

Monika Noworolnik-Mastalska
Roskilde University, Denmark

Learning and Democracy in the Workplace

The purpose of the present article is to reflect upon the relation between the conditions in the working environment of modern day enterprises – seen as a potential educational environment – and the possibilities of learning on-the-job participation in line with democratic values.

I shall begin my considerations by exploring a more general problem that has become visible today, which relates to the strong link between education and neoliberalism, and thus contribute to the critical discussion set around this issue. Firstly, the “clash” of these two contradictory ontologies (education and neoliberalism) presents an opportunity for opening a discussion on their non-problematic coexistence in social practice. Secondly, it offers a platform for demonstrating the fractures created by this “clash”. Teaching and learning today is strongly set in various political and economic contexts. This raises questions regarding the humanistic premises of education. What are the real goals and whom does it actually serve? The prime objective of this critical perspective is not only to identify education as a tool for legitimisation and cementing the existing neoliberal ideology, but also to create an opportunity to challenge the *status quo*. Such a transformation would involve a shift towards teaching citizenship and building democratic awareness among those living in the reality of the modern-day world. The perception of education needs to change. In the light of democratic values, education should display a commitment to transformations for the benefit of the society and effectively counteract the inequalities and the practices of exclusion. Most importantly, education should be aware of the political or economic premises that lay at the core of its foundation.

I shall now proceed to present the differences in understanding of the basic values underlying democracy and neoliberalism so as to direct the attention of the reader to the contrast between education for democracy and an education at the services of neoliberalism. The key aspect is to recognise the seemingly hidden yet fundamental contradictions.

Freedom, equality, and the public sphere: the spaces of the differentiation of neoliberalism and democracy

One of the basic principles of the neoliberal doctrine is freedom. It is, however, frequently reduced to the question of economic freedom, i.e. the so-called market freedom. The “free market” discourse becomes an ideological instrument, which not only legitimises capitalistic institutions, but also defines reality in a particular way¹. Thus initiated, the process of marketisation gradually colonises the awareness of its users, propelling them to reproduce the existent social order rather than to liberate themselves from it. Moreover, this limitless, individual freedom that consists of a right to choose and to reach for one’s own, independently selected goals can be achieved even at the expense of other individuals or even the entire society. It is the boundless freedom, the so-called “freedom from” that is the greatest political value – not the democracy, which involves commitment and responsibility for one’s choices, and is a freedom that is understood as the “freedom to”. Another postulate is to confer equal rights to all individuals. Human beings are capable of self-determination and taking full responsibility for themselves, and therefore they have the right to property and self-possession. This, however, is a “myth” with regards to this equality, as this superior democratic principle is shifted from an actual equality of social rights and responsibilities towards the chances for equality in terms of the possession of objects². It is a democracy of status³, a so-called “economic justice” that is based exclusively on the “equality of resources”. The link between capitalism and democracy is weak; the first serves private interests, while the latter serves the public needs which, as we know, are divergent. Consequently, we observe an indiscriminate affirmation of differences and a consent for growing inequalities, which are additionally deepened by the education. The neoliberal culture puts the market above the society. It uses mechanisms manifested in the use of populist discourse and the manipulation of slogans addressing free will, independence, and righteous governance. The process of the deep pauperisation of the public sphere and the visible weakening of the civic spirit is a result of neoliberalism’s peculiar perception of the civic sphere: civil society is embodied in the autonomous decisions of its members⁴. This is reasonable as long as it serves certain interests, but in itself it is pointless. Therefore its “atomisation”, i.e. focusing on the individuals rather than on the society as a whole, results in the

¹ E. Potulicka, *Teoretyczne podstawy neoliberalizmu a jego praktyka* [Neoliberalism’s Theoretical Background vs. its Practice], [in:] E. Potulicka, J. Rutkowiak, *Neoliberalne uwikłania edukacji* [Neoliberal Entanglements of Education], Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls, Kraków 2010, p. 53.

² Eadem, *Pytania o skutki neoliberalizmu. Aspekt jednostkowy* [The Issue of Impact of Neoliberalism. Individual Aspect], [in:] E. Potulicka, J. Rutkowiak, *Neoliberalne uwikłania edukacji* [Neoliberal Entanglements of Education], p. 315.

³ J. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society. Myths and Structures*, Sage, London 1970.

⁴ D. Boaz, *Libertarianism: A Primer*, Free Press, New York 1997.

disappearance of the civic sphere, and democracy along with it. It is impossible to consider these ontologies as one, all the more since they differ on the level of their basic premises. After these general considerations, I shall proceed to refer to the principal issue of this article, which addresses the learning and the shape of the educational on-the-job environment in a defined political and economic context.

Workplace democracy? On employees (not) learning citizenship in contemporary enterprises

Perhaps the idea to seek pro-democracy practices and attitudes in a workplace may come to some readers as unusual or downright aberrant. After all, a workplace, the same as any other formal institution, has a clear structure, along with a hierarchical management system. Furthermore, contemporary workplaces are designed to protect and secure further expansion of the neoliberal doctrine, rather than to cater to the needs of those who work there. From the standpoint of critical theory, there are no politically neutral places and all environments contain certain, invariably conflicting and competing discourses. Neoliberalism, being the dominant ideology of global capitalism, is visible in numerous spheres of contemporary human life. However, it is most strongly rooted, legitimated, and appreciable in workplaces, i.e. in places where the private and public interest should meet. Sadly, nowadays the work, which constitutes an important part among human activities, is being deprived of its ethos-related aspect. Thus it becomes a mere good that can be recalculated into the possession of means, which have economic and tangible value. This, in turn, may create an environment that adversely affects workers' learning of pro-democracy attitudes and teaches them instead to function within the framework of the neoliberal market principles. On the other hand, the so-called social enterprise becomes increasingly popular, and serves as an example of a practice that differs from the one seen in "traditional" enterprises. It is set on a premise to realise social goals and to function in line with principles that are closer to democracy than to neoliberalism. This, in turn, has the potential to positively influence the way the working environment is organised and to benefit the process of learning citizenship and foster attitudes of engagement in community life. As we know, the phenomenon of adult learning is highly complex in its nature and shaped by numerous factors. These include both external ones, such as top-down political agendas or market systems, as well as the internal ones, such as the negotiation of meaning by members of a given professional community, the creation of a company's own system, internal policy, etc. Similarly, adult on-the-job learning is not only conditioned by the manner the environment is organised, or by the adopted formal education system, but also by the culture created within the professional communities, which in itself constitutes a valuable source or a dimension of informal learning in a given workplace. Notably, this phenomenon is not as

much a cumulative result of all these factors, but rather an outcome of their mutual correspondence and their participation in a process that has its own unique and particular dynamics. Among my considerations dedicated to the phenomenon of learning in contemporary workplaces, I became interested in exploring the question of how the conditions of the working environment – designed in line with the neoliberal doctrine and the ubiquitous (market) “profits culture”, prevalent in most of the companies – can hinder or even prevent learning of pro-democracy attitudes? Or maybe the opposite: how can such conditions support an on-the-job learning of participatory democracy, when manifested as a workers’ resistance to the imposed manner of the learning of functioning in line with the neoliberal doctrine? After all, it is such a kind of pressure that can contribute the most to a swift development of dissent. I shall now consider in more detail the most common conditionings of workplace learning environment, i.e. the shape of contemporary enterprises.

The neoliberal context of learning in contemporary workplaces

The majority of modern-day enterprises are subject organisations with totalitarian traits, oriented against human beings and operating on non-democratic principles. Their goals contradict the good of human beings and their leaders use coercion while demanding unconditional discipline and obedience. This type of organisations weakens the responsibility, creativeness, and activeness of its members, numbing and discouraging them, often causing their frustration. In terms of management, we often observe imposing centralised solutions without prior consultative discussions, which leads to arbitrary decisions that have nothing to do with an on- or off-the-job dialogue with local communities. Employers are seen as producers – highly efficient, disposable and slavishly devoted to the employing corporations, externally motivated, competitive against each other, egoistic, and expansive-yet-internally-docile in the face of the threat of the incapacity to pay off their bank loans. Neoliberalism deepens the typical labour market divisions and social distance between the highly qualified professionals and low-skilled producers. Ever more often the workers are forced to take jobs below their qualifications. They are offered temporary contracts, which deny them the opportunity for permanent employment. Bad working conditions, common rights abuses and despotic attitudes of employers often render the workplace oppressive for contemporary people. An individual is burdened with responsibility for their fate at the enterprise, regardless of actually having a very limited say regarding the future of their employment at the company. Corporatism affects the culture of learning and the obtaining of qualifications that are indispensable for pursuing professions. Education becomes a means for increasing the value of work in the modern-day economy, which demands general analytic skills, reasoning capacities, and innovativeness. These can be obtained at universities, but the larger the

role of education in professional advancement, the larger the threat of the deepening of social inequalities⁵. The purpose of education in the service of neoliberal policy is to produce the labour force, which is reflected in the limiting of teaching plans, and the imparting of specific and narrow skills instead of knowledge. Thus, all sorts of specialists and experts are created, i.e. the so-called “Fachdioten”, who possess a certain knowledge in their narrow field, but at the expense of a general, contextual knowledge on a given subject. Such a phenomenon can have not only negative consequences for the society and the environment, but also may become, in a wider perspective, a serious threat to humanity as such. Moreover, one can have an impression that, sadly, education understood as on-the-job teaching does very little for the development of workers and improving their quality of life, and is merely a tool for legitimating the dominant, neoliberal culture. In most cases, it is designed to serve the purposes of the organisation, i.e. to constantly increase the revenues of the company. All in all, it is difficult not to agree with the idea that “nowadays education is reduced to simply increasing the ‘human capital’, and educative activities to practical training exercises, often accompanied by a ludic element, ethos-related potentials of persons are limited to the instrumental effectiveness of an optimistic human and an efficient producer, while the ideal of human cooperation is reduced to the principles of competitiveness”⁶. On the other hand, a new, different, and increasingly visible trend is the setting of contemporary enterprises along the lines of social business.

Between society and the economy: learning in socially responsible enterprises

More and more attention is dedicated to the rebirth of the ethos of economics, whose duty is to serve the truth and the interests of the global community⁷, while proposing to abandon centralisation, specialisation, and standardisation in favour of diversity, flexibility, and creativity in action⁸. First and foremost, subject organisations are preferred over object organisations, i.e. those that serve the human being and accentuate cooperation in a team or, in broader terms, in the entire society *vs.* those in which the human being is merely a means for reaching goals. An organisation for human beings is adjusted to their physical and psychological

⁵ E. Potulicka, *Pytania o skutki neoliberalizmu. Aspekt społeczny* [The Issue of Impact of Neoliberalism. Individual aspect], p. 328.

⁶ J. Rutkowiak, *Czy istnieje edukacyjny program ekonomii korporacyjnej?* [Does a Corporate Economics Education Programme Exist?], [in:] E. Potulicka, J. Rutkowiak, *Neoliberalne uwikłania edukacji* [Neoliberal Entanglements of Education], p. 33.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁸ B. Klusek-Wojciszke, M. Łosiewicz, *Wiedza jako specyficzny zasób przedsiębiorstwa* [Knowledge as a Specific Resource of an Enterprise], [in:] *Współczesne przedsiębiorstwo. Zasobowe czynniki sukcesu w konkurencyjnym otoczeniu* [Contemporary Enterprises. Resource-related Factors in Competitive Environment], J. Frycy, J. Jaworski (eds.), *Prace Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Bankowej w Gdańsku*, Gdańsk 2009, vol. IV, pp. 133–146.

capabilities. It promotes a friendly culture of workers' coexistence based on the respect for human dignity and it includes the worker in the processes of management. This implies, in a way, the primacy of the human issues in the organisation – which, on the other hand, can result in the complete identification of the workers with the existent order, depriving them of any critical attitude. However, the postulates listed above are accompanied by conceptual solutions in the form of e.g. social entrepreneurship, which describes enterprises or agents undertaking innovative activities while following the values that are important from the society's point of view. Literature offers numerous definitions of the responsibility of an organisation. Lidia Zbiegień-Maciąg⁹ defines social responsibility as a company's moral responsibility and the commitment to be held to account by society for its activities. International organisations, such as the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, proposed a different group of definitions that see corporate social responsibility as an ethical behaviour of an enterprise towards the society. This includes companies' permanent commitment to ethical functioning and contributing to economic development, while simultaneously improving the quality of life of its employees, their families, local community, and the entire enterprise¹⁰. Most commonly, however, social responsibility is analysed in the following contexts: economic, i.e. the capacity to generate profits, but also improve the corporate image, increase the competitiveness and innovativeness, shape the social corporate culture, boost employees' commitment and motivation, attract potential investors, widen the outreach to loyal and regular clients, foster good relations with suppliers, form positive relations with local communities (e.g. the image of an attractive employer, reliable partner, donor, etc.)¹¹; legal, i.e. carrying out business activities, fulfilling fiscal obligations, meeting the standards of environmental protection, consumer rights and labour legislation, requirements related to the transparency of companies' activities, credibility and trust towards companies' initiatives, securing the reliability of accounting systems, financial reporting, the diligent and timely fulfilment of financial and contractual obligations, ensuring stable collaboration with stakeholders, and increasing attractiveness for potential investors and financial institutions; ethical, i.e. the awareness of the consequences of one's own activities and taking responsibility for them, giving priority to public welfare, even at the expense of a loss of profits; and, finally, charitable, i.e. consisting of charitable activities or the ability to share with others¹². Interestingly, according to the principles of social economics, there is a high likelihood that a company that undertakes socially responsible actions in an informed and coordinated manner will build trust, which over time will contribute to the formation of effective

⁹ L. Zbiegień-Maciąg, *Etyka w zarządzaniu* [Ethics in Management], PWN, Warszawa 1991, pp. 48–49.

¹⁰ J. Nakonieczna, *Spoleczna odpowiedzialność przedsiębiorstw międzynarodowych* [Social Responsibility of International Enterprises], Centrum Doradztwa i Informacji Difin Sp.z o.o, Warszawa 2008, p. 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹² M. Rybak, *Etyka menedżera – społeczna odpowiedzialność przedsiębiorstwa* [Manager's ethics: corporate social responsibility], PWN, Warszawa 2004, pp. 29–31.

relations between the company and its environment and will result in a better financial situation, along with a correspondingly better position in the market¹³. Still, such results as the increase of democracy in the workplace or cooperation with the local community, as well as the formation of the sense of community and improved atmosphere at the company are hard to measure, and economic results continue to prevail over the non-economic ones. The understanding of enterprises' social responsibility can be seen in the categories of the wide array of companies' obligations – thus the responsibility is placed among the concepts from the domain of social activities. Yet, it is more often considered as a means for improving public image, thus becoming part of marketing activities. Ever more frequently it is the human being that serves the organisation, while the organisations serve human beings less and less, which in turn complicates the area of social life. The assessment of the results of entrepreneurial processes is highly narrowed, usually limited to a single target group. It does not take into account the effects of companies' actions on other (wider) levels, e.g. the external ones, which include the environment or the society. Unfortunately, the principles of social responsibility stand usually in opposition to their actual implementation. It is the economic and legal aspects that are of greatest interest to the owners of the surveyed companies, while the ethical dimension remains in the background. Social responsibility in the surveyed companies is addressed only to a limited degree, i.e. more as a tool for public relations, for meeting short term financial indicators, or as a one-time charitable initiative to improve the image, rather than a purposeful, rational, and internally integrated concept¹⁴. One of the examples is the CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility).

Having in mind the links between neoliberalism and education, in my deliberations I have to admit that, beyond any doubt, the neoliberal principles affect mainly the quality of the learning environment – as I have already observed much earlier while investigating workplaces. Neoliberalism, or any other political concepts for that matter, have a very strong impact over specific places and create a sort of framework for the internal social life of a given group of workers. Seeing and being aware of this neoliberal context, one must not forget about the particular dynamics of social life within each organisation, its culture, etc., as these factors contribute immensely to the quality of learning. Perhaps, instead of seeking a workplace democracy that is embedded in top-down political agendas and management systems, it would be more appropriate to search through periodic or even singular situational contexts of workers' everyday participation at work.

¹³ A. Sokołowska, *Cechy społecznej odpowiedzialności małego przedsiębiorstwa w dobie kryzysu* [The Traits of Corporate Social Responsibility of a Small Enterprise in a Time of Crisis], [in:] *Współczesne przedsiębiorstwo...* [Contemporary enterprises...], pp. 51–61.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59

Participatory democracy embedded in the daily social life of a workplace

Possibly, this democratic nature of workplaces or the readiness of people to engage in activities that conform to social goals remains hidden in the so-called “small things” created through participation in the daily professional practice and is observable in workers’ interactions? Maybe it manifests itself in certain defence tactics or the so-called survival strategies, or in grass-roots initiatives undertaken by the employees? A workplace, in spite of being a *sui generis* institution, dominated by the narrative in line with the neoliberal policy, does not determine definitively the life of workers. After all, humans in their working environment are not mere recipients or passive observers who only learn how to adjust to their surroundings. They do not only replicate unquestioningly certain existent patterns; instead they are an important “element” of an environment they proceed to change. The protagonists and creators of any institution are the persons who function within it. If we assume that people continuously create and co-create the world in which they live, also the social world of their professional sphere will be subjected to a ceaseless deconstruction and/or reconstruction amidst daily interactions. Learning of a professional role and a culture of a given organisations is invariably set in a context, but this context is never a petrified structure of a neoliberal system. My research experience shows that even in highly limited conditions for learning democracy in a workplace, certain practices that engage the workers in the life of the organisation are possible. A study at a Danish company serves as an example: in spite of having a strongly hierarchical management style, there was a significantly large space left for the employees to be arranged in accordance with their own vision of a workplace. This means not as much as a tendency to reproduce the context, in which human beings learn, but rather the constant construction of new micro-contexts by the learning subjects¹⁵. Mostly, it is the day-to-day practice or simply the pragmatic reasons that vest significance in humans as subjects. A human being not only cognises but also modifies the existent reality, which is exactly what constitutes the emancipatory potential of an individual. Therefore problematisation can only refer to the premise regarding the capacity of neoliberal culture to reproduce its properties. Having in mind the presumptions of constructivist philosophy, the role of those micro-worlds needs to be considered and appreciated, as the neoliberal culture can be perceived in different manners. Seen as a chance for the realisation of one’s own (private) interests, or on the con-

¹⁵ J. Rutkowiak, *Uczenie się w warunkach kultury neoliberalnej: kontestowanie jako wyzwanie dla teorii kształcenia* [Learning in a Neoliberal Cultural Setting: Dissent as a Challenge for the Theory of Education], [in:] E. Potulicka, J. Rutkowiak, *Neoliberalne uwikłania edukacji* [Neoliberal Entanglements of Education], p. 170.

trary, as an opportunity to deepen and modify one's own experiences, it results in learning dissent while the imperative to participate in such an oppressive environment is simply met with resistance. Therefore, I believe that any kind of change of the *status quo* seems to be more feasible as a form of the self-organisation of people through the stimulation of grass-root transformations, informal initiatives, local communities' activities, or individual civic activities, as only the real experience of persons present in these places can foster learning and social change. To achieve this, engaged learning is not only necessary but indispensable. The goal is not to reject or discard institutions, i.e. the workplaces, as one of the fields where the neoliberal reality can be transformed – and thus to negate the fact that democracy appears within them – but rather to accentuate the individuals who function there and who, in fact, constitute the core of these environments. Of course, my reflections on this matter are still only very recent and require further exploration of the issue in a form of empirical data. Nonetheless, from the perspective of education itself and the means of organising working environments, it is important to carry out research in the field of on-the-job learning. Since every learning activity is set in certain social conditions, it is crucial to study the impact the conditions – along with the social life and culture – in a given workplace have on the process of learning. Institutions and enterprises are always organised according to a certain model that is set from the top down, which defines a kind of context for learning. Hence, while studying workplaces, it is necessary to draw attention to the dialogue, or perhaps “a game” of sorts, between the members of a given learners' community and the framework of functioning imposed by a given organisation. Perhaps, instead of asking whether on-the-job democracy is possible, the question should be how is it possible? This also relates to the context for learning citizenship and commitment, and thus the matter of conditioning the workplace as an educational environment. In other words, it is simply the question of how and to what degree can a given workplace become a space for developing pro-democracy attitudes. Only a fully-fledged research of the learning processes in working environment can offer adequate answers to these questions (or challenges).

Summary

Learning and Democracy in the Workplace

The general aim of the paper is to reflect on the relation between the neoliberal educational environment in workplaces and the possibilities to learn to act in accordance with democratic principles in this environment. Institutions or enterprises are always organised in a concrete, prevailing model, which forms the context of learning. Neoliberalism as the global and dominant ideology is present in many areas of human life. It is most deeply embedded and most strongly legitimised in the workplace, where it “serves” companies' owners rather than the employees. Because of the design of today's workplaces, which frequently benefits the protection or further expansion of the neoliberal doctrine, employees

usually suffer from this ideology. This type of educational environment can hinder the learning of democratic attitudes. On the other hand, the social enterprise becomes the most popular example of a totally different practice compared to that encountered in traditional enterprises. Social enterprise demands acting according to democratic principles, pursuing social objectives rather than neoliberal, economic goals. It could have a positive influence on the environment for the learning of public spirit and encourage engaging in the community of practice inside the organisation. Unfortunately, social responsibility value is seen merely as a form of improving public relations between the society and the organisation in most of the companies that practice Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). At the same time, it is only a part of the market's promotion. Nonetheless, any kind of learning takes place in social conditions. This means that we also should take into account the internal conditions of the working environment and quality of social life in organisation, which have a huge impact on the whole process of learning. The author asks at the end of the paper, how these new conditions in companies, in the context of their extensive dominant 'culture of profit', can support learning of active citizenship that is supposed to begin the changes in culture of organisations in this way.

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