The shifting role of adult educators in Canada: an examination of Co-op programs for new immigrants

Bonnie Slade, University of Toronto, Canada

Paper presented at the 38th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 2-4 July 2008
University of Edinburgh

In Canada, as in the UK, there has been a dramatic change in the role of adult educators over the past 25 years. Global market-driven ideologies have gained influence over Canadian administrators and policy-makers who increasingly emphasize vocational training over education for active citizenship and social justice. According to Scott, Spencer and Thomas (1998), ‘the danger is that the social agenda, which was historically supported by Canadian adult education—advocating equality, Co-operation and universality in such fields as welfare, health care, higher education and Co-operative enterprise—is being displaced’ (pp.14).

In this paper, I argue that adult educators need to be critical of the contexts in which they work. Employing Smith’s (2006) institutional ethnography, I examine the volunteer work undertaken by immigrant adults as part of Co-op programs offered by Ontario District School Boards paying particular attention to the role of adult educators in these Co-op programs. This research analyzes the impact of government policies on the design, implementation and measurement of Co-op programs, the working conditions of the adult educators and the role of adult educators in brokering volunteer work placements for immigrants. Within the context of neo-liberal educational reforms in which the downloading of funding has compromised the ability of school boards to function effectively, the school boards have adopted an entrepreneurial approach to the relationship between course delivery, meeting funding criteria, and revenue generation. These fee-based Co-op programs offer Canadian work experience, which immigrants seek, and grant high school credits, which are of little value to immigrant professionals who often have graduate degrees from abroad and many years of professional experience. Martin (2000) warns that under a growing neo-liberal discourse, ‘adult education is reduced to training for work: preparing people for their roles in production, wealth creation and profit’ (pp.1). In the case of the Co-op programs, the role of adult educators is diminishing, rather than enhancing, the labour market position of immigrant professionals. The school board programs actually function in similar ways to a temporary employment placement agency, as a third party employer supplying free labour to workplaces, with adult educators working as job developers. How have we come so far from the social agenda of the past? In this paper which draws from my doctoral dissertation, I will detail the Co-op programs and discuss the role of the adult educators.

The social organization of school board co-op programs that promise Canadian work experience

School boards in Ontario have been offering Co-op programs to adolescents for decades. Their goal is to provide young students an opportunity to learn about work first-hand, spending time in an actual workplace while earning credits towards their high school diploma. Researchers have shown that Canadian work experience gained through these Co-op programs for young students is very valuable (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008). One important benefit is that it allows students to test out a possible career route while gaining a significant number of credits towards their high school diploma. As early as
1997 school boards, particularly those in the Greater Toronto area, extended high school Co-op programs to new immigrants for Canadian work experience. The courses, usually 18 weeks long, offer a three to five week in-class session followed by a 13 to 15 week unpaid work placement. Because of the accessibility of the courses with respect to cost and number of sessions, these programs take in a large number of immigrant professionals. While official statistics are difficult to obtain, I have estimated that in Ontario over 5,000 immigrant professionals enrol in the Co-op programs annually.

Student selection criteria varies slightly among programs; in general, to qualify a person must be a non-native speaker of English with a certain level of proficiency, have professional qualifications from another country, be over 21 years of age, be able to attend on a full time basis, have a work permit, health card, a completed resume and enough money to cover the fees and living expenses for the duration of the course. These programs are specifically marketed to professionals and some programs divide their classes based on professions; for example, there are special classes for accountants, engineers, information technology specialists.

The brochures and information flyers for the various Co-op programs make ambitious promises: 'Want to continue the career you had in your home country? Canadian Experience for the career you want. Be true to yourself. Follow your dream!' While one program encourages potential students to 'live their dreams' another asserts that 70% of their students found paid jobs at the completion of the program. These programs are popular with immigrants; they learn early in their settlement process that they lack Canadian work experience despite the fact that their international qualifications and experience were what qualified them as ideal immigrants to Canada. Within the taken-for-granted ideological frame of Canadian work experience, volunteer work is promoted by many as a good strategy to get a start in the labour market.

The relevance of curriculum: 'They had to go through those processes'

During my interviews with the Co-op teachers, I asked them about how they determined the curriculum for the Co-op program and they pointed me to an Ontario Ministry of Education document, Cooperative Education and Other Forms of Experiential Learning: Policies and Procedures for Ontario Secondary Schools (2000). This document outlines the principles, guidelines, criteria, and administrative responsibilities for cooperative education courses. It is very important to note that this policy document applies to all Co-op programs, both for adolescent high school students and adults in the for-credit day programs. Despite the fact that the high school program has been extended to serve a very different client group -- immigrant professionals -- no modifications to curriculum, policies or procedures have been made by the school boards. With respect to the curriculum, one Co-op teacher reported:

In the Co-op program, the students [immigrant professionals] get four high school credits. They are identical to the credits that the kids get so sometimes I have a parent who is in my class, and he’s got a 17-year-old kid in the regular system and they’re both taking the [grade 11] Designing Your Future credit.

There is one important difference, however, between the Co-op programs for adolescents and adult immigrants; the adolescent program is part of the regular school stream and the other is part of the Continuing Education stream. The funding and working conditions for the teachers are very different in Continuing Education, despite the fact that they have to deliver the same program. These policy guidelines determine work processes and program designs that do not work in the best interests of immigrant professionals. For
immigrants with university degrees and professional experience, three problems arise out of the curriculum requirements: (1) the content of the academic courses is not relevant; (2) the length of the program is too long, and (3) the evaluation tools are not relevant to immigrant professionals looking to re-establish their careers.

The impact of funding

It is funding, rather than the needs of immigrant professionals, that is the central factor driving curriculum. With the introduction of Bill 160 in 1999, adult education in Ontario was entirely reconfigured. All adult education programs including Adult day school for credit courses such as Co-op, were re-organized under the Continuing Education framework with a different set of administrative processes from the regular high school stream. Previous to this policy change, adult day students in credit programs were funded at the same rate as adolescent high school students.

The working conditions for the teachers in the Adult day schools were also radically altered. As a result of the changes in working conditions, most Co-op teachers left to join the regular stream. This was an opportunity for one Co-op teacher who joined the Co-op program at the time of the mass exodus:

I went for an interview as an ESL [English as a Second Language] teacher and about 15 minutes into the interview the Vice Principal turned to me and said, what do you think about Co-op? And I said, well I don’t have qualifications in Co-op, and she said well, we need a Co-op teacher, and if you are looking for a job, then the position is yours. So, I ended up doing ESL and Co-op, but primarily Co-op, I think the reason I got the job [in the Co-op program] to begin with is the fact that 99 per cent of the credit teachers who were working in the Co-op programs left as a result of Bill 160 and went into the regular system, because part of Bill 160 changed the funding schedule.

Under the Continuing Education stream, the teachers have vastly different working conditions from teachers who are in the regular high school stream. They work on nine week contracts, are paid hourly for classroom time only, receive a lower hourly wage and have larger class sizes than teachers in the regular system. According to one Continuing Education teacher:

In the con-ed stream, we are not part of the regular high school system. We have a different pay scale - we get paid only for the hours we put in. There are some benefits, but they’re not exactly identical to the benefits that the regular teachers get. For example, the teachers would be paid sort of on a pro-rated basis for 12 months. We’re paid only for the months that we work. So if we don’t work in the summer, we’re not paid. It makes it a little tight.

In the York Region District School Board, for example, regular day school teachers who teach Co-op have much more stable and lucrative working conditions than the teachers who teach Co-op in Continuing Education. As of February 1, 2008, the pay scale for the regular teachers ranged from $40,139 to $84,379, depending on seniority whereas the Continuing Education teachers, similarly qualified, earned $46.93 per classroom contact hour. Although this may seem like a high hourly wage, the teachers I interviewed indicated that it was difficult to survive on their pay. Their classroom hours were limited (in some cases three hours per day) and to do their job they needed to regularly work over their paid hours.

For teachers in the regular stream, the Co-op class sizes are set between 22 and 26
students, they have unassigned time for preparation and marking as well as a set maximum number of periods for student mentoring. The Continuing Education teachers have no paid preparation time and there are no negotiated limits on class size. Because the funding of the Continuing Education Adult Day Schools (a set amount per hour per student) is entirely different from the funding of the regular school (a set amount for a full time student), this drives different enrolment and working conditions for the teachers and as a result the class size for Co-op is often double or triple that in the regular classes. Also, many of the Continuing Education teachers are immigrants themselves:

Teachers in adult day schools have a different profile from teachers in regular secondary schools. Many of them are new: new to teaching, or new to teaching in Canada. They are all faced with the usual limitations of the adult school model: large class sizes, hourly pay, and no benefits (TDSB, 2008, para 4).

Although the Continuing Education teachers’ working conditions are poor, there has not been much focus on improving their issues through collective bargaining. This lack of attention could be because the Continuing Education teachers currently make up less than ten per cent of the membership of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation.

The Continuing Education teachers work under very precarious conditions with no paid time for preparation, reduced benefits and short term contracts. Because the Co-op programs are 18 weeks long and the teacher’s contracts are only nine weeks, there is constant stress on the teacher about the number of students in the program; if the numbers fall below a certain threshold (set by administration), then the course can be cancelled at the nine week point. According to one teacher:

We essentially have a job as long as the numbers are there. So if the numbers aren’t there, classes close. So the one important factor in my job is to keep the numbers up, to make sure that we have, I think we should have about 40 per class… and if that…and that number, see, with adults, they get jobs, they move on, all sorts of things. So that number always declines, but numbers are a big issue for us.

This administrative arrangement creates a tension for the teacher who, on one hand, expressed the desire to see immigrant professionals find paid work, yet, on the other, worried that they would lose their job if too many students dropped out of the program. The administrative requirements force the teachers into having an individual, personal stake in increasing the student numbers rather than working to improve the quality of the curriculum or outcomes of the program. In the report, ‘Ontario Learns: Strengthening Our Adult Education System’, by the Ministry of Education (2005), it is noted that the precarious working conditions for the teachers of Continuing Education have impacted the program delivery: 'The low pay and the uncertain employment future mean that educators leave, and administrators find it hard to recruit new educators to what is viewed as a 'second-class' teaching environment' (pp.33).

The teachers are obliged to find and closely monitor placements for the Co-op students, yet because adult education is devalued and underfunded, the ability of the teachers to deliver the programs to function as laid out in policy is compromised. It might be possible for a teacher in the regular stream to manage each student’s Co-op placement in their classes that have a maximum of 26 students but it is difficult to manage for the Co-op teachers in the Adult day schools who often have 80 to 100 students in their classes. The responsibility to find placements, then, is downloaded onto the student. One teacher describes her responsibilities as follows:
Well, as soon as we register students, part of their registration process, the students have to submit a resume. And so we read it and we have a little interview right, you know, at the beginning. So we have a sense of what people are interested in, if we can figure it out. And sometimes it can be challenging. When we see that we have a student in a certain occupation, if we’ve had someone in that occupation before, we call that old employer even before the students start. We have to do that or we’d never get the students out because while they’re in class, while the students are here, we’re teaching and finding placements, and doing administrivia. It takes a long time to find placements. We have usually around 100 students and it can take, for one student we could spend 20 or 30 hours making phone calls, making cold calls, calling old employers, you know doing all of that, researching, and you multiply that out times 100.

The role of adult educators in the co-op program

Students are not only encouraged by adult educators to accept entry level positions but also to downplay their education and to consider themselves as lacking in Canadian work experience. According to one Co-op teacher quoted in a newspaper article chronicling a group of students going through a Co-op program:

Skills are so invisible and intangible. A lot of the students don't really see them. They just know how to do their jobs … Many of them are not used to promoting themselves. They came from cultures where modesty was regarded as desirable. You can't really blame them. She tosses out a question to the class: Given that you are new to the country and want to start from the entry level in your old profession, how would an employer feel seeing at the top of your resume that you are a Ph.D. degree holder? University graduates aren't a dime a dozen in developing countries, where most of Boras' class comes from, and academic achievements automatically define them as an elite class of citizens in their homelands. It's just natural that they all begin their resumes with all the degrees and academic honours under their belt. 'They take pride in their education. It is who they are. In their cultures, education simply says a lot about them,' Boras sighed. 'But in Canada, employers care more about what knowledge you have, what skills you have and how you apply them at work.' (Keung, 2003)

Immigrant professionals receive a puzzling message here: promote yourself but downplay your education and experience. This quote from a Co-op teacher reveals much about the way that the Co-op programs work with immigrant professionals. Paradoxically, while they acknowledge the immigrants skills and abilities in the admission process, in the program, they transform the immigrants into high school students looking for unpaid entry-level positions. The criteria for this program basically ensures that the candidates are job-ready, with high levels of English proficiency, foreign credentials and work experience, up-to-date technical skills, and 'suitability and appropriateness required in the Canadian workplace'. Interestingly, these Co-op programs are not open to all new immigrants. They are particularly targeted to immigrants for whom English is not their first language; the candidate must be an immigrant who speaks English as a second language, which excludes all immigrants whose mother tongue is English. The justification for the program rests on the notion of Canadian work experience as an essential component of employment; a requirement of the program is that the immigrants lack relevant Canadian work experience in their professions.

In Co-ops for youth, the employer provides a learning opportunity and the student exchanges their time for valuable high school credits; the employer does not expect a
professional work contribution from these students on placement. For immigrant professionals, however, this idea of partnership is more nuanced. The employer does provide a workplace opportunity to the highly skilled immigrant but, depending on the quality of the training and mentoring, the match between the work of the placement and the immigrant's skills, and the ability of the employer to provide meaningful opportunities to network with Canadian professionals in the same field, the value of the work placement for the immigrant varies widely. While the employer receives free labour from an educated professional with global work experience, for the immigrant professional, the outcome of the placement experience can range from finding employment to being exploited by their host employer.

Not only do the Co-op programs produce immigrants as particular types of workers (contingent, entry-level), but also condition employers to view immigrant professionals as free labourers to whom they have no responsibility. The adult educators play a pivotal role in this. The impact of these programs on many immigrant professionals is downward class mobility and deskilling. Financially, although the program fees are relatively inexpensive, immigrants pay a heavy price for the Co-op in terms of lost revenue, lost time and depletion of their savings; employers, on the other hand, are entirely subsidized by the student and the state in these work arrangements and pay nothing for weeks of free labour. I argue that the Co-op program can be seen as a site of deprofessionalization. While the Co-op programs may help some immigrants make meaningful employment connections, it is riddled with inherent contradictions. Its location in the public education system, dictates that immigrant professionals seeking entry into the labour market as professionals are treated in the same way as high school students. Because these programs are primarily taken by immigrant professionals of colour, they contribute to the racialization of the labour market.

Adult educators who deliver the Co-op programs for immigrant professionals are caught in a difficult bind. They realize that immigrant professionals deserve better than having to go into a workplace as unpaid Co-op students, yet, at the same time, their own working conditions are unstable and poorly paid, and their own livelihood depends on the students finishing the course. Martin (2000) argues that ‘we must recognise that people learn to be active citizens in a democratic society’ (pp. 5). Unfortunately, adult educators in these school board programs are teaching highly skilled immigrants that their place is at the very bottom of the ladder in Canadian society. The adult education in this program is far removed from the foundational work which was rooted in social justice. Adult educators need to be critical both of the place of adult education within the larger educational framework as well as the impact of these courses on immigrants to Canada.

References
Ontario Ministry of Education (2000) Cooperative education and other forms of
experiential learning: policies and procedures for Ontario secondary schools, online at www.edu.gov.on.ca.


Toronto District School Board (2008) TDSB adult teachers as learners, online at www.tdsb.on.ca/communications/adultPD.htm

This document was added to the Education-line database in June 2008