

**The Depiction of Workplace Reality:
Principles of Democratic Learning and
New Brunswick's Youth Apprenticeship Program**

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Abstract

The sharp decline in voter participation among Canadian youth requires an examination of how our students are being prepared for democratic citizenship. Public schools, including programs falling under the purview of career education, provide the means to prepare learners for vocational, community, and political participation. In Canada, career preparation occurs under a variety of names – Career Planning in British Columbia, Career Preparation in Alberta, Guidance and Career Education in Ontario – to mention a few. In this article, we offer a policy analysis of New Brunswick's Youth Apprenticeship Program (NBYAP) to determine its respect for the principles of democratic learning (Hyslop-Margison & Graham, 2003). These principles are designed to provide students with a sense of community responsibility, political empowerment and social understanding. Our analysis reveals that NBYAP violates fundamental democratic values that foster student understanding of Searle's (1995) distinction between brute facts and social facts. Students must appreciate this distinction to recognize how their own agency and democratic decision-making effects change in the formation of social, political, and economic reality.

Introduction

The decline in voter participation among Canadian youth suggests the need for a comprehensive examination of the ways in which students are prepared for citizenship in a democratic political community. Since public schools are the medium through which the state moulds its citizenry, the programs designed to prepare students for public, vocational and professional life require analysis for their contribution to active democratic involvement. In Canada, career preparation occurs in each province under a variety of headings – Career Planning in British Columbia, Career Preparation in Alberta, Guidance and Career Education in Ontario – to mention a few. In this article, we analyze New Brunswick's Youth Apprenticeship Program (NBYAP) to determine its respect for the principles of democratic learning. According to the New Brunswick Department of Education NBYAP, introduced into secondary school curriculum in 1999,

Provides youth with an opportunity to experience the “world of work” and expand their knowledge of essential employability skills as outlined by the Conference Board of Canada. The New Brunswick Youth Apprenticeship Program represents an innovative approach of preparing youth for future employment interests, opportunities and challenges in a rapidly changing and global economy. (NBYAP, 1999, n.p.)

Unlike other career education programs across Canada, participation in NBYAP is neither mandatory nor guaranteed as students must compete for available positions with participating employers. Students selected by an employer experience "hands on" paid work experience and, according to the program description, “expand their knowledge of essential employability skills” (NBYAP, 1999, n.p.). NBYAP involves a multi-level, collaborative partnership that includes secondary and post-secondary educational institutions, government, business organizations and various New Brunswick employers. NBYAP also operates outside the regular school calendar beginning in June and ending in December of each year. Students chosen for the program complete approximately 50 hours of professional employability skills development and a minimum of 180 hours of paid employment. NBYAP graduates are eligible for a secured seat at NBCC or preferred status at designated universities.

In the first section of the article, we introduce what Hyslop-Margison and Graham (2003) describe as the principles of democratic learning (PDL). These principles are designed to provide students with a sense of political understanding, responsibility, and empowerment. We also review some of the major problems impacting deleteriously on

democratic learning in career education more generally. We then analyze NBYAP through the conceptual lens provided by the three principles of democratic learning. Our findings reveal that New Brunswick's career preparation program neglects fundamental democratic values that promote student understanding of Searle's (1995) crucial distinction between brute facts and social facts. Students need to appreciate this distinction to recognize how their own agency and democratic decision-making effects change in the formation of social, political, and economic reality.

Review of Relevant Literature

Citizen disengagement from political participation represents a growing concern among researchers in many industrialized countries (Bellah, Masden, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1986; Gidengil, Nevitte, Blais, Fournier, & Everitt, 2004). Torney-Purta, Schwille and Amadeo (1999) suggest "countries find themselves with increasing numbers of adolescents who are disengaged from the political system" (p. 14). In Canada, voter participation hit a record low of 60.5% during the 2004 federal election with only 22% of eligible 18 to 22 year-olds choosing to cast ballots (Centre for Research and Information on Canada, 2004). Reduced youth involvement in electoral processes has understandably fuelled increased interest among researchers, government officials and teachers on how public education might better promote participatory democratic citizenship among Canadian youth (Gidengil, Nevitte, Blais, Fournier, & Everitt, 2004).

In addition to confronting declining rates of voter participation, modern industrialized democratic countries also confront dynamic economic and labour market conditions that are rapidly changing the nature of occupational experience for many workers. In response to these changes, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of secondary level career education programs designed to prepare students to become flexible and skilled workers. Most Canadian provinces, reflecting the growing trend toward occupationally relevant curricula, have introduced some form of secondary level career education programs to address changing economic and labour market conditions (Hyslop-Margison & Welsh, 2003).

The two educational objectives that emerge from this context are traditionally considered in practical tension. Leaders of industry, focused on the instrumental aims of occupational preparation, expect increased labour market relevance from education while other, more progressive, stakeholders wish to insulate schools from what they consider an assault on democratic learning practices. This disagreement was evident at the World Conference on Education for All where some delegates viewed education as

“the crucible for democracy and liberty,” while others demanded “skills for living and increasing national economic growth” (Spring, 2000, p. 4). In this article, we categorically reject this dichotomy by suggesting that democratic career education may contribute to the achievement of both occupational preparation and democratic citizenship. The choice is not the traditional bifurcated one between democratic learning and career education, but between career education that is democratic and that which is not.

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

Recent empirical research indicates that classroom environments significantly influence the future political participation of students (Torney-Purta, Schwille and Amadeo, 1999). The validity of this claim is revealed by the fact that researchers tested and surveyed more than 90,000 14-year-old students in 28 countries, and 50,000 17 to 19 year-old students in 16 countries to reach this conclusion. Formal content and classroom instruction combine to determine whether career education is democratic or indoctrinatory in format. Hyslop-Margison and Graham (2003) distinguish democratic career education from indoctrinatory approaches based on the following three principles:

- Democratic career education respects student rationality by encouraging student critique and evaluation of course material;
- Democratic career education includes alternative perspectives on vocationally related issues such as labour market structure, environmental impact and sustainable development, the labour movement and labour history, acceptable working conditions and economic globalization;
- Democratic career education emphasizes that economic, labour market and working conditions are constructed through human agency and can be reconstructed through democratic participation.

These principles and practices of democratic learning, with their focus on promoting student agency and democratic participation, provide the conceptual framework to evaluate NBYAP.

Secondary level career education programs typically cite the importance of students acquiring a range of transferable employability skills (CBOC, 2001). These skills include such capacities as critical thinking, lifelong learning, and the personal character qualities supposedly appropriate for successful workplace functioning. The following section explores how these CBOC Employability Skills are incorporated into career education programs, and affords insight into their practical and democratic effectiveness as presently designed.

Threats to Democratic Learning in Career Education: Lifelong Learning, Character Development and Critical Thinking

Our previous analysis suggests that several areas of secondary career education could be both democratically and practically improved in order to meet these goals and protect the principles of democratic learning. The Conference Board of Canada's (CBOC, 2001) *Employability Skills 2000 +*, a document widely cited in Canadian career education including NBYAP, considers lifelong learning an employability skill designed to ensure a seamless transition between education, training and work. When restricted to occupational readjustment, however, lifelong learning may encourage passive student acceptance of existing economic, labour market and social conditions. Rather than providing a vehicle for continuous intellectual, social and vocational growth, when portrayed in this fashion lifelong learning may become an unintended instrument of democratic disempowerment by diverting student attention from the possibility of social change, or the possibility of transforming unstable labour market and working conditions.

The human capital discourse portrays lifelong learning as a labour market strategy that undermines the ability of students to act as democratic agents of social change. Democratic forms of pedagogy as advocated by the principles of democratic learning view humans and society as unfinished, and subject to continual evaluation and transformation by students. As subjects in history, students who are respected as lifelong learners possess the democratic right to influence occupational conditions and, in the process, potentially create a more just, stable and caring vocational experience. From a democratic perspective, we cannot legitimately expect students to accept an ahistorical view of the world that presents social reality and labour market conditions as fixed and unchangeable, and reduces their role to that of social adaptation or adjustment (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, in press).

Under the heading of employability skills, some career education programs also advocate student adoption of certain character traits such as honesty and reliability (CBOC, 2001). When personal characteristics are identified as skills, the rational deliberation consistent with democratic learning that evaluates the appropriateness of these qualities is undermined. Simply identifying character qualities as skills fails to provide students with good reasons why adopting such characteristics is vocationally important. Morally competent garage mechanics, architects and academics are not merely workers practicing abstract employability skills, but people who practice honesty, dependability, and pursue occupational excellence in their respective vocational roles for

very particular reasons. The internalization of desirable characteristics requires illuminating to students the concrete connections between honesty, courage, trust and justice, and actual workplace situations.

Current constructs of critical thinking in career education emphasize instrumental reasoning rather than foundational critique by depicting contemporary working conditions to students in an ahistorical context (Hyslop-Margison & Armstrong, 2004). A model of critical thinking for career education that respects the principles of democratic learning explores the entire social and economic context of work. By critiquing the context of vocational experience, this approach to critical thinking creates democratic subjects in the construction of vocational experience rather than simply objects of labour market efficiency. A critical thinking approach for career education based on democratic learning pursues the following principles of inquiry (Hyslop-Margison & Armstrong, 2004):

- Critical thinking that respects democratic learning considers the social and economic context a legitimate unit of analysis;
- Critical thinking that respects democratic learning encourages the political engagement of students in shaping the conditions that determine their social and occupational lives;
- Critical thinking that respects democratic learning places neo-liberalism, or any other ideology, in a historical context that promotes student understanding of society as a dynamic and evolving process;
- Critical thinking that respects democratic learning provides students with alternative viewpoints on possible social and economic structures;

Critical thinking that respects democratic learning fosters critical dispositions among students by providing continuous opportunities for social, economic and political critique, and includes social structure as a legitimate unit of critical analysis.

New Brunswick's Youth Apprenticeship Program

While New Brunswick's Youth Apprenticeship Program (NBYAP) has been designed to bridge the gap between secondary school and work, a close examination of the way in which that transition is conceptualized reveals potential limitations on students' democratic agency. For example, the program describes opportunities for "hands-on" work experience aimed at expanding student knowledge of "essential employability skills" (NBYAP, 1999, n.p.) as outlined in *Employability Skills 2000 +*. Later, in the section entitled "Why you should hire a youth apprentice," (a narrative directed at potential employer partners in the program) the Employability Skills

developed by the Conference Board of Canada are divided into sub-categories that include Academic Skills, Personal Management Skills, and Teamwork Skills.

Personal Management Skills are described as “a combination of skills, attitudes and behaviors” (NBYAP, 1999, n.p.). The NBYAP offers workshops “on understanding the importance of Positive Attitudes and Behaviors, Responsibility, and Adaptability” (NBYAP, 1999, n.p.). The inconsistency with the principles of democratic learning is apparent in this narrative on at least two different fronts. First, the document cements the link between certain identified corporate friendly attitudes and employability. Not only is such a strategy aimed at ‘adapting’ students to prevailing labour market expectations, a strategy which NBYAP candidly admits, but it compromises the respect for personal diversity within pluralistic democratic societies. If the labour market determines what counts as suitable student traits and personal characteristics, other traits that are equally important, although perhaps less useful to the neo-liberal economy, could be theoretically eliminated from curricular initiatives. For example, if competitive leadership is coveted as an employability skill (perhaps more accurately falling under the category of attitudes), its development may exclude other personal qualities required for democratic living such as cooperation, caring or community involvement. More generally, if employability is reduced to the criteria established by corporate labour market demands, the role democracy plays in creating occupational experiences and working communities appears marginalized.

Second, the entire imperative toward individual adaptability undermines student recognition that their role within democratic societies includes the legitimate right to shape, rather than simply adapt to, the conditions of their vocational experience. The exclusive focus on adaptability sends potentially dangerous signals to students about their possible role in transforming the social, economic and unstable labour market conditions they confront. Indeed, the employability skill of “adaptability” appears little more than a cloaked ideological imperative for students to accept uncritically the dynamics and effects of an unstable labour market.

According to NBYAP, “Teamwork Skills help our youth know it is critical to the success of a company to be able to work with others” (NBYAP, 1999, n.p.) In the section on the importance of teamwork, students participate in “Personality Preference” workshops. First, the notion of preferring certain personalities or selecting for specific qualities in people threatens the principles of democratic learning in the same manner that cultivating specific ‘attitudes’ is potentially anti-democratic. When students are

expected to uniformly adopt a predetermined set of personal qualities, such an imperative risks smothering human diversity and delegitimizes the rational capacity of individuals to develop their own personality and select their own behaviour patterns. The value of teamwork in NBYAP is entirely predicated on its place and utility in the labour market. It implies that the benefits of working with others are most suitably reflected in profit margins rather than in various modes of community cooperation and sharing. For example, there is no mention in NBYAP of the personal and non-financial benefits of teamwork in creating democratic workplace experiences such as building and participating in labour unions. This section of NBYAP affords another example of career education adopting a hierarchy of personal values based on the dictates of a market system that is undemocratically depicted as beyond student influence.

Together, these three sub-categories of Academic Skills, Personal Management Skills, and Teamwork Skills suggest the inclusion of “Employability Skills” in NBYAP is largely aimed at preparing students for the job market by having them passively conform to its demands. One of the pillars of democratic learning is appreciating the distinction between what Searle (1995) describes as brute facts and social facts. An example of a brute fact can be borrowed from science; water at sea level boils at 100 degrees Celsius. The content of the claim, or proposition, is not subject to changes in social or economic circumstances that are, in turn, influenced by human agency. A social fact, on the other hand, is a product of human decision-making. For example, when university graduates are told that they will have to change careers four to five times in the course of their professional life as a result of labour market volatility students are exposed to a social fact presented as a brute fact. That is, they are presented with a fixed social reality that is actually subject to political and practical transformation through their own democratic decision-making.

Democratic learning in career education, as revealed in the principles of democratic learning, adopts a very different perspective by emphasizing the distinction between natural reality and social reality, and helping students understand that social facts (such as current labour market and working conditions) are a product of human decision-making. Instead, the vocational preparation of students in NBYAP is guided entirely by fixed conceptions of the neo-liberal labour market, and student personality traits (under the amorphous heading of Employability Skills) are selected for by the competitive market mechanism. Within this portrait of social reality, students must either adapt to a fixed reality or presumably remain unemployed, and there is little opportunity

to explore the impact of individual or collective democratic action on social and labour market transformation.

The Authority of the Market in NBYAP

The manner in which students are placed in their practical work experience by NBYAP gives much authority to the market economy, especially in the process by which students are chosen to participate. In order to become a Youth Apprentice, students are selected “through a competitive interview process with a local employer” (NBYAP, 1999, n.p.). While this practice may introduce students to the market interview process at an early age, there is no mention of encouraging students to reflect initially on the type of employment they seek, the fairness and validity of the interview process, or discussing how the required 50 hours of work experience has influenced their understanding of themselves as occupational agents, and labour market and working conditions more generally. NBYAP lacks discussion and rigorous analysis conducted by students of the ways in which their understanding of the labour market and their place within it is affected by occupational placement. Once again, the emphasis is totally placed on students conforming to the demands of the job experience regardless of their subjectivities, and the working conditions and workplace expectations they experience.

There are even stronger anti-democratic implications in NBYAP that appears under the heading of Employer Benefits where the program boasts it “enables employers to participate directly in the education of students and to keep educators informed of their requirements with respect to future employees” (NBYAP, 1999, n.p.). While the recognition of the link between school and work is certainly important, the authority granted here to employers over educators risks eroding what little autonomy schools have preserved from neo-liberal market requirements. The clear implication is that curriculum aims are guided by the demands of the market; as employers articulate their requirements for employees, educators will modify their programming to ensure students meet those needs.

We do not claim, of course, that collaboration with the market is inherently harmful, but rather democratic collaboration depends on the type and quality of interaction. If students are encouraged to reflect on their own interests and abilities and choose apprenticeship partners that reflect their diversity and interests, then the YAP has counteracted the selective mechanism of neo-liberalism that values some personality traits over others. The list of companies provided by New Brunswick’s program, however, suggests limited opportunities for students to explore alternative

business structures or actively interpret the labour market. In 2006, most of the companies who selected student apprentices were large-scale franchise corporations who are less likely to prioritize the individual needs of the participant than smaller, independent businesses. Encouraging students to work with companies such as Staples, Tim Horton's, Zellers, and Sobeys - all prominently featured in the program - as part of their career education, risks impressing upon students a limited business model, especially restrictive of student agency as a democratic force to affect working conditions, let alone the labour market. It also raises the concern that some businesses may view the apprenticeship program as an opportunity to exploit cheap unskilled labour rather than afford students a quality and democratic vocational experience.

Finally, under the heading of Student Benefits the program emphasizes that students will gain “an opportunity to network with employers” and “an understanding of employer expectations” (NBYAP, 1999, n.p.). This bolsters the bridge between schools and business that has been created by the neo-liberal foray into public education (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006). New Brunswick's program fails to elaborate on *what kind* of employers students will network with, and to what specific end an understanding of employer expectations will benefit learners as future workers. From the list of business participants above, we worry that students will be exposed to a very passive notion of worker agency through NBYAP.

Semantics and Presentation

Due to the nature of policy analysis, much of our investigation involves examining the presentation of content as much as the content itself. As the fundamental concepts are introduced by the policy document, the way in which they are designed and treated reveal many troubling NBYAP assumptions about the role of students as future workers in shaping their vocational experience. In NBYAP, the use of quotation marks to denote the “world of work” (NBYAP, 1999, n.p.) has a somewhat ambiguous effect. Either it suggests that curriculum advisors are aware of the weight that such a term bears, or it shirks the genuine academic responsibility of conceptually defining what they really mean. Still, what is this “world of work”? Does it have fixed rules or principles akin to naturally determined laws of physics? Who decided upon those particular rules and why? Whose interest does the “world of work” best serve given the rules currently in place?

By including quotation marks around the concept, the illusion is created that the reference is common enough to be beyond the need for explanation or, more

importantly, beyond students raising the type of questions we pose above. In light of its iconic depiction, the “world of work” becomes a static term that suggests minimal flexibility or interaction with learners since, as a “world,” it presumably exists outside the realm of human influence. Unfortunately, this evasive language misses a valuable opportunity to offer students bold new ideas about questioning their relationship with working conditions and the labour market. Consequently, the principle of democratic learning that distinguishes between social reality and natural reality is compromised once again as students are afforded no implied opportunity to examine the ways in which the labour market is shaped by human decision-making.

Similar to the treatment of the “world of work” is the employment of concepts such as “Communication, Thinking, and Learning,” that, in workshops where students are presented with “the pillars of Academic Success,” (NBYAP, 1999, n.p.) appear as though they are finite skills independent of context or personality. From this use of “Thinking” with a capital ‘T’ there is the impression that human capacities under the guise of employability skills are reduced to buzzword commodities, or slogans, with rather direct ideological implications. NBYAP is far more interested in promoting student acquiescence to labour market dictates than fostering authentic democratic discussion about contemporary vocational experience. Amid this conceptual ambiguity, semantic poverty and ideological manipulation, there is a profound lack of space for critical discussion available to students. What does “Thinking” entail? How will “Thinking” be taught? What does a “Thinking” person think and do? If the *goals* for education (which in this case are simultaneously represented as cognitive *tools* such as Thinking and Learning) are iconified, the opportunity to challenge their appropriateness, democratic otherwise, is correspondingly restricted.

Conclusion

NBYAP gives students an opportunity to explore the market economy at a young age in preparation for future entrance into the work force. With its generous allowance for business presence in guiding the curriculum, as well as the provision it makes for students to work directly with real and potential employers, the program satisfies many stakeholders’ insistence that schools facilitate the transition from home to work, from the private sphere to the public sphere, and from education to vocation. However, we suggest NBYAP would greatly benefit today’s students and tomorrow’s democratic citizens by including the opportunity for rigorous and critical discussion of the experiences of NBYAP participants. As we point out in the introduction, we are not

against emphasizing the importance of the relationship between school and work – indeed, career education has the opportunity to shape thoughtful, reflective, dynamic, and committed workers within a healthy democratic context. The opportunity for students to work with businesses – even large-scale corporate franchises like Tim Horton’s or Staples – might present an invaluable learning opportunity to those who are interested in understanding more fully the economic forces and working conditions within our neo-liberal paradigm. But without the opportunity for meaningful examination through discussion about the role and significance of these transnational powers, the utility of the experience is transformed into an adaptive ideological process whereby students submit to the dominant business model at a relatively early age. Only by recognizing the distinction between natural reality and social reality, and the importance of human agency in shaping vocational experience can NBYAP re-erect the primary pillar of democratic learning to support more critical forms of career and vocational education. NBYAP could then situate itself as part of the solution to declining youth participation in formal electoral processes rather than as part of the continuing and disconcerting problem of formal political alienation.

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