of ‘work-applied’ learning and unlearning... Si it is first and foremost necessary to be more explicit about ...

2. what we may mean with ‘work’

Being an Australian ‘NESB’ or ‘CALD’ resident, one of the few privileges I have is that I may play around with the English language and wonder about some of its quirks ... and be a bit ‘adventurous’ with it...

You see, I grew up in 1950s-60s wall-to-wall Catholic Belgium and against one of those walls in the Assembly Hall in my Catholic secondary college was written in big letters: ***ORA et LABORA – pray and work*** – to be seen as the main principles to guide my future Christian life... of course, about fifty years later, Elizabeth Gilbert elaborated this further to *Eat, Pray, Love*... and I won't go into that remarkable evolution (lest I would have to confess how I have gone in my own peregrinations) ... but it is interesting to see that 'work' seems to have dropped out of the equation...

But living across several other language, cultural and political-economic territories – I gradually started to wonder about how people differentiated between different types of work and arriving in the US and Australia, the mystery deepened... For example, one of the most difficult and painful activities central to our species' reproduction is giving birth... we do call it 'labour,' but not many would call it 'work' and certainly nobody would call it 'employment' (although with the surrogacy trade, one never knows...); and the freely-given breastmilk certainly isn't counted into the GDP of any country I know; and at the same time, the 'labour' movement is continuously being challenged, certainly in this country, as to its central importance for the sustainability of our lives, livelihoods and liveability... as a matter of fact, quite a number of politicians would rather put it out of its labours...

And things like volunteering, cooking for cupcakes sales at soccer matches add to the GDP only because we may have to buy some of their ingredients... or the laundry powder used by (usually) the 'mums' whose efforts are all too often just looked at as 'unpaid labour' and hence totally ignored in the national accounts (except, of course, the ever more expensive insurance one needs to acquire for the pleasure...).

So, what we are prepared to include in 'work'-applied or -generated learning and knowledge largely depends on our '*personal-is-political-and-ecological*' understanding of how the relevant activities relate to what is *thought to be important for 'the economy' and its 'growth' and its 'health'*... and those of us who have been 'working' in 'development' know everything of the value-traps one walks into when talking about 'work'... is 'work-applied' learning in a 1-dollar-a-day 'job' more important than 'work-applied' learning in the subsistence agriculture which – at least – keeps people alive if not 'wealthy'... and how does this compare with the efforts of Gina Rinehart as she was '*working*' the crowd at the recent Melbourne Cup...?

So the part of 'work' and what we *mean with it* is crucial when we develop ideas about the important 'learning' which is needed to be had when 'work-applied' learning is talked about...

Which leads me to my last and main point...

3. the characteristics of 'learning' in the dialectic of 'head – hand – heart – and feet'

The intended learning ‘outcomes’ of ‘work-applied’ and ‘work-generated’ learning with an orientation towards ‘innovation and (radical!) social change’

- *analytical and self-reflective capacities* as students/trainees/workers apply them to and across theoretical domains and practical situations-in-context, including their personal, group and organisational life
- *decision-making capacity to choose and appropriately adopt behaviours*, intervention or action modalities in given contexts and situations
- *capacity to live with and act in culturally and structurally diverse contexts* which are contradictory, paradoxical, uncertain and which allow for multiple “regimes of truth”
- *capacity to relate to others reciprocally and in solidarity*, including colleagues, community members, clients or service users, and
- *capacity to establish appropriate ethical principles and to act as moral actors* – and to keep learning.

Experiential learning describes the sort of learning undertaken by people who are given a chance to acquire and apply knowledge, skills, attitudes and feelings in an immediate and relevant ‘practice or action’ setting. It involves a **direct encounter** with the phenomena being studied rather than ‘merely’ thinking about the encounter, or only *considering* the possibility of doing something about it. It is learning that occurs as a **direct participation in the events of life**, where learning is not (necessarily) sponsored by some formal educational institution but by people themselves. In all cases, it is achieved through **reflection upon everyday experience**, which is the way that most of us do our learning-about-living (rather than only being focused on the ‘technical’ side of things they need to learn for their hoped-for or actual ‘job’).

This will need to be explicitly reflected in the concrete working-and-learning conditions, expectations and structural arrangements of the working-teaching-learning processes and the specific requirements of courses and other programs in educational institutions. This is especially the case for students engaging in practice learning (e.g. internships, practicums, placements, field work, ‘work experience’, participatory forms of (action) research). Most of these requirements however, are closely related to the professional, vocational or anticipated practice domains for which students are being trained and made ‘work-ready’ for, and as such, their pragmatic and often technical-rational orientation corresponding to learning is often understood as ‘training’. J. Rappaport circumscribes the difference as follows:

“Training implies that I have a set of very specific skills, for very specific problems, and it implies that, given proper instruction, these are transferable and will lead to precise performance and predictable outcomes. Education, on the other hand, ... implies that what is transferable, given proper instruction, are not specific skills so much as non-specific competencies. *Education enables one to think about a variety of problems in a variety of ways.* Training suggests professionals, specialised and licensed. *Education suggests inquiry, adaptability and flexibility ...*” (in Doyle, J. 1983).

Further, experiential learning in a *participatory* spirit requires learning as *reflection-in-action*. Such learning invites workers/students to become *reflective practitioners* (Schön),

critically reflective and engaged human beings, laying the foundation for life-long learning (see also Freire, Illich and many others since). And this certainly highlights the necessity to enlarge and transcend the area of ‘work-learning’ well beyond the specifics of the narrowly defined ‘job’ workers are expected to ‘execute’ do their ‘work-applied learning about... It clearly needs to include what I refer to as developing the worker’s/student’s generic competencies well beyond the specific ones for which s-he is paid...

The relationship between generic/general and specific/special competencies in any discipline, profession or work context is often understood as being synonymous with the theory-practice relationship, in that the **general/generic competencies** are thought of as those which relate to **theory** or **knowledge** whilst the **special competencies** are identified as **techniques**, methods, ways of working with special groups of clients or on special problems (similarly to the notion of ‘**applied theory**’ and thus closely associated with practice).

By contrast, my understanding of the generic/generalist - specific/specialist relationship links the *general/generic competency/capability* to be acquired by (future) ‘workers’ to a much broader notion of *competent human praxis*, a notion which derives from a

*humanistic understanding of human beings as constantly appropriating,
individually and socially, their material and social reality and, in that
appropriation, deliberately changing it.*

General competency/capability, therefore, refers to *people’s ability to critically understand* their own and others’ reality - based on ontological and epistemological reflection - and to, accordingly, *politically and personally change that reality towards a good and satisfying life – towards Eudaimonia....* Such general competency/capability clearly has to include workers’/students’ capability to theoretically and practically (but also *morally*) link and integrate the more specific competencies or ‘skills’ necessary for conscious action and survival in the various (also ideologically) fragmented realms of their everyday life. More, it should include the competency/capability to *deliberately transgress* - both in theory and practice the - often heavily guarded and ‘gate-kept’ - boundaries erected between these fragments.

The *special/specific competencies/capabilities*, by contrast, are related to the *theoretical and practical capability of workers/students to operate within (and across) the empirical and structural boundaries of given and to-be-changed occupational fields or areas and to be doing so according to more specific intentional and goal-oriented criteria*. Such special competencies/‘skills’ include the understanding of and the capability to act professionally (including the special ethics thereof) in their respective broad professional or occupational fields as well as within more specifically defined or otherwise singled-out fields of practice. Special competencies/skills also include knowledge about and the *capability to use specific operational modes*, methods, processes, etc. and the capability to relate those to the following hierarchy of goals:

- goals related to the specific problem, issues or people the intervention (or ‘job’) relates to;
- overall goals of the occupational or professional field in question as a special function in society;
- goals related to our humanistic ideals for planet, society and people.

This obviously refers back to what I previously mentioned about the *distinction between training and education*; whilst some of the more specific capabilities could be learned through training, it remains essential to acquire and realise them (*as well as assess them!*) continuously in a creative and dialectical tension with what has been described as general/generic capabilities. The latter can only be acquired through a properly understood ***educational or learning process***, based on the dialectics of reflected life experience, of more narrowly defined practical professional experience and of theoretical exploration and reflection.

To conclude, the following quote, taken from one of the later books of Richard Sennett, makes the point much better:

“The separation of the professions, while it seems to promise improvement of skill... serves in some measure to break the bonds of society, to substitute mere forms and rules of art in place of ingenuity, and to withdraw individuals from the common sense of occupation on which the sentiments of the heart and the mind are most happily employed.”

And when was this written? During the 18th Century, by the ‘Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Adam Ferguson’ ... in *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, re-published in 1996, New York: Cambridge University Press); I’d wish the man could come back and have a look around to see his prophecy so effectively fulfilled....

Thank you for giving me this time to share some thoughts about this important matter...