



Desjardins, R. (2017). *Political economy of adult learning systems: Comparative study of strategies, policies, and constraints*. London: Bloomsbury.

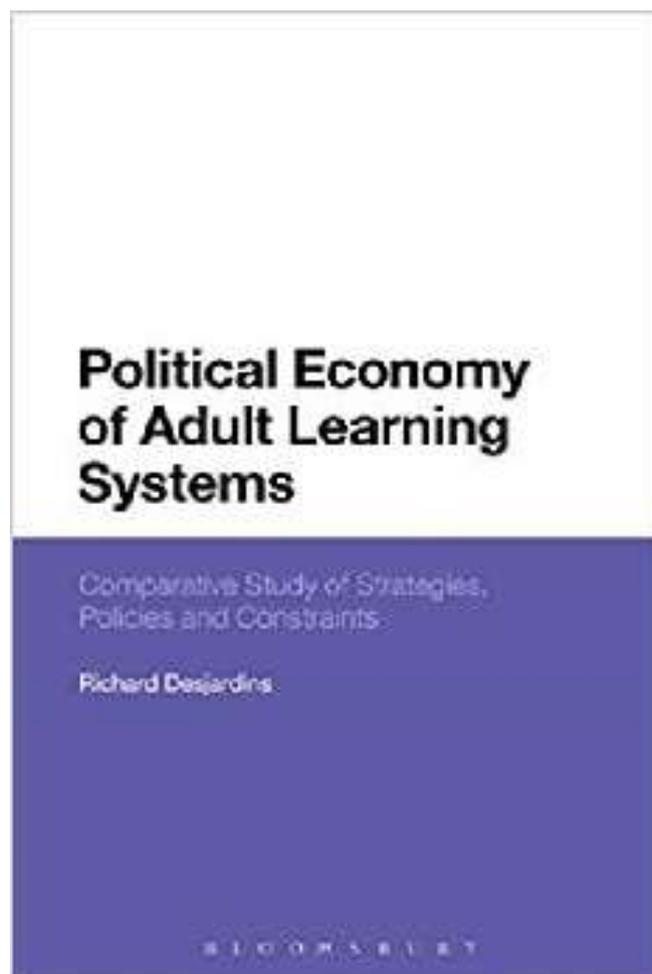
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**Reviewed by Khalaf Mohamed Abdellatif
Cairo University
Egypt**

There is a consensus that the concept of adult learning is not precise enough to have a clear meaning. Perhaps its definition depends on the provided learning opportunities, which may vary from one community to another. Likewise, since the 1990s, lifelong learning has been used as a substitute for adult education (Seddon, 2018), and the terms “adult education” and “adult learning” have also been used interchangeably. While interest in the topics of adult learning and lifelong learning by educators and practitioners has increased globally and adult learning counts as essential for promoting well-being (Merriam & Kee, 2014), it has yet to be considered a political priority for many OECD countries.

In *Political Economy of Adult Learning Systems*, author Richard Desjardins – an associate professor of political economy of education at the University of California, Los Angeles (USA), and former OECD staff member – gives visibility to adult learning and provides some strategies and policies that promote it. Accordingly, Desjardins discusses adult learning systems and provides a comparative overview of



governance-associated characteristics, the degree of formalization of adult education, and the financing and provision structures of adult education (p. 41). Based on data from the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), the book comprises three parts sequentially arranged, including the framework, eight case studies of adult learning systems, and a comparative conclusion.

Desjardins sets the framework through a comprehensive discussion on forces of social change. He outlines the four socio-political positions and approaches to adult learning systems. First, the modernist position is based on the argument that Keynesianism emerged from economic pressures, and therefore the pursuit of knowledge added assets to the role of non-formal education, and eventually modernization and complexity grew together. Second, the neo-Marxist position is arguably a reaction against the modernist position, with the ideas of Freire and Grundtvig on dialectic emancipatory learning and social movements involved in the emergence of adult liberal education. Third, the neo-liberal position is also critical of the modernist position, but unlike the neo-Marxist, the neoliberalist rejects the notion that the state plays a pivotal role in directing development or in harmonizing social interests. Consequently, neoliberal ideas influenced policy thinking by highlighting adult education, in particular, as a significant economic policy tool to promote national competitiveness (Desjardins, 2018). Finally, the post-structural position is an approach for accepting the social change and diversity with the rejection of social norms. Moreover, Desjardins lists the major structured provisions he uses in his analysis: Adult Basic and General Education (ABE and AGE), Adult Higher Education (AHE), Adult Vocational Education (AVE), and Adult Liberal Education (ALE).

In the second chapter, the author presents a balanced discussion of the

embeddedness of adult learning systems, including the varied demands of individuals and employers. In particular, Desjardins highlights the social demands, and these demands structure the argument of the third chapter, which underscores the problems and barriers facing adult learning systems. The hidden theme running through the first part is the sustainable role of learning: the relation between the developing labor market needs and the provision of learning opportunities promotes sustainability and development through lifelong learning.

The second part comprises eight case studies: Denmark, Finland, Norway, The Netherlands, Germany, United Kingdom, United States, and South Korea. In these case studies, Desjardins summarizes the major characteristics related to the governance, financing, and provision structures encompassing adult education in these countries through a comparative approach. The diversity of providers and provisions and their degree of formalization is characteristic of adult education. Consequently, provisions that may lead to recognized qualifications are considered formal (e.g. ABE, AGE, and AHE), less formalized or non-formal (e.g., ALE), and complex or less formalized that lead to certificates only recognized in post-secondary education (e.g. AVE), while ALE provision. The organization of adult education varies from one country to another, as well as the integration of ABE, AGE, AHE, AVE, and ALE. Desjardins clarifies that “these aspects are difficult to assess but case studies of governance, financing and provision structures surrounding adult education in different countries can provide comparative insights on some of the dominant characteristics that drive cross-national differences in adult learning systems” (p. 42).

Desjardins’s selection of the eight countries is covering alternative coordinating mechanisms. He clarifies that “there is no one-model-fits-all” (p. 26), and highlights “state-led regimes with high degree of stakeholder involvement.”

However, he provides neither coverage of African countries nor the Mediterranean region. The case studies have many strengths, e.g., each one ends with a useful summary of the characteristics of adult learning systems. Additionally, the comparative approach made clear the similarities and differences within adult learning systems. On one hand, this section reflects Desjardins' international experiences, as he has worked in several countries, and contributed to providing data on adult learning systems globally. On the other hand, there is some imprecision. Desjardins claims that the National Institution of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is "a major provider of adult education in England and Wales" (p. 133), while NIACE is no longer the lead provider. Additionally, the focus of PIAAC is the working-age population between the ages of 16 and 65, including 5,000 individuals in each participating country, and other ages have been neglected. Perhaps, if he used data that covered older ages, it would contribute to a wider and more grounded comparative analysis.

The third part examines the cross-national patterns of participation, the patterns of outcomes and the patterns of coordination, depending on the typology of different alternatives of adult education (i.e. ABG and AGE, AHE, AVE, and ALE). On

basis of PIAAC data, there are some interesting findings. For example, on the patterns of outcomes, the correlation between formal adult education and the earnings (Table 13.2, p. 220) shows that the highly educated individuals have higher income, within or beyond the normative age. While all the case studies reveal the complexities of the parties involved (including social partners, work-related adult education, and meeting market needs), Desjardins notes, "this had led to anxiety among traditional adult educators who emphasize the humanistic aspect of adult education" (p. 254). Some even claim that adult education cannot be observed or reported through surveys accurately.

It would be interesting if the author developed a future edition that included the variety and balance of the OECD's PIAAC countries, besides using additional data (i.e. PISA) to enhance the comparison. However, a contribution to the adult learning systems literature, this book is highly recommended as a critical reference for adult educators, scholars, policymakers, researchers, and anyone interested in the political economy of adult learning systems. While finding a consensus on the concept of adult learning may appear far-fetched now, a volume that promotes adult learning is noteworthy.

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About the Reviewer

Khalaf Mohamed Abdellatif, M. Ed., is a Ph.D. candidate at Hiroshima University, Japan, and an assistant lecturer of education at Cairo University, Egypt. His professional career as a

researcher has generally focused on issues related to adult education, community-based learning, and social education.



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