



Canadian Labour Market and Skills Researcher Network

Working Paper No. 129

A Typology of Adult Learning: Review of the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation of Canada's Model

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November 2013

CLSRN is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) under its Strategic Knowledge Clusters Program. Research activities of CLSRN are carried out with support of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). All opinions are those of the authors and do not reflect the views of HRSDC or the SSHRC.

A TYPOLOGY OF ADULT LEARNING:

REVIEW OF THE SOCIAL RESEARCH AND DEMONSTRATION CORPORATION OF CANADA'S MODEL

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Abstract:

Recent development of adult learning typologies stems from the policy community's interest in collecting information on learning activities of populations in order to understand the economic and social benefits of learning and to contribute to the development of evidence-informed policy making in the field of adult education and training. In this regard, the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation's (SRDC's) Adult Learning Typology (Myers, Conte & Rubenson, 2011) was constructed as a heuristic device capable of classifying all types of learning in a single framework. Through a primarily conceptual process the authors arrived at a typology consisting of five classes of learning: foundational; higher education; workplace-related; labour market-related; and personal/social. While initial feedback has been positive, the typology needed to be tested for utility in describing the actual participation patterns and practices of adult learning. This paper assesses the utility of the SRDC's adult learning typology by addressing three broad questions: 1) How does the typology compare to emerging international adult learning classification schemes (UNESCO, OECD-PIAAC and EUROSTAT)?; 2) To what extent is the typology useful in describing actual participation patterns as captured by the Access and Support to Education and Training Survey?; 3) How well does the typology describe how adult learning activities are organized provincially, using British Columbia as a case study? Based on the examination of the typology conducted in this report, the authors recommend to revise the SRDC's typology. They further recommend that future surveys collecting information on organized forms of adult learning and education should be designed to collect information on all forms of formal and non-formal learning activities, as well as on informal learning.

JEL classification: I20; I21; and I29

Key words: adult learning; adult education; typology; foundational learning; higher education; workplace-related learning; labour-market related learning; personal/social learning.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The overall purpose of this report is to contribute to the development of evidence-informed policy making in the field of adult education and training by constructing a heuristic typology of adult learning.

Recent development of adult learning typologies stems from the policy community's interest in collecting information on learning activities in their populations. The goal is to better understand the impact of learning activities on skills distribution and the wider economic and social benefits that eventually result. Despite conceptual and empirical progress in measuring competencies, the development of crucial linkages is less evident; we refer here to ties between competencies, forms of adult learning and education, policy levers, and outcomes. Such analyses are essential in gauging how well education and training systems perform in generating required competencies, and in clarifying which policy levers would best enhance socio-economic returns. The development of a robust typology of adult education and learning is a key component of such efforts.

The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation's Adult Learning Typology is constructed as a heuristic device capable of classifying all types of learning in a single framework. Through a primarily conceptual process the authors arrived at a typology consisting of five classes of learning: foundational; higher education; workplace-related; labour market-related; and personal/social. These five types of learning were further described in terms of providers, funders, duration, learners' motivations, and other design and delivery features.

While initial feedback has been positive, the typology needed to be tested for utility in describing the actual participation patterns and practices of adult learning. This paper addresses three broad questions concerning utility:

- How does the typology compare to emerging international adult learning classification schemes?
- To what extent is the typology useful in describing actual participation patterns as captured by ASETS?
- How well does the typology describe how adult learning activities are organized provincially, using B.C. as a case study?

Comparison of the typology with similar initiatives spearheaded by UNESCO, OECD and EUROSTAT reveals both similarities and fundamental differences. The typology is closely aligned with the definitions proposed in ISCED 2011 except that the latter does not cover informal or incidental-random learning. Another important difference is that ISCED stipulates that non-formal learning occurs in educational institutions, while we find it in many contexts – a position endorsed by EUROSTAT, whose work was foundational in our typology’s development. There are fundamental similarities between the two: both use learning activities as basic building blocks; both recognize the official triad of formal, non-formal and informal learning; and both exclude incidental learning and make institutionalization a fundamental criterion in the classification scheme. The most notable difference between them is that EUROSTAT classifies learning activities according to the formal, non-formal and informal learning triad while our scheme aims to identify the five key learning categories: foundational, higher education, workplace-related, labour market-related and social/personal-related. Our typology recognises the triad as an intermediate step in arriving at these five fundamental categories.

Further, with the exception of higher education (exclusively formal), the categories contain a mixture of formal, non-formal and informal learning. We use the form of delivery to separate the categories, while EUROSTAT uses institutionalization. Finally, we make the distinction between formal and informal based on whether or not the program leads to a recognized credential and not, as in the EUROSTAT case, whether it is included in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which does not exist in Canada.

The empirical and conceptual analyses included in this report raise concerns about the extent to which the five core categories of adult learning are mutually exclusive. The expert reviewers reinforced this point. They also cautioned against relying on motivation as a criterion for classification and raised concerns about the way the triad had been deployed. These concerns were amplified by our analyses of how well the typology captures actual participation patterns, or portrays how adult learning activities are organized provincially. Problems arose about what should be classified as workplace-related learning. Contradicting the definition in the typology, our review showed that employers play a major role in what we classify as non-formal foundational learning, providing 44 per cent of all the learning events. Well over half of the participants were financed by their employers, who had required an astonishing 84 per cent of the male participants to take non-formal foundational learning. These data suggest that it is impossible to disentangle

workplace-related learning from non-formal foundational learning using the definitions provided in the typology.

Analogous issues surround classification of what the typology calls 'labour-market related' learning. Contrary to assumptions, we found that a large group of participants were funded by their employers. Similarly, it was common for learners to report that they had engaged in a formal program of learning for labour market-related reasons, a circumstance not anticipated in the typology. The findings also indicate difficulties disentangling personal/social learning from higher education and foundational learning; most often a person has a mixture of motives for engaging in these activities.

Based on our findings we recommend that the typology be revised. The formal, non-formal, and informal triad offers a higher-order structure than does the original typology. Reducing the number of categories from five to three makes it easier to fulfill the criterion of exclusiveness. We would aim at more specificity by creating sub-classes within each of the three categories. The challenge lies in finding meaningful dimensions that would provide a social charter (Meyer, 1977) for each education/learning activity. This is most readily achieved in formal education. We recommend using the 2011 ISCED codes to constitute the sub-classes. We also suggest adopting the EUROSTAT criterion of at least one semester duration for an event to be classified as formal.

For the non-formal category, participation data and existing classification schemes identified the following sub-classes: courses that cannot be considered as formal; seminars and workshops; and guided on-the-job-training. Regarding purposeful informal learning, research suggests that life roles could provide a meaningful substrate. Potential sub-classes would include learning related to work, the community and civil society, the household, and for general interest. As in the original proposal the new framework's three categories will be analyzed according to field of study, providers, funders, duration, learners' motivations, and other design and delivery features. This approach will allow in-depth examination of educational and learning activities across the three core categories.

Our review also reveals some serious limitations in available survey data on participation in adult education and learning. The importance attached to adult learning in Canadian and supranational policy documents seems at odds with efforts made to secure data reliable enough to support evidence-based policies. The policy discourse promotes private and public investments in adult learning as central elements of a skills strategy. When it comes to developing and monitoring this

strategy, however, adult learning tends to be noted rather than elaborated. There seems to be a mismatch between the heavy investment in instruments to measure competencies and the lack of focus on the role of different parts of the 'adult learning system' in generating and maintaining these competencies.

Looking closer at surveys like ASETS and PIAAC, three features stand out. First, there is a strong focus on formal education. This is understandable as national ambitions to increase the pool of competencies are often expressed in terms of targeted minimum levels of educational attainment in the population. The level of formal education is also central in discussions around how to assist vulnerable groups to improve their economic and social opportunities. However, as was evident in the IALS and ALL surveys, non-formal learning activities are also important for a country's pool of competencies. Further, some forms of non-formal learning activities help individuals to respond to the economic and social challenges they face. Countries with high participation in adult learning, such as the Nordic states, are distinguished by a well-developed non-formal sector (Rubenson, 2006). Most likely the existence of a vibrant non-formal adult education sector partly explains why the Nordic countries have a larger skill pool than could be expected by their formal level of educational attainment. This suggests that the skills debate should pay closer attention to the nature and importance of non-formal learning activities. Always remembering the restrictions of a survey and the difficulties in collecting information, it would be helpful to know the nature, extent and providers of non-formal learning activities. Without this information it will be difficult to gauge the performance of adult learning and training systems in generating required competencies, which of course makes it impossible to examine the efficiency of certain policy levers more closely.

Second, a noticeable job-related bias in ASETS, and to a certain extent in the PIAAC survey, prevents certain learning activities from being followed up, making it impossible to identify learning that, according to the typology, should be defined as social/personal. The rationale for this approach is never discussed but the logic seems to suggest that only job-related learning activities are important for the national skills pool. The problem with this argument is that it is difficult to justify such a policy on existing evidence. People studying for job-related reasons do apply the acquired skills or knowledge at work to a higher degree than those who participate for personal development, as the literature shows. However, more interesting is the extent to which what is learned in one context can be transferred to another. Thus, in the 1997 Adult Education Training Survey, half of those taking courses for personal reasons reported that the acquired skills or knowledge were also greatly or somewhat useful at work. The same finding, albeit to a lesser extent,

is true for courses taken for job-related reasons, which also benefit participants in their personal lives (see for example Statistics Canada, 2001). Thus, from a strictly economic perspective, it is important not to neglect studies undertaken for other than job-related reasons. Further, the literature does not support a simplistic division into job-related and non-job-related, as there are many simultaneous reasons for actively engaging in learning.

Based on these observations we recommend that:

- Future surveys of adult learning and education should be designed to collect information on all types of formal and non-formal learning activities.
- Questionnaires on participation in adult learning and education should be designed from a broad lifelong learning perspective, rather than a narrow job-related focus.
- Canada should initiate an international research program to address the challenge of eliciting survey information on informal learning.