Challenging Transitions in Learning and Work
Challenging Transitions in Learning and Work

Reflections on Policy and Practice

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1. UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGING TRANSITIONS IN LEARNING AND WORK

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this volume is to present both a critical and expansive exploration of learning and work transitions. In part, it is a response to contemporary understandings of the relationships between education, lifelong learning and the knowledge economy. Taken as a whole, this volume is aligned with research that has recognized that learning and work transitions are increasingly complex, extended across the life course, differentiated and in turn differentiating across social groups. In this sense, our response can be seen as being critical of the homogenization of diverse experiences. What is the nature of the transitions for different social groups? Are these transitions the same as or different from those presumed by dominant ‘school-to-work’ notions that continue to inform policy? And, perhaps the most important question of all that we ask: How? How do these challenging transitions emerge and how are they navigated? To answer such questions we suggest the need to expand concepts of transitions.

Our collection begins from a set of premises that are different from those of the dominant policy and research traditions. As we make clear in this introduction, the volume presents an expanded critical vocationalism approach to learning/work transitions. These transitions we feel are challenging for those enmeshed in them and need to be actively challenged through critical research we report. We present a range of detailed discussion and analysis across different dimensions of learning/work relations: transitions from education to work, from work to education, and transitions within educational and training systems, occupational and work life. Throughout, we emphasize the need to develop ways of understanding the context, social differences and power relations that define how learning capacities are productive and reproductive of uneven social and economic prosperity.

Beyond an interest in recognizing context, differences and power, the critical vocationalism perspective taken up in this volume also provides us with a particular orientation to informal dimensions of transitions, learning and experience. While this volume does not fixate strictly on these informal dimensions, they remain a strong, underlying theme in virtually all contributors’ attempts to engage in research into challenging transitions. Indeed, one of the major contributions of a critical vocationalist approach is its interest to recognize learning and experience throughout its full range of variation that in the final instances allows us to better understand the complexity of learning/work transitions throughout the life course.
We claim that beyond rhetorical flourishes the informal dimensions of learning and experience are rarely recognized in a meaningful way within dominant theoretical or policy-based transitions research.

In our view, there are explanations for this omission of meaningful attention to informal learning and experience in transitions research. We argue this is because informalized dimensions of learning and experience do not fit comfortably with approaches (implicitly or explicitly) committed to individualization and the commodification of learning and experience. Given the socially embedded and, not infrequently, collective nature of informal learning processes and outcomes, they remain difficult to credentialized. Moreover, careful attention to the informalized dimensions of learning and experience admit what most mainstream approaches to transitions, education and work simply cannot: the negative as well as the positive outcomes of learning – the good, the bad and the ugly. A critical vocationalism approach, in this sense, demands attention to the experience of barriers and the individual and group scarring that result as every bit as predictable as positive outcomes of participation in schooling, training, the workplace, and the transitions between them. Given that challenging transitions are rarely formally recognized as anything but aberrant problems, we claim that attention to informal learning and experience tends to illuminate such transitions not as aberrations but as latent institutional functions.

The impetus for this volume, its conceptual framing and much of the research emerges from the team of Canadian researchers who together completed case study and survey projects within the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada’s ‘Work and Lifelong Learning’ (WALL) network (2002–2007) (see www.wallnetwork.ca) led by D.W. Livingstone. This network was composed of researchers from seven universities and myriad community groups, unions and associations from across Canada. While all of the research in this volume is Canadian-based, half of the contributions emerge directly from the research, discussion and debate of the WALL network. The 12 case studies of WALL were qualitative in nature and, while not all of these are represented in the volume for those that are the specificities of relevance are noted in individual chapters. In several instances, these case studies also involved small-scale surveying of particular occupational groups and/or workplaces which are, likewise, described in individual chapters. The large WALL Canadian national survey of learning and work practices generated a sample of over 9000 respondents. It is described in Chapter 2 of this volume, and is referenced in several other chapters as well. This survey is the largest of its kind to date and serves as an important counter-balance to the focused, qualitative studies of the volume. With this WALL research as a foundation, the remaining half of the contributions to this volume – Chapters 3–8, 12 and 16 – were selected as dialogic complements that extended and deepened our understanding of challenging learning/work transitions in particular areas.

Finally, we note that while research in this volume is Canadian its significance is not limited to this national context alone. The WALL research network functioned in the context of international debate and reflection. It included a team of international research advisors (from Europe, South America and Australia) whose perspectives constantly informed its findings and interpretation. To further
sharpen comparative assessment, the introductory and concluding chapters speak
directly to how the research relates to other national situations and research.
Moreover, as available comparative transitions research and, not least of all,
the global economic events of 2008–2009 that demonstrated trans-national inter-
dependency have shown, it seems clear to us that insights from individual countries
can and should be used to shed light on others. In fact it may be the case that the
Canadian context encourages comparative insights all the more given its historical
admixture of economic, labour market and labour relations legacies. That is, these
legacies have clear roots in anglo-European, franco-European as well as American
models. And, one final way that this research on transitions may have inherent
comparative value lies in the fact that Canada (like, for example, Norway) has
achieved particularly high rates of educational attainment. In this sense, given the
fixation in so many countries (including in Canada) on educational attainment as a
solution to problems of contemporary learning/work transition, this situation
suggests Canadian research may serve as a one among a small group of other
particularly relevant contexts from which to begin critical re-evaluation. Indeed,
the truth of the relationship between educational attainment and learning/ work
transitions is a contradictory one, as we hope to show, but our point is that
consideration of the Canadian context may encourage further critical appreciation
of research and policy issues actively being considered in one’s own country. Of
course, none of this can erase the differences between national contexts. And, this
is why we discuss such differences in our introductory and concluding chapters. As
such and with such supports in place, our sense is that readers – aware of the
specificities of their own and possibly other national contexts – will be able to see
the forest of comparable dynamics amidst the trees of national differences.

ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF LEARNING/WORK TRANSITIONS

Before proceeding further with our introduction we want to take a moment,
however, to briefly present our understanding of the economic context within which
different perspectives on learning/work transitions are figured. Significant economic
instability around the globe at press time makes any simple contextualization
problematic. Uncertainty within virtually all major, international comparative
reports on economic and labour market conditions provides us with little choice but
to take a medium-term outlook of both the past and future.

In these terms, an important point to begin with derives from observations
published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
(OECD). This literature acknowledges that over the last two decades advanced
capitalist countries have seen sustained growth in labour market participation along
with a growth in the number of jobs workers tend to have in their working lives
(OECD 2008). While beginning in 2008 this trend made a reversal – short of major
social and economic restructuring – in all likelihood it will return. Over a slightly
longer period we also see that not only formal educational attainment but
participation in a range of non-compulsory learning/training have likewise grown
(OECD 1998, 2001). Particularly significant for us, however, is that the OECD
(2008) has confirmed that a wide variety of forms of labour market discrimination remain a serious issue in virtually all member countries (including G10 countries), and that treatment based on a range of social differences (including gender, age, disability and race/ethnicity) have continued to play a crucial role in the growing disparities in employment participation as well as in disparities in the quality of employment. Reporting on data just prior to accelerated global turmoil, this same 2008 OECD report goes on to provide indications that traditional labour market transitions were already increasingly fragile and exclusionary. Related to this, it was also reported that the number of so-called ‘stepping stones’ required by youth to solidify a place in the labour market appeared to be multiplying. In fact, for both youth and adults the number of jobs in a working life has continued to rise over the medium-term, and to make matters more complicated still the OECD (2008) also identified that (undeclared) informal employment was likewise expanding.

Informing our concern for challenging transitions, our summary interpretation of these matters suggests a trend of both polarization. In the language of labour market segmentation theorists, primary labour markets (i.e. good jobs) are likely shrinking in relation to overall labour force participation. Workers in primary labour markets retain a capacity to positively cope with and experience forms of (relative) control in the course of their transitions, either laterally or vertically, and in the medium-term past and future have and will see either stable or growing remuneration. Within the growing secondary labour market, however, structural factors appear to have created distinctive forms of complex learning/work transitions, and in so doing bring questions of social difference and non-linearity into even sharper relief.

In relation to this interpretation of global economic context, equally important is how organizations such as the OECD and many member states understand available solutions. While, recognizing a role for state regulation rhetorically, the dominant tendency still appears to presume growth of labour market opportunities in general to be the key technical fix. From a public policy perspective, this continues to translate into an allegiance to viewing educational and vocational training attainment as the only viable mode of public intervention. Obviously, such tendencies set a specific course in policy, practice and understandings of learning/work transitions which continue to marginalize differentiated and differentiating experiences.

In this sense, the economic context and way it is understood by mainstream policy and research perspectives retains, to our minds, a conviction that suitable education, training and informal learning environments associated with work, if further developed, have the capacity to generate relatively transparent, equitable and linear learning/work transitions. Such perspectives comfortably admit that in a knowledge economy these transitions may be more learning-intensive and multi-institutional. But, as we will see below, such perspectives retain a privileged place, implicitly or explicitly, for particular conceptual touch-stones: namely, post-industrialist, human capital and rational choice theories. And, resting on a generalized growth solution, in these formulations education is regarded, unproblematically, as the primary response to satisfying social and economic need vis-à-vis individualized cost-benefit decisions. It is within such approaches that – despite the economic
context we summarize here – learning/work transitions will more than likely continue to be subject to a homogenizing and normalizing, rather than critical and differentiated consideration.

ASSAYING THE LITERATURE AND ESTABLISHING OUR FRAMEWORK

As Staff and Mortimer (2003) comment: ‘A diverse set of life changes mark the transition from adolescence to adulthood, including school completion, entry into the full-time labor force, and economic self-sufficiency’ (p. 361). As a host of researchers have likewise confirmed, transitions to work have become more extended and complex (e.g., Marsden, 1999; Sackmann and Wingen, 2003; Hannan, Raffe and Smyth, 1997; Van Berkel and Hornemann Moller, 2002; López Blasco, McNeish and Walther, 2003; Walther and Pohl, 2005; McVicar and Anyadike-Danes, 2002; Breen, 2005; Anisef, Axelrod, Baichman-Anisef, James and Turrittin, 2000; Evans, 2002; Grubb, 1996). Indeed, amidst this complexity some have gone so far as to suggest the term ‘transitions’ to have lost its analytic value (e.g., Brooks 2007). However, it seems that many others, like us, have simply begun to recognize the need to expand how we think about transitions in order to examine the concept of learning and work transitions more carefully for their multiple, differentiated and non-linear dimensions. In this section we wish to register some related disciplinary traditions as well as the most pronounced bodies of learning/work transitions research that form, either implicit or explicit, companions to the material in this volume.

In this context it is important from the start for us to note that this collection is rooted in but not confined to educational studies, broadly conceived. It offers, as we have said, a (critical) vocationalist perspective. But vocationalist perspectives are hardly alone in their consideration of transitions. This volume contrasts and dialogically engages with a series of other traditions with vitally important points to make of their own. Minimally, these include sociology attending to life transitions and biography, trans-disciplinary studies of the life course, the life history tradition, institutionalist and neo-institutionalist sociology, political science, economics, and so on. Among these many choices of perspective, for us two traditions stand out however. And, although the linkage to them are more implicit than explicit, it is relevant to begin by briefly registering each in order to better situate our own vocationalist approach.

First, life course research (e.g., Mortimer and Shanahan 2003; Sackmann and Wingen 2003) including the many contemporary, multi-disciplinary applications of the ‘life course approach’ have expanded at an accelerated pace over the last two decades. This includes those drawing on the tradition to inform health and epidemiology, gerontology, studies in marriage, family, drug addiction, obesity, sports, crime, housing and urban studies, immigration, consumer behaviour and social policy to name only a cross-section of applications. Our approach is distinct from this tradition, but to our minds linkages to it retain important potential given our interest in expanding understandings of learning/work transitions that inevitably must incorporate such wide-ranging issues as well. That is, while some of these topics are registered in contributions to this volume many others are beyond its
present scope, and thus we see a future for critical perspectives on learning/work transitions as necessarily including these other, sometimes life-defining, matters. Minimally, it is unlikely that health, family-life, participation in the criminal justice system and housing – as assessed in the life course research tradition – can remain separate from full appreciations for the factors that shape the many forms and periods of learning/work transition.

Likewise, given our concern for broadening learning/work transitions research, neo-institutional analysis offers an additional, broad tradition with clear connections to our goals in this volume despite it being beyond our present scope. Having origins in several disciplinary homes (e.g., economics, sociology, political science and more recently organizational studies), neo-institutional approaches over the past two decades have established relevant means of assessing how institutional practices are conditioned by relationships with other, mediating institutions. For example, as we see in this volume, labour market participation is understood in relation to education, apprenticeship programs, the labour processes, the states, and so on. The complex circuits suggested by neo-institutional approaches provide examples of what we refer to in this volume as inter-institutional dynamics. Neo-institutional perspectives also have, as of late, developed an interest beyond simply the reproduction of organizational structures, rules, norms, and so on. They have, for example, provided accounts of inter-institutional isomorphosis to generate relevant theories of embedded agency, often connected to the analysis of social position and fields of action. Questions of inter-institutional competition (for legitimacy as well as resources; e.g., DiMaggio and Powell, 1991), the de-coupling of institutional functions to provide flexibility in response to increasingly tight inter-institutional networks (e.g., Scott, 2001) have a family resemblance to the matters which our volume explores.

Both the life course and the neo-institutionalist traditions remain implicit resources for further development of our perspective here. They remain implicit rather than explicit, but retain the potential for fruitful, future research and dialogue. In turning toward learning/work transitions research itself however, there are several important sets of companion works and bodies of work that we wish to brief register as well.

First, we see that the bulk of research confirms a substantial understanding of youth oriented, school-to-work transitions. These include the especially informative work by Shavit and Müller (1998), Stern and Wagner (1999), and contributions to Heinz (1999; see also Heinz, 2002). In Canada specifically, recent scholarship can be found in book form in Gaskell and Rubenson (2004), Scheutze and Sweet (2003) and Krahm (1996). Some of the material above utilizes a life course perspective, but the bulk offers a critical reflection on contemporary relations of transitions including both detailed qualitative analysis as well as structural and policy effects regarding, in particular, educational experiences and occupational outcomes. For example, matters discussed include standardized and occupationally specific curriculum and stratification (e.g., Shavit and Müller, 1998), the restructuring of vocational education and apprenticeships for better transitions (e.g., Stern and Wagner, 1999), biographical orientations to schooling and work (e.g., Heinz, 1999, 2002), and the shifting effects of human capital on school-to-work transitions and its relationship to occupational segregation (e.g., Gaskell and Rubenson, 2004). Though our volume is interested in more than simply
youth transitions and we are arguably more intensive in our tracing of the effects of social differences and power relations, taken together these sources form a relevant backdrop and recommended companions to the types of questions we raise.

Distinct from these examples of key pieces of research are the largely separate Canadian and European survey analyses of transitions currently available. In this research, again we see the focus tends to be on youth primarily, and that there is less interest in understanding the interlocking mechanisms of difference and power. Nevertheless, we can begin by noting that Canada’s best survey data base for understanding youth transitions has been recently compiled. The Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) was developed as a longitudinal means of collecting data beginning with two age groups producing its first cycle in 1999. The first group was aged 15 and the second 18–20 years. In total, almost 52,000 youth from across Canada participated in the first cycle of the survey. The first follow-up survey took place in 2002 and included over 40,000 youth, and the second follow-up survey interviews took place in 2004 including over 37,000 youth respondents. This has produced a range of cohort and sequence analyses to date (e.g., Clark, 2000; Bowlby and McMullen, 2002; Zeman, Knighton and Bussière, 2004; Livingstone, 2004; Shaieiks, Eis1-Culkin and Bussière, 2006; Shaieiks and Gluszynski, 2007; Hango and de Broucker, 2007, Krahn and Taylor, 2005). We consider this another important companion to understanding the dynamics of transitions we explore in this volume. Despite its focus on youth, it broadens appreciation for the sticking points at definitive periods of the transition process, and allows the testing of observations emerging from the qualitative studies here and elsewhere. With the existence of similar longitudinal data sets, such as the European Community Household Panel (1994–2001; e.g., Peracchi, 2002; Brzinsky-Fay, 2007), this research, in turn, allows additional capacity to compare Canadian data with those gathered in European countries to add further substance to models of, for example, generalized vocational tracks versus highly structured ones, universalized benefits and supports policies versus highly targeted ones, and so on. Again, like the resources we have already registered, these studies provide a valuable backdrop for understanding the findings reported in this volume.

Having taken a moment to recognize some companion traditions outside of learning/work transitions research, and two separate clusters of research within it, we now turn our attention to properly situating our vocationalist perspective in specific terms in the remainder of this section. Indeed, to begin to analytically grasp the wide variation in transitions research, we draw on a basic continuum for comparing and contrasting approaches either implicit or explicit across available quantitative, qualitative and policy-based research including those already cited. We suggest that this literature can be understood in light of the continuum running between new vocationalism and critical vocationalism approaches. We use the term ‘continuum’ here to resist dichotomizing the differences. While maintaining that distinctions do exist, in fact, most of the work we have just registered only rarely falls easily onto one end of the continuum or another.

In its most extreme form new vocationalism, as we use the term in this collection, is defined by the argument that narrowly prescribed occupationally-specific knowledge and skill sets are becoming less important within contemporary,
fast-paced, global market economy. Replacing them are abilities related to independence, evaluation, conflict resolution and team-work (see discussion by Lehmann, 2000). An important distinction here is that this argument is centred on adaptation of workers to the needs of the economy. For this, a touch-stone of new vocationalism is the notion of ‘human capital’ (cf. Gaskell and Rubenson, 2004). However, the human capital thesis, and the utility-maximization research of Nobel laureate Gary Becker (1964) specifically, did not simply appear from thin air. Rather, it along with the new vocationalism approach developed an educational and training as well as life, occupational and career development perspective standing on the shoulders of a broader thesis on society and economy; one with European but in particular American roots in the post-World War Two era. The ‘industrialism/post-industrialism thesis’ summarized early in the work of Kerr, Dunlop, Harbinson and Myers (1960; see Sawchuk, 2006 for further explanation) has for almost a half a century articulated and developed extensive research reflected by key, contemporary presumptions of new vocationalism. That is, education and training are the prime means through which individuals develop capacities for an increasingly information/knowledge-centred economy (e.g., Touraine, 1971; Bell, 1973; Zuboff, 1988; Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire and Tam, 1999). These complementary approaches argue that changing skill requirements in the workplace have been caused by new technologies as well as flatter, looser and more ‘flexible’ organizational structures which emphasize individuality and problem-solving. In later iterations, such approaches promoted the idea that all workers need to be symbolic analysts or knowledge workers (e.g., Reich, 1991; Grubb, 1996). Indeed, the coherence between post-industrialism thinking and new vocationalism is, to our minds, both remarkable and remarkably persistent.

Powerful supports for the new vocationalism perspective are to be found amongst virtually all OECD policy literature and economic outlook material (OECD 1996, 1998; 2001, 2004, 2008). The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, likewise, now orient to, amongst other matters, the issue of lifelong learning, work and human capital generation as well. Such policy views have taken a lifelong learning perspective on transitions including both youth and adult/continuing forms. As primarily an individualadaptive perspective however it has inherent difficulties admitting structural contradictions rooted in both institutions of education and economy. Necessarily such perspectives presume that better and more responsive education, continuing education, vocational and workplace training – for youth, employed and unemployed adults, from ‘cradle to the grave’ (OECD 1996) – can adequately address the types of problems we identified earlier in our summary of economic, labour market and transitions context. Of course, the new vocationalism perspective has begun to register informal learning in the life course. To date, however, this appears both selective and persistently difficult to apply concretely vis-à-vis anything but rhetorical flourishes. What may be particularly relevant to note, however, is that in its individual/adaptive orientation what is – indeed what must be – presumed first and foremost is that neither young nor established workers currently possess the necessary capacities to effectively live and work in the present and future economy.
They are in (perhaps a permanent state of) deficit. This is a presumption that we challenge both in this volume and elsewhere (e.g., Taylor, 2005; Lehmann and Taylor 2003; Livingstone and Sawchuk, 2004).

We are not alone in this view (e.g., Kincheloe, 1999; Griffin, 1999; Hunt, 1999; Evans, 2002; Evans, Hodkinson and Unwin, 2002; Coffield, 2007), but the international summary provided by Bynner (2001) brings additional focus in this regard. He offers a critique of the ‘economism’ inherent in mainstream views of transitions specifically. Our volume shares this view as well. National and international policy continues to construct transitions in a specific way: “the starting point being the immature unemployable child and the end point the independent employable adult” (Bynner, 2001, p. 5), yet it is an end point perpetually receding. Bynner’s solution is to instead think in terms of the “interconnectedness of activity across the different domains of life” (p. 7). For him, there is a distinct lack of attention to broader political climate, culture and the effects of other spheres of institutional and non-institutionalized life as dimensions of the transitions process.

Offering an alternative, political/analytic approach Critical vocationalism challenges most if not all of the presumptions of post-industrialism, human capital, rational choice theory, new vocationalism and their associated policy expressions. However, just as new vocationalism has important intellectual roots in industrialism/post-industrialism thinking, so too does critical vocationalism have roots in critical analyses of gender (see review in Griffin, 1985; Sharpe, 1994), race (see review in Galabuzi, 2006), disability (e.g., Oliver, 1996) and social class (e.g., Braverman, 1974). As we have shown elsewhere (e.g., Lehmann and Taylor, 2003), the reality behind the rhetoric of new vocationalism is that it has tended to ignore or at least minimize how education systems – hand-in-glove with labour markets and work systems – are shaped by the tensions and contradictions inherent within processes of control, conflict, accommodation and occasionally resistance. There remains, in Livingstone’s (2004) terms, a significant ‘education-jobs gap’ that continues to be either ignored, under-recognized or mis-interpreted in the new vocationalism tradition (see also Roberts, 2003; Osterman, 1996). Likewise, social divisions are perpetuated and in fact intensified under these conditions vis-à-vis the relationship between biographical agency, social structures and social histories (see contributions to Heinz, 1999 and particularly Heinz, 2002). And in summary, our observations result in the following, initial points of emphasis we wish to note regarding our critical vocationalism perspective on learning/work transitions:

a) vocational education and training, including attention to informal on-the-job learning has intensified as people are staying in school longer and availing themselves more frequently of adult, continuing education as well as training opportunities;

b) vocational training is increasingly important for securing employment in competitive, increasingly internationalized labour markets;

c) skills and knowledge developed in vocational preparation are not effectively utilized in the labour process;
d) labour processes are just as likely to reduce the use of judgment, autonomy and discretion by narrowing the terms of performance as they are to require independence, flexibility and creative problem-solving;

e) experiences and ‘biographical agency’ are socially differentiated across relations of dis/ability, gender, race and class lines.

In keeping with our recognition that simple dichotomies do little justice to understanding the distinctions between new vocationalism and critical vocationalism perspectives, it is important to not conclude our comments here without registering overlaps. Clearly, we see that ‘human capital’ approaches over the last decade in particular have expanded to include notions of ‘social capital’; a revelation that has expanded the application of the basic capital accumulation metaphor to collective practices, interrelations and social structures which suggests a movement toward a more critical analysis in some cases. Considerations of social capital, while popular, have seemed to remain secondary to transitions-related policy to date however. Likewise, if we associate a narrow labour market orientation with new vocationalism, we might just as well observe that a great deal of transitions studies oriented by critical vocationalism have not consistently dealt with an expansive inter-institutional perspective that takes into account what actually happens at work. Many critical approaches remain fixated on the distribution of education and training generally, often continuing to ignore a variety of specific social groups, and focusing simply job attainment rather than the quality of these experiences.

With these types of caveats in mind, to our minds it remains relevant to position this volume on the critical vocational end of the continuum we have just outlined. And, having outlined our approach in broad strokes, we can now specify with additional details that will be useful in understanding the collection as a whole.

EXISTING LITERATURE AND EXPANDING THINKING ABOUT LEARNING WORK TRANSITIONS

In seeking to expand understandings of transitions from a critical vocationalism perspective, it is important to first ask ourselves what types of variables and mechanisms have been associated with challenging transitions to date in the research. As we mentioned earlier, understood as ‘learning and work transitions’ specifically, the most detailed research has tended to focus on youth and early adulthood. As such, this is where we begin. At the same time, it may be the case that studies of youth and early adulthood offer some points of general guidance for understanding transitions more broadly.

Beginning with recent Canadian research on youth transitions, we see that there are a variety of social variables that shape the patterns of transition and marginalization in and out-of high school and post-secondary education, and then into and out-of the labour market. Several key social variables are strongly correlated with specific transitional pathways. The detailed Canadian survey research of Hango and de Broucker (2007) for example substantiate this well. These variables include gender where being female strongly correlates with transition interruptions as well as incidences of returning to school. Aboriginal ancestry has
shown a strong negative correlation with engaging in continuous education transitions toward labour market participation. People living in urban centers in Canada are much more likely to return to school. And finally, experiencing a disability has shown amongst the strongest negative correlations with both continuous education and disrupted transitions to and within the labour market. Not well covered in the Hango and de Brouker analysis (2007), however, we note some specific figures on transitions for immigrants within Canada. According to Gilmore (2008), we see that for immigrant youth, unemployment was highest among those of African and Eastern European origin, followed by those youth born in Latin American, West Central Asian or the Middle Eastern countries. Youth unemployment for Canadian youth was lowest for those from Southern Asian countries, and virtually all immigrant youth groups show higher levels of unemployment and poorer quality employment than Canadian-born youth.

Looking beyond Canada, analysis of international data, for example, in Breen’s assessment of 27 OECD countries (2005), highlights a variety of similar dynamics, and provides some additional explanation. It argues that two key factors explain differential learning and work transitions from youth and into early adulthood: i) the ability of the educational system to effectively signal the suitability of a job seeker for a specific form of employment; and ii) the degree of employment regulation and specifically the degree to which employers are prevented from dismissing workers more or less easily early in their job tenure. Breen goes on to indicate that despite the call for greater flexible and generalized skill sets, in detailed analysis it is specific skill and knowledge sets taught at schools on a consistent basis that appear to result in stronger youth employment. Close partnerships between industry and educational systems are said to be central. In these terms, Germany, Austria and the Netherlands appear to offer the most effective models of such linkages (though there is variation in how this achieved). Despite Sweden’s apparent deviation from specific vocational skill and knowledge set teaching, it still seems to generate relatively high youth employment levels however. It would seem to do this on the basis of strong employment regulation which underlines all the more the importance of paying attention not simply to education but the workplace as suggested earlier in our discussion of critical vocationalism. Countries such as Canada (as well as the UK, the US, Australia) appear to offer neither strong linkages with industry through their general education or vocational education and training streams, nor strong employer regulation and thus suffer from higher levels of youth unemployment, often despite very high levels of educational attainment overall.

Taking a different approach altogether, Brzinsky-Fay’s (2007) innovative international comparison of transitions within 10 European countries (using sequence analysis software developed for researching human genetics), highlights quantitatively the importance of many of the points we have associated with a critical vocationalism perspective. Like the Canadian-based research we began with, Brzinsky-Fay makes some important in-roads into understanding questions of universality of experiences to develop characterizations of national ‘volatility’ and ‘integration’ vis-à-vis learning and work transitions. Such an approach offers a chance to further challenge the myth of linearity linked to public policy goals.
Contributions to our volume may shed further light on the question of how it is that countries like Germany have generated significantly stronger culture of ‘bridging’ and ‘return’ sequences in learning/work transitions when compared, for example, with the UK? Or, thinking beyond the traditional ‘General Qualifications’ versus ‘Vocational Specific Qualifications’ frameworks, our volume informs the question of how it is that the countries such as the UK have generated much more successful ‘express’ transition sequences. Brzinsky-Fay (2007) identifies all of these features of transitional event sequences, and others as well, but how these are produced is less clear. In combination, international comparative analyses such as Breen (2005), Brzinsky-Fay (2007), and others (e.g., Pohl and Walther, 2007) likewise pose important research questions that the type of research presented in this volume can address, particularly so in relation to concerns for non-linearity and its relationship with social differences and power.

In sum, existing research – nationally specific research in Canada as well as international comparative literature – highlights the effects of a range of social differences on learning/work transitions. It also broadens a sense of the types of variables associated with challenging transitions. It demonstrates the need to further understand how non-linear transitions come about, and, in so doing, the complexity of transitions and the need to attend to broader institutional arrangements within and across education and training, the labour market and workplace. The contribution of this volume to these types of findings is by way of posing the questions of how educational signaling and labour market regulation function differently for different social groups, how such things function differently at different points in multiple transitions within and between institutional spheres. These questions are best answered, we suggest, through a combination of careful extension of the issues raised through quantitative research and detailed qualitative, exploratory study of the frequently under-studied groups and contexts. Drawing on these exemplar studies simply as cases in point, we see that nationally specific demographic information is essential for understanding transitions, both the more traditionally focused inter-institutional (e.g., school-to-work/work-to-school) but also the intra-institutional transitions (within education and workplaces), for youth as well as adults.

For a proper understanding of the critical vocationalist perspective that orients this book, however, a few more words on this idea of agency and choice may be necessary. Building on some of the themes referenced immediately above we can say that the quantitative research on learning and work transitions limits access to how it is that people make active, even if limited, choices in constructing their own pathways. Sometimes these choices are made in a rational manner in the course of life planning. Indeed, sometimes these choices (amongst both youth and adults) are made out of an orientation of resistance – whether this is a resistance to forms of schooling, parents, peers, communities among youth, or forms of adult resistance opposing employers, work organizations for example. Whatever the case, it is crucial to know what people choose but also the patterns of choices are rooted in biography, identity, situation and emergent life course. The rationality of such choices is wholly dependent on not simply objective conditions but biographical horizons, and indeed the complex, shifting and subjective interpretations of both. Answering these types of questions demands a thick description of context, relations and dynamics.
Our volume provides such analysis, but on this matter we can also register some invaluable Canadian research on youth to make a broader, general point. Lehmann (2005) shows how working-class youth of differing gender and ethno-racial backgrounds become actively involved in their own streaming into particular work and learning pathways. This is not a new observation in itself, however he goes on to identify ‘critical junctures’ or points of choice-making that can both transform and reproduce patterns of marginalization in the transition processes. Varying in their moment of appearance in individual lives, the emergence of a concrete orientation to, for example, ‘job rewards’ appears crucial and more elusive to predict than at first glance. Likewise, moments when clear articulation of autonomy brought on by work – almost universally expressed in the way that youth contrast notions of ‘real work’ with either part-time work or their studies – are equally crucial, highly variable and related primarily to parental as well as peer group orientations. Our point in this regard is this. The meaning and social relations of transitions to employment as well as transitions within employment are always actively constructed. Youth and adults actively generate the horizons of choice unique to the circumstances which are often shared by their social groups. Processes such as these, once initiated, can have a robust, enduring effect on learning efforts, occupational or career advancement choices and transitions.

A variety of international studies confirm this type of appreciation of the learning/work transition process as well. In Australia, for example, Stokes and Wyn (2007) argue subjective achievements of agency as “investments in identity [that] foreshadow the emergence of new meanings of careers” (p. 495). Heinz (1999) likewise suggests an emphasis on structured agency as a particularly powerful means to understand transitions to labour markets. In the UK similar arguments in the work of Shildrick and MacDonald (2007), and Furlong, Cartmel, Biggart, Sweeting and West (2003) show how ‘at-risk’ and ‘hard-to-reach’ youth from impoverished neighbourhoods follow their life transitions from teens and into adulthood in similar ways. They identified enormous variability and ‘unpredictability’ in their lives following school (whether exit comes from graduation or dropping-out) that were peppered with periods of unemployment. These transitions feature longer periods of unemployment, longer duration of dependency on parents than generations past. Recognition of forms of human agency are central to these Canadian, Australian and UK examples, following the original example set by Paul Willis (1977), where we perhaps first came face-to-face with how youth play an active, decision-making role in selecting transitions that are most available and most commonly portrayed to them: portrayed to them in ways shaped by identity, the social production of roles, possibilities and limits.

COMPONENTS OF A CRITICAL VOCATIONALISM APPROACH TO TRANSITIONS

At this point we have offered some initial definition and background for a critical vocationalism approach which was then followed by a selective review of literature which raised additional traditions, findings and questions which could be taken up from this perspective. As we have outlined it, a critical vocationalism perspective
demands we both look beyond and question the default social spheres and social variables that have largely, though not exclusively, defined the literature on learning/work and transitions to date. In other words, in an era of lifelong learning, ‘school-to-work’ transition needs to be understood as but one inter-institutional dimension of the broader phenomenon of the learning/work transition complex. Equally important are the learning/work transitions of various specific social groups within the aggregate. Consider for a moment, both the complexity and specificity inherent to the manner in which immigrants to virtually every advanced capitalist countries are forced to engage in uneven, byzantine (if not Kafkaesque) circuits of learning/work transitions that are non-linear, fraught with barriers and regularly mediated by non-school-based occupational regulatory bodies. Alternatively, we could just as easily look at the role of voluntary (unpaid) work, the growth of paid work for students, the growth of continuing education amongst working adults, and the various medications each of these patterns entail for contemporary learning/work transition circuits. None of this is to presume that linearity is undetectable, at least within the sub-set of successful transitions of particular social groups and individuals within what we earlier referenced as primary labour markets (cf. Furlong, Cartmel, Biggart, Sweeting and West, 2003). It does mean that challenging these normalized, homogenized forms of inter-institutional transitions requires attention to biography, social characteristics as well as the ongoing constructions of social differences within the transition process.

Importantly, our approach seeks to understand how intra-institutional transitions also shape the barriers and successes of inter-institutional learning/work transitions. For example, opportunities for mobility across programs within secondary and post-secondary institutions clearly inform the possibilities and patterns of inter-institutional transitions. Moreover, intra-institutional transitions might also include transitions between schools and related training systems such as union-based apprenticeship, employer-based apprenticeships, or transitions mediated by national vocational qualification systems as in Britain, or as in Canada, systems of ‘employability skills’ offered by the Conference Board and later Human Resource and Social Development Canada. And likewise, intra-institutional transitions include movements in and across workplaces. Examples here would include cases where employees undertake employer-based training moving to new positions (i.e., transitions within internal or sectoral labour markets), or in some cases where whole groups of workers must make a transition from one labour process to another signifying a learning/work transition which transforms an entire office, shopfloor, and sometimes even an entire occupational group or sector. A critical vocationalism approach encourages such concerns, and specifically these types of considerations have the capacity to expand our appreciation beyond the ‘supply side’ of the labour market to illuminate how the capacity of educational or training institutions, as well as employers, workplaces and industry effectively shape learning/work transitions as a whole. Thus, to more clearly put our point, a critical vocationalism perspective requires attention to how transitions are affected deeply by biography, social differences, as well as institutional arrangements and forms of constrained agency or choice. And moreover, efforts to challenge and expand notions of learning/work transitions must recognize that the experience of transition is hardly universal.
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Beyond the recognition of inter- and intra-institutional transitions and social differences, we feel it is equally important to also think expansively about the notions of ‘learning’ and ‘work’ themselves (e.g., Sawchuk, 2003; Livingstone, 2004; Taylor, 2005). Whereas in the past, conceptions of learning/work transitions were almost strictly rooted in conceptions of ‘formal schooling’ on the one hand and ‘full-time paid work’ on the other, it is now recognized that learning is more than ‘schooling’ and the complexities of employment cannot be expressed in a stagnant notion of ‘full-time paid work.’ Thus, we now know that formal schooling shapes and is shaped by non-formal learning (i.e., organized learning that takes place beyond the formal, state-regulated credential system) as well as by informal learning (non-organized learning that can take place through self-directed projects or can be done in groups). Furthermore, both scholars and organizations such as the OECD are increasingly registering the fact that paid work is increasingly non-standard (i.e., part-time, seasonal, precarious) and that unpaid work such as volunteering in the community or un-declared employment affects labour market participation, and that paid employment itself contains variation, includes (lateral and vertical) occupational transitions and that entire work processes frequently undergo change.

Thus to summarize the analytic points of departure of our critical vocationalism perspective we can say that it opens up the notion of learning/work transitions on several levels. First, on the specific themes of expanding previously conceptualized notions of transitions in contemporary society, across our collection we critically evaluate:

1. traditional scholarly research on inter-institutional school to work transition policy and practice
2. other inter-institutional transitions including but not limited to apprenticeship programs
3. intra-institutional learning transitions involving linkages between formal education, non-formal education as well as informal learning experiences
4. intra-institutional work-based transitions with attention to informal learning in relation to different types of work, work changes, sectors and occupations.

Second, across each of these expanded notions of ‘transitions’ we explore social themes oriented by our wish to critically evaluate and challenge:

1. the linearity of transitions in which either youth or adults undertake one-way progress from learning towards the world of paid work
2. the universality of transitions by highlighting how social differences including those rooted in gender, race/ethnicity, national origin, social class, disability and age.

As we indicated, we are critical of the presumption that learning/work transitions can be understood as individual, labour market ‘supply-side’ inadequacies. Thus, on top of these points of analysis and themes our collective argument is that problems of learning/work transitions are rooted in institutional contradictions of capitalist labour markets and labour processes themselves, as well as the economic and social implications of racial, gendered, ageist and ablest structures that are likewise central to generating disparate and inequitable experiences.
Each of the contributions to this volume explores aspects of the positions we have introduced above. In unique ways and via distinct empirical foci, the chapters set the stage for a better understanding of the questions inherent in the above comments; answers to which are the subject the concluding chapter of the volume. Our introductions to the two sections of the volume provides further detail, but as an initial orientation to what will come we offer a brief introduction to each chapter below.

Along with this introductory chapter, Chapter 2: Age, Occupational Class and Lifelong Learning: Findings of a 2004 Canadian Survey of Formal and Informal Learning through the Life Course completes our conceptual and empirical starting point for the volume. In it D.W. Livingstone reports analysis based on the 2004 WALL survey mentioned above. Beginning from the recognition of life course transitional elements broadly, the author suggests both proliferating sub-components and non-linearity are factors in contemporary life course. The analysis focuses on intentional (formalized and informalized) learning activities across this life course amongst cohorts from 18 to over 80 while also recognizing social class divisions. Findings reported in this chapter speak to matters of underemployment/over-education developed in earlier work by the author, and further assessed here. The dynamics between formal and informal learning alter over the life course, though this would appear to be rooted in changing formal rather than informal learning practice. In particular there is a call for greater attention to the extensive learning of both older and working-class people.

Following this, we begin the first of two major sections of the book. The goal of Section 1 Learning/Work Transitions – Education and Training, is to look at critical studies of formal education and training programs designed to help participants transition into work. As with the collection as a whole, in this section there is a focus on the experiences of participants who are ‘non-traditional’ entrants to particular learning and work sites (e.g., women in trades, students with disabilities, black and working-class youth).

Wolfgang Lehmann and Eric Tenkorang’s Chapter 3: Leaving University without Graduating: Evidence from Canada’s Youth in Transitions Survey starts off this section noting that high levels of post-secondary education are seen increasingly as essential for occupational and life course success, as well as the importance of investigating the educational outcomes of groups that have been traditionally excluded from higher education. In this context, socio-economic status (SES) and access to university has tended to retain a positive relationship. However, little is known about how SES affects individuals’ university experiences and chances to persist and graduate. These authors carry out an analysis of Canada’s Youth in Transition Survey mentioned earlier in this chapter where we see that SES has no significant effects on university attrition when basic logistic regression models are used. The authors then offer an alternative statistical technique to find important effects on university attrition.

Alison Taylor and Evelyn Steinhauer’s Chapter 4: Evolving Constraints and Life ‘Choices’: Understanding Pathways of Students in First Nations Communities begins from the observation that the career pathways of First Nations
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youth do not conform to the linear model that is dominant in policy literature. Through interviews with high school students involved in a provincial career program and other community organizations, they examine the institutional and personal factors that influence the career pathways of First Nations youth in Alberta Canada. The authors’ findings suggest that schools on Reservations were constrained by a lack of resources, high student needs, and limited opportunities for career education. Taylor and Steinhauer conclude that these institutional realities must be recognized, and the understandings of young people validated if policymakers and communities are to better support Aboriginal youth in their transitions.

In Chapter 5: Educating for Followership – The Hidden Curriculum in Community Colleges Anthony Tambureno sheds light on the role of the community college system as a reproductive force in determining employment outcomes. That is, intra-institutionally, within the college system itself, there are important determinants of transition potentials, and indeed the class structure of the broader economy. Tambureno’s focus is on the hidden curriculum of the colleges that selectively prepare working-class students for working-class jobs drawing on extensive ethnographic and interview data from Ontario as well as secondary analysis of data from other provinces in Canada and the US.

Michalko and Titchkosky’s Chapter 6: There and Not There: Presents and Absence of Disability in Transitions from Education to Work offers a view, rarely seen in the research literature on learning/work transitions, into the way that disability shapes and is actively produced. Indeed, as they outline, unemployment, under-employment, and labor force non-participation are enormous amongst “persons with disabilities”. We see that the role of education in reproducing these dynamics is a powerful one where expectations are ratified through failed accommodation. Employing what is known as the social model of disability, the authors find that undergirding this process are the ideological assumptions of educational environments that help to constitute disability as an unexpected or as a disappearing feature of the transition from learning to work.

In our first contribution to our understanding of the apprenticeship process, in Chapter 7: Skilled Trade Training for Women: In Vogue One More Time Bonnie Watt-Malcolm analyzes the renewed discussion of women in the trades amongst multiple stake-holders including government, capital, sector councils, unions, contractors, education and training agencies, as well as employees. She offers a critical evaluation of the assumptions underlying attempts to implement training initiatives to recruit and retain women into a sector that has customarily resisted their presence. The analysis reveals that training that takes place off the jobsite may not, in fact, be the most effective means to help women learn how to work in trades work within various industrial sectors.

Karen Carter then offers a fascinating exploratory discussion in Chapter 8: Re-Thinking Learning-Work Transitions in the Context of Community Training and Racialized Youth. Her argument is that traditional training and school-to-work transitions are disproportionately ineffective for racialized youth. Based on participatory observation and interview methods, her research is focuses on the role of the arts and culture industries and the value of community programs. Such programs are seeking to bridge a particularly disenfranchised
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social group to labour markets with a focus on community-based initiatives dealing with cultural industries such as music, film and new media in the Toronto area.

Pollock’s Chapter 9: Transitioning to the Teacher Workforce: Internationally Educated Teachers (IETs) as Occasional Teachers takes a close look at the growing trend for teachers who are educated in non-western countries entering the Canadian teacher workforce. She focuses on Occasional Teachers, documents the nature of their transitions, and shows these transitions to be seriously challenging. We see that these teachers are challenged in the course of gaining access to work as well as in terms of the actual work in the classroom. The various and intersecting processes of professional marginalization are outlined.

The second section of the book is entitled Section 2 Learning/Work Transitions – Work, Career and Life Changes. It is aimed at exploring social differences in the transition process ‘from work to education’ as well as within labour markets and the labour process itself. It highlights in several spots the role of workplace change in negotiations over learning and training opportunities.

We begin with Peter Sawchuk’s Chapter 10: Occupational Transitions within Workplaces Undergoing Change: A Case from the Public Sector. In keeping with the volume’s orientation toward expansive understandings of learning-work transitions, his chapter focuses on what happens once people obtain a job, and how occupational and organizational transitions are interlinked. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative research on the changing nature of welfare benefit delivery work we find multiple layers of transition at play. Central to discussion are the structure of informal learning networks that are crucial for intra-occupational and intra-organizational transitions where we see the importance of changing entry requirements and age cohort divisions.

Chapter 11: Ambiguities in Continuing Education and Training in the Knowledge Economy: The Biopharmaceutical Economic Sector by Paul Bélanger and Stéphane Daniau parallels the theme introduced by Sawchuk in several ways. Their research reports on formal and informal learning trends and contradictions in the bio-pharmaceutical sector as important factors for understanding future developments over the next decade both in this and, indeed, a wide-range of other economic sectors in Canada and elsewhere. The analysis details the differential support given to informal learning among professional groups, the impact of competition between firms on knowledge transfer, as well as how these dynamics can and do shape the development of communities of practice, self-directed learning (within and outside of work).

In keeping with our focus on the transition intrinsic to particular economic sectors and differentiated experiences, in Chapter 12: Transitioning into Precarious Work: Immigrants’ Learning and Resistance Kiran Mirchandiani et al. examine the dynamics of so-called flexibility associated with the new economy. The reality, as the authors point out, is that such dynamics are characterized by the use of temporary and part-time employees within contingent work arrangements which put them ‘at-risk’. These workers do not receive the same protection and benefits as the full-time permanent workforce. Based on extensive interviews with female contingent workers (new immigrants) in the Toronto area across a variety of
workplaces (e.g., supermarkets, call centers, garment industry) the various roles of social differences in this under-research learning/work transition topic are illuminated.

Next is Shibao Guo’s Chapter 13: False Promises in the New Economy: Barriers Facing the Transitions of Recent Chinese Immigrants in Edmonton. Guo expands on the theme of immigration and racialization established by Mirchandani et al. in the previous chapter. He offers a critique of the self-framing of Canada as a country of immigrants, and the land of vast opportunity. Indeed, not unlike many European countries, in the face of an aging labour force and declining fertility, Canada has little choice but to open its doors, but what awaits newcomers falls far short of the imagined ‘land of opportunity’ that is actively promoted abroad. The author draws on survey research on immigration from the People’s Republic of China. Despite that fact that China has become the country’s leading source of new Canadians over the last decade and the immigrant experiences concerning transitions remains poorly understood. Although the majority of these immigrants arrived with post-secondary education, many of them face unemployment or underemployment.

Bonnie Slade and Daniel Schugurensky’s Chapter 14: ‘Staring from Another Side, the Bottom’: Volunteer Work as a Transition into the Labour Market for Immigrant Professionals shows how labour market participation and transitions are linked to the ‘paid work bias’ by focusing on volunteer work, race and immigration. The authors note that a majority of new immigrants in Canada now fall into the “Skilled Worker” category according to the country’s immigration ‘point system’, and that although there is a good deal of information on the integration of ‘highly skilled’ immigrants into the Canadian labour market in general, few studies to date have explored the mediating role of volunteer work and informal learning in immigrants’ work transitions from their home country to Canada. Based on interview and focus group research as well as secondary analysis of national survey data we see the significant degree to which immigrant workers orient to volunteering as a key means of fixing the broken learning-work transitions they face in Canada.

Elaine Biron and her co-authors next turn our attention to the issue of aging in their Chapter 15: Adult Education and the Transition to Retirement. Extending the observations from previous chapters (e.g., Livingstone’s Chapter 2 and Sawchuk’s Chapter 9) their analysis shows that, even in the context of lower adult education participation amongst older adults, the contradiction between initial education in early years of one life still predict, to a large degree, not only who will remain active learners in the later portions of the life course, but also who will use adult learning to guide them amidst challenging uncertainties. The authors note important generational patterns in terms of understandings of the role and purpose of adult education.

And finally, in the last analytic chapter of our collection Tara Fenwick and Janice Wallace reconnect with the issue of disability in Chapter 16: Transitions in Working Dis/Ability: Able-ing Environments and Disabling Policies. This chapter bridges many of the concerns about older workers in the previous chapter and issues raised in Chapter 6 (Machalko and Titchkosky). Here the authors point
out that as workers increasingly experience age-related changes to their abilities and mobility, particularly with the removal of mandatory retirement policies in most of Canada, issues of disability in the workplace are growing in importance. However, persons with disabilities, despite employers’ legal “duty to accommodate”, face discrimination in the workplace including informal stigma, marginalization, insufficient provision of necessary support, and stress-producing expectations that they conform to narrow norms defining the ‘good employee’ and the ‘acceptable body’. Fenwick and Wallace show that individuals often encounter a series of transitions between agencies and workplaces, finding themselves and their ‘disability’ re-inscribed at each point in the learning-work transitions process. More broadly, most workers can expect to experience transition into or out of various levels of disabling conditions that affect their well-being throughout their working lives, including invisible disabilities such as mental illness produced by workplace stress. Building on an expansive notion of formal as well as informal learning they show that issues of identity become sites of struggle for individuals finding themselves avoided and marginalized. The authors conclude that broad workplace policies can be developed to produce holistic able-ing environments.

CONCLUSIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Drawing from this diversity of original research allows us to effectively construct a collective, scholarly response to what, as we have argued, are frequently narrow conceptualization of transition processes. Central to constructing this volume has been our critical vocationalism approach that has the goal of illuminating the experiences of those social groups that remain effectively under-served by existing learning and work transitions processes. In our collection’s division of labour, for the sake of avoiding repetition, contributors were specifically asked not to spend inordinate amounts of space re-hashing the range of transitions literature, but rather to focus on the detail and original contributions of their own empirical work. Situating the contributions against the backdrop of national and international literature, we felt, could be properly dealt with through effective introduction and concluding chapters further supported by concise section introductions. Where suitable, we did ask them to retain observations on method where it is necessary for critical understanding of the material and/or it serves the purpose of expanding understanding of studies in learning/work transitions directly. This way of proceeding, we feel, has yielded an illuminating look at the learning/work transition process which begins from the premise of providing voice to marginalized groups while providing clarity to marginalizing mechanisms that remain under-researched in this sub-field of scholarship.

These are the origins of our work, in brief. However, by way of moving forward into the substance of our collection we offer some final words of invitation and observation. Research on transitions can be potentially dizzying in its variation. Fantastically enough, a literature search for the term ‘transition’ within the many electronic indices of social science research now available reveals something that has the potential to overwhelm: over a half a million entries! The vast majority of these appear to not relate to issues of education, learning and work as such. In other
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words, they do not begin from what we understand as a vocationalism perspective. However, the point for us is that conceptualizations of ‘transitions’ has and will likely increasingly play an enormous role in how researchers come to understand the life course. For a volume of this type then, the practical as well as intellectual challenge of delimiting an understanding of transitions was a necessary and immediate one.

While encouraging readers to push forward critically to expand their own thinking beyond the resources collected here we have, nevertheless, found it necessary to draw some boundaries for the purposes of coherence. Our first tools for this are found in our discussion of vocationalism, including the new vocationalism and critical vocationalism continuum. While broad, it serves as an important orientation for us and we hope readers as well; a specific entry point into the broader field that does, however, distinguish the discussion from the sea of transitions, life course and neo-institutionalist studies that exist.

Based on this, we and our contributors have aimed to develop a perspective with careful attention to a broad array of contexts and social differences. The principles we have outlined, this type of perspective and this attention to differences, we feel, are essential for understanding learning/work transitions: transitions which remain challenging to an enormous proportion of the populations of virtually every country and for this reason must continue to be challenged.

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INTRODUCTION


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