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Drawing on practice-based learning theory, this chapter examines issues pertaining to the deskilling of immigrant professionals in Canada. It argues that adult educators need to have an awareness of transnational migration dynamics and work in meaningful ways to keep immigrant professionals connected to professional knowledge practices.

# 6 Migrating Professional Knowledge: Progressions, Regressions, and Dislocations

***Bonnie L. Slade***

Migration, moving from one country to another, implicates professionals in multiple transitions, many of which are unexpected and unwelcomed. Since the 1990s skilled migration for permanent and temporary settlement has been rapidly increasing. In the global competition for skilled migrants, professionals are highly sought after in both traditional immigrant receiving countries (Canada, United States, Australia) and increasingly in more historically restrictive regions, such as the European Union. For national governments of immigrant-receiving countries, professional migration is viewed as strategic, addressing labor market shortages, as well as dealing with issues of aging populations and low birth rates. Aspects of migration such as population flows, settlement, and integration are well researched and are generally approached from an economic, demographic, sociological, or cultural perspective. From an adult education perspective, researchers examine how professional knowledge crosses national borders, encountering new systems of professional regulation and higher education, facing different value systems related to professional knowledge and experience, new gender configurations of professions, different work practices and material realities.

Although migration is a very contentious issue, research has shown that both policymakers and citizens believe that skilled migration is beneficial to the economy, culture, and professional practices of a country (Park, Clery, Curtice, Phillips, & Utting, 2012, p. 36). The perceived benefit of professional migration, however, rests on certain assumptions about the labor market integration of these professionals. Critically, it assumes that they will be able to practice their profession, providing essential services and contributing to the growth of the economy. Adult educators in Canada have shown that the economic promise of skilled migration is often not realized. Many professionals experience difficulties in establishing themselves in professional practice in Canada, facing deskilling and labor market exclusion. Although Canada purposefully recruits a high

numbers of skilled workers annually, migration to Canada for professionals has been shown to be a risky endeavor.

Drawing on three empirical research projects as well as related literature on transnational migration and adult education, this paper examines the professional trajectory of immigrants in Canada, arguing that deskilling is itself a transition that can be empirically investigated through examining the knowledge practices of immigrant professionals. Current approaches to understanding workplace learning stress that professional knowledge cannot be separated from work practices. Researchers from education, organizational studies, and science and technology studies assert that knowing itself is a practical activity enmeshed in the social and material relations of work (Bruni, Gherardi, & Parolin, 2007; Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Orlikowski, 2002; Schatzki, 2001). These ideas have profound implications for understanding workplace learning and professional knowledge, but they have not been applied to the migration of professionals across national borders. This chapter raises questions about how deskilling is accomplished through exclusions and inclusions in various knowledge practices.

This paper is presented in four sections. First, I outline the background of Canadian immigration policy, and the research on the labor market outcomes of immigrant professionals in Canada. In the second section I detail the research on deskilling, drawing on three qualitative research studies in particular (Mirchandani et al., 2010; Slade, 2011; Slade & Schugurensky, 2010). The next section details the labor market exclusion of immigrants, either through unemployment or working without pay. The final section draws out some thoughts on migration and professional transitions and implications for adult education policy and practice.

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## **Background—Canadian Immigration Policy**

The explicit goal of Canadian immigration policy is to attract the “best and the brightest” for both permanent and, increasingly also temporary, migration (Kenney, 2012). The result of Canada’s robust immigration strategy with its stringent selection process has been the creation of a large pool of professionals with international credentials and work experience, many of whom are unemployed or underemployed (Gogia & Slade, 2011). Research indicates that immigrants’ education and work experience is consistently undervalued in Canada, resulting in higher levels of unemployment, lower earnings, and deskilling for individual immigrants and their families (Creese & Wiebe, 2009; Grenier & Xue, 2011; Li, 2005; Preston et al., 2010; Reitz, 2007; Slade, 2011, 2012). In relation to national productivity, studies have estimated that the lack of

recognition of skilled immigrants' credentials and prior learning has a negative impact on Canadian economic performance by approximately \$15 billion annually (Reitz, 2001). The links between immigration status, unemployment, poverty, and racial origin have been investigated, and it has been argued that there exists a racialized and gendered labor market where people of color, particularly women, are overrepresented in low-income sectors (Guo, 2009, 2010; Mirchandani et al., 2010; Ng, 1996; Shan, 2009, 2012; Xu, 2012).

A wide range of barriers have been identified by researchers, government task forces, community advocacy groups, and immigrants themselves: credential assessment and recognition processes that are lengthy and individualized, devaluation of international work experience, limited opportunities to gain relevant appropriate Canadian work experience, discrimination, lack of professional networks, difficulties adapting to Canadian culture, lack of knowledge of Canadian standards and practices, cumbersome and costly licensing processes, language issues, and employers' lack of knowledge about international systems. According to the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC), although 76% of new immigrants have at least one type of international credential, such as a university degree, 70% experienced barriers in gaining access to the Canadian labor market at an appropriate level. The biggest barrier to finding appropriate employment for immigrant professionals was the lack of "Canadian work experience" (Statistics Canada, 2003). LSIC also revealed that immigrants experience "occupational skidding" (Kofman, 1999, p. 283) as 6 out of 10 immigrants who were employed at the time of the survey were not working in the profession or occupation in which they were educated and experienced (Statistics Canada, 2003). The barriers are especially profound for immigrants in professions that are regulated in Canada, such as engineering (Dang, 2005; Slade, 2004).

Deskilling is a term that initially referred to the skill degradation of workers with the introduction of new technologies into the labor process (Braverman, 1974). Deskilling, and the related terms *deprofessionalization* and *underemployment* have been taken up in current adult education debates to describe the experiences of immigrant professionals who end up working in their own fields but at much lower levels (and pay) than they are qualified, as well as in unrelated survival jobs characterized by low pay and irregular hours (Gibb & Hamdon, 2010; Guo, 2009, 2010; Man, 2010; Mirchandani et al., 2008, 2010; Mojab, 2000; Ng, 1996; Sakamoto, Chin, & Young, 2010; Walsh, Brigham, & Wang, 2011). For immigrants, having a non-Canadian university degree does not necessarily translate into the same financial or professional opportunities of Canadian-educated graduates. Preston et al. (2010) have shown, drawing on data from the 2006 Canadian Census, that immigrants with at least one university degree have lower annual earnings and double the unemployment rate than Canadian-born people with the same education. The discrepancy is worsening for new immigrants and is especially pronounced for highly skilled immigrant

women. Deskilling leads many immigrants into poverty. Evidence of this can be found in food bank usage statistics. The Daily Bread Food Bank (2012) reported that 49% of the 1,082,000 people who relied on the food bank for basic survival in 2010–2011 were immigrants, 53% of whom had been in Canada for more than 10 years. Twenty-four percent of the immigrants had a minimum of one postsecondary credential, compared to 19% of Canadian-born food bank users.

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## Deskilling Through Workplace Training

Findings from the Skilled in Vulnerability: Work-related Learning in the Racialized Culture of Contingency research project, funded by the Social Science Humanities Research Council in Canada, reveal much about the process of deskilling. The purpose of the research was to examine the labor market impact of transnational migration on immigrant women in Toronto (Mirchandani et al., 2008, 2010). Semistructured, in-depth interviews were conducted in five languages with 50 women working as supermarket cashiers, call center operators, and garment sewers on a part-time, seasonal, or temporary basis. Twenty-four of the women were highly skilled immigrants with university degrees from their home countries. On average they made between seven and eight dollars an hour and received no job security or benefits; 80% of the women earned less than \$20,000 per year, and 36% of the women earned less than \$10,000. Several participants experienced adverse health effects due to the nature of their work. Women also noted that their family lives, educational endeavors, or social and leisure activities were frequently disrupted as a result of constant and unplanned schedule changes in their paid work.

Participants reported experiencing great difficulty in obtaining professional work in Canada, facing a number of social processes, such as professional closure, accessibility of precarious jobs, gendered family dynamics, which channeled them into low-end contingent jobs. Women noted that precarious jobs in call centers and supermarkets were easily accessible and did not require credentials or Canadian experience. Participants shared that workplace training served more as a monitoring tool than as a means to develop their capacities and confidence, and the work itself undermined their autonomy and took away their discretionary power. Learning to follow scripts, to memorize product codes for fruit and vegetables, and to sew garments as quickly as possible were a long way from their former work as accountants, engineers, and teachers. For these highly skilled immigrant women, the transition into precarious work involves, first, a material shift where women learn to deal with unstable, poorly paid jobs, and second, an ideological shift where women learn to construct themselves as precarious

workers. This research revealed that for many immigrant women, transnational migration is accompanied by a jarring discontinuity between past education and work, and present occupation (Sangha, Slade, Mirchandani, Maitra, & Shan, 2012).

Separated from the networks and knowledge practices of their profession, underemployed skilled immigrants experience a double jeopardy when trying to find an appropriate job in their profession. Not only do their skills become outdated in light of changes in their fields, but they also suffer a deskilling process with respect to their original capacities. Reestablishing a professional career in a timely way is critical for immigrants. The consequences are dire when immigrants are out of their fields for too long, as Galabuzi (2006) asserts that, “over 90% of those who fail to find work in their field in the first three years of immigration end up permanently in other services” (p. 136). Often immigrant professionals will undertake adult education to “upgrade” their skills, or they will turn to volunteering to improve their labor market situation.

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## **Informal Learning Through Unpaid Work**

When faced with high levels of unemployment and labor market dissatisfaction (Toronto Immigrant Employment Data Initiative, 2012), many immigrant professionals undertake volunteer work as a strategy to reestablish themselves in their professions. Volunteering provides a hope of gaining access to Canadian workplaces, getting exposure to “Canadian culture” and increasing their chances of finding suitable employment. Data from the National Survey of Volunteering and Giving (Hall, McKeown, & Roberts, 2001) reveals that 30% of newer immigrants indicated that their motivation for volunteering was to improve their job opportunities. Community-based agencies through school boards are points of entry through which many immigrants find volunteer work as they offer employment-related programs with a work placement (Slade, 2011). There is a wide array of stakeholders promoting volunteerism as an effective strategy for immigrants to gain Canadian work experience. Proponents include community organizations, advocacy associations, regulatory bodies, federal and provincial government departments and ministries, academics, ethnic media, and immigrants themselves. There is, however, very little evidence to support the generally held belief that volunteering works to improve the labor market position of immigrants (Schugurensky & Slade, 2008).

To draw out the tensions, mechanics, and nuances of this transition from immigrant professional to volunteer workers, I draw on empirical data from The

Informal Learning of Volunteer Workers research project (Slade & Schugurensky, 2010). The purpose of the study was to explore the connections between informal learning and volunteer work among immigrants who volunteered to improve their access to the labor market. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 45 immigrant volunteers: 30 women and 15 men. Most arrived as skilled workers, and although they came from 17 different countries, almost 47% of the participants were from China. Forty-three participants (96%) had completed at least one university degree and, on average, the participants had 10 years of professional work experience prior to immigrating to Canada. Professions included medicine, engineering, business administration, teaching, psychology, and information technology. Most participants had been in Canada for 5 years or less. With respect to age, 20% of the group were under 29 years of age and 18% were older than 40 years old. Most participants (62%) were between 30 and 39 years of age. Overall, participants embodied the intended outcome of immigration policy: they were well educated, had years of work experience in a professional field, and were the right age for the labor market.

The volunteer work placements were brokered through community-based agencies (usually through an employment assistance program) or negotiated independently by the individual. The site of volunteer work included the nonprofit (82%), for-profit (16%), and public sectors (2%). Some of the volunteer placements were part of adult education programs delivered by community organizations and local school boards. The length of time for the volunteer placements varied from 2 or 3 hours per week to full-time hours for a fixed period of time, usually 3 months. Volunteer tasks varied from placement to placement—network administration, website development, looking after children, arts and crafts for kids, teaching computer software classes, setting up and maintaining computer networks, general office support, accounting, filing tax returns, language interpreting, and wrapping gifts. Some of the tasks required only general and basic skills, such as gift wrapping, whereas the others needed more professional skills and knowledge, such as computer network setup and writing computer software code.

Although 43 of the 45 participants in the study had at least one postsecondary degree and years of relevant work experience, they experienced great difficulty in securing meaningful employment after their volunteer work. Overall, if measured by obtaining meaningful paid work as a result of the volunteer placement, this research indicates that volunteering for “Canadian work experience” is not a very successful strategy. At time of the interviews, only 13% of participants were in a job that matched their skills and experience. Almost half of the participants were either unemployed (44%) or underemployed (42%). The largest group of participants (n=20) were those who were unemployed after their volunteer placements. In this group of participants, there were two immigrants with backgrounds in science who volunteered at for-profit companies writing

software code. There were also 19 participants who were underemployed. Examples of this include a female engineer from Columbia who was doing quality testing in a factory, a male professor working in sales, and a female psychologist working as a waitress. Of the whole sample, half of the women (50%) and slightly more than one-quarter (27%) of the men were considered underemployed.

The six participants (13%) who were able to secure work matched to their education and work experience had two things in common. The first was that the work they performed in their volunteer placement was closely connected to their educational backgrounds and work experience. The second common element to their experience, related to the first, was that through their volunteer work they were able to develop meaningful social networks. For these participants, the volunteer work acted as a successful stepping-stone to paid work, as it allowed them to draw on their prior professional experience from abroad while building social and cultural capital in Canada in their profession (Bourdieu, 2004). They were able to remain connected to the knowledge practices of their profession.

Although most participants reported that they had increased their confidence, self-esteem, and social and cultural capital through their volunteer placements, their experiences raise questions about volunteering as a direct transition to the labor market. For employers and the Canadian economy, however, there are measurable benefits to these poor labor market options for immigrants. It is difficult to measure the actual financial contribution of the volunteer labor of immigrant professionals. However, an analysis of one adult education program offered through local school boards in Ontario conservatively estimated that in 1 year immigrant volunteers performed over 1.92 million hours of work, the equivalent of over 923 full-time jobs, representing almost 20 million dollars of unpaid wages (Slade, 2011, 2012).

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## **Deskilling as Exclusion from Practice: Implications for Adult Education Practice and Policy**

As the experiences of immigrant professionals in Canada illustrate, transitions into professional life in a new country can involve regressions, dislocations, or progressions. This paper has mainly detailed the experiences of professionals who are unable to smoothly navigate the various assessment and licensing processes and as a consequence are deskilled. Of course, some immigrant professionals do transition into professional work. Professionals from English-speaking countries of the British Commonwealth and from the United

States who have high levels of social, cultural, and linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 2004) and are able to convincingly match their education and experience to Canadian practices have a much better chance of reestablishing their professional practice (Li, 2005). Often professional regulatory bodies will have mutual recognition agreements with other English-speaking countries, making the licensing process easier by accepting educational credentials as equivalent and removing the need for additional assessment of professional knowledge through examinations. The majority of immigrant professionals in Canada, however, are from Asia and South Asia, and issues of deskilling are particularly prevalent in these communities.

Professional regulatory bodies that are responsible for protecting the public from harm by ensuring high standards of professional practice have a challenging task to assess applications from over 100 countries against Canadian standards. Tools that they use to assess knowledge include examinations, evaluation of university transcripts, comparison of national professional regulatory systems, and references from local professionals. Researchers, community advocates, and politicians who are concerned about deskilling have raised questions about the logic and fairness of these assessments. When a medical oncologist with 15 years of professional experience migrates to Canada, how relevant is it to assess their skills and knowledge by making them take several examinations on basic medicine?

There are tensions and contradictions in the process of professional migration. The recruiting country needs the skills, energy, and international connections of professional migrants, yet, for many in Canada the promises of a professional life often do not materialize. Professional migrants are often shocked to experience deskilling; they do not imagine migration to be a transition from professional practice to labor jobs. But although deskilling is experienced individually, it is structurally accomplished and adult education has become a vital part of the institutional response to deskilling through the provision of courses geared at helping immigrant professionals get back into their professions. Are these courses unnecessary retraining or do they provide an essential bridge back into professional work? Drawing on practice-based learning theory, it is critical to ensure immigrant professionals remain connected to the knowledge practices in their fields, whether this be through formal courses designed in partnership with professional regulatory bodies or informal communities of practice. The research illustrates how dangerous it is for immigrant professionals to be away from their professions for too long. A key component of deskilling is a profound loss of professional identity, which can be compounded by taking on a survival job or volunteering in an unrelated field. For successful labor market integration immigrant professionals need to remain part of the knowledge practices of their profession. They cannot do this while working in a supermarket or call center or by “volunteering” in a factory (Slade, 2012).

Globally there is a tension in adult education between serving social purposes and the needs of the labor market. Adult educators need to be aware of the issues involved in transnational migration and deskilling. Critical adult educators with an awareness of these global transnational migration dynamics need to find ways to keep immigrant professionals connected to their professions and professional discourses. Employment programs without this critical structural awareness may simply be reproducing exploitation and deskilling for immigrant professionals.

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