

Sociology 919

Topics in Economic Sociology

Understanding Job Quality: Skills, Technology, and Organizational Restructuring in the New Economy

Professor Michael J. Handel

Fall 2002

Thursday 4:00-6:00

6304 Social Science

This course will introduce students to debates regarding the transformation of work. Many argue that computers and high technology are increasing cognitive skill requirements at work and that organizational changes, such as the spread of teamwork or employee involvement practices, are also increasing the level of responsibilities employees are expected to shoulder. At the same time, some believe the education system is failing to produce students with the necessary skills, leading to a possible mismatch between worker competencies and job requirements. The issue of skills mismatch has also been raised in research on poverty and the potential obstacles facing former welfare recipients seeking employment. Perhaps most central, many of these ideas have also been used to explain recent increases in wage inequality in the wider labor market.

However, the data on which the discussions are based are often limited or flawed and important questions remain unanswered.

- What skills specifically are believed to be in short supply (basic reading, writing, and math; advanced intellectual skills; technology-related competencies; "problem-solving" abilities; interpersonal skills; motivation, work effort, and attitude; everything?)?
- Who is believed to lack the necessary skills (young workers, older workers, less educated workers, college graduates without science, engineering, or other technical backgrounds)?
- What is responsible for perceived skill shortages (technology, organizational changes, failing educational system, highly disadvantaged subgroups, simple demographics)?

- What is the actual evidence on which these concerns are based and how reliable is it? Is there a skills problem at all?

This course will give students a thorough grounding in the existing literature on the effects of high technology, employee involvement, skills mismatch, and growing wage inequality and will involve students in primary research on these subjects in the second half of the course.

Students will conduct survey and participant observation research at a workplace investigating issues raised in the course. The final project will be an analytical ethnographic paper based on this research. The goal will be to improve upon existing research in this area to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between technology, employee involvement, other management practices, job skill requirements, and worker outcomes.

The issues examined will have broad applicability to a number of debates. We will examine diverse work contexts in both manufacturing and services, covering managerial and professional work, as well as blue-collar and clerical work, and discuss the role of schools and training institutions, as well as employers.

This course will be useful to students interested in economic sociology, the sociology of work and labor markets, industrial relations, industrial/organizational psychology, human resource management, welfare-to-work, and sociology of education topics such as school-to-work and occupational and vocational education. The hands-on research focus will give students useful experience, can serve as the basis for MA theses, and may help satisfy research methods requirements in some departments.

Requirements: The format of the class will be a seminar. Attendance is mandatory. Gaining a full understanding of the materials requires participation in discussions, particularly for the research-focused segment.

It is anticipated that student research at the work sites will begin in mid-October. Students are required to conduct interviews and observe employees at work for four hours per week for six weeks. Students must hand in copies of their work and be prepared to share their experiences informally with the class each week. The goal is for students to learn from each other's experiences, share suggestions, and remain on track. Given how easy it is to fall seriously behind, coming prepared with new interview materials to discuss in class will be a relatively rigid requirement. Please check with me if you think you will be unable to work at your site before class for a particular week.

The readings during the research phase of the course will probably be divided among students so that the material can be covered without interfering with the research.

Readings: All articles will be available on-line unless noted below.

Week 1. The Problem—Why the Interest in Job Quality Now?

Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone, The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America (1988)

Sheldon Danziger and Peter Gottschalk, "Why Inequality of Earnings Increased" from America Unequal (1995)

Bluestone, Barry, "The Inequality Express," The American Prospect (Winter 1995)

Recommended

Lawrence F. Katz, "Technological Change, Computerization, and the Wage Structure" from Understanding the Digital Economy (2000)

David R. Howell, "Institutional Failure and the American Worker: The Collapse of Low-Skill Wages" (1997)

Week 2. The Earlier Debate Over Skills and Some Recent Extensions

Harry Braverman on computers, automation, and service work, Labor and Monopoly Capital (1974)

Paul Attewell, "The Deskilling Controversy," Work and Occupations (1987)

Kraft, Philip, "The Routinization of Computer Programming," Work and Occupations (1979)

David Howell and Edward Wolff, "Trends in the Growth and Distribution of Skills in the U.S. Workplace, 1960-1985," ILRR (1991).

Recommended

Kenneth I. Spenner, "Temporal Changes in Work Content," American Sociological Review (1979) **JSTOR**

Kenneth I. Spenner, "Deciphering Prometheus: Temporal Change in the Skill Level of Work," American Sociological Review (1983) **JSTOR**

Michael Wallace and Arne L. Kalleberg, "Industrial Transformation and the Decline of Craft: The Decomposition of Skill in the Printing Industry, 1931-1978," American Sociological Review (1982) **JSTOR**

Weeks 3. Information Technology, Skills, and Work—Sociological Approaches

Harley Shaiken, Work Transformed (1984)

Shoshana Zuboff, In the Age of the Smart Machine (1988)

David Halle, "Blue-Collar Work and the Automated Factory," in America's Working Man (1984) pp.80-147

Ruth Milkman and Cydney Pullman, "Technological Change in an Auto Assembly Plant." Work and Occupations (May 1991)

Weeks 4-5. Information Technology, Skills, and Wages—Economic Approaches

A. Econometric Approaches

Alan B. Krueger. 1993. "How Computers Have Changed the Wage Structure: Evidence from Microdata, 1984-1989." Quarterly Journal of Economics. 108:33-61. Omit Section III C (pages 47-50) and Appendices. **JSTOR**

John E. DiNardo and Jörn-Steffen Pischke. 1997. "The Returns to Computer Use Revisited: Have Pencils Changed the Wage Structure Too?" Quarterly Journal of Economics. 112:290-303. **JSTOR**

David Autor, Lawrence Katz, and Alan Krueger, "Computing Inequality: Have Computers Changed the Labor Market?" Quarterly Journal of Economics (1998). Read 1169-1176 (stop after first three lines of p.1176), 1180-1181 (stop at Section B), 1185-1195 (stop at Section VI), 1202-1203. **JSTOR**

B. Inside the Black Box and Critiques

Frank Levy and Richard Murnane, "With What Skills Are Computers a Complement?" American Economic Review (1996) **JSTOR**

David Autor, Frank Levy, and Richard Murnane, "Upstairs, Downstairs: Computer-Skill Complementarity and Computer-Labor Substitution on Two Floors of a Large Bank." NBER Working Paper 7890 (2000).

David Howell, "The Skills Myth," American Prospect (1994)

Michael Handel, "Implications of Information Technologies for Employment, Skills, and Wages: What Do Data and Research Say?"

Week 6. Strategies for Understanding and Measuring Job Quality and Principles of Fieldwork and Survey Methodology

George Milkovich and Jerry Newman, "Assessing Work" from Compensation (1993)

Kenneth Spenner, "Skills: *Meanings, Methods, and Measures*," Work and Occupations (1990)

Roberto Fernandez, "Skill-Biased Technological Change and Wage Inequality: Evidence from a Plant Retooling" American Journal of Sociology (2001)

Michael J. Handel, proposal and draft, "Survey on Job Skill Requirements, Technology, and Work Organization."

Weeks 7-8. High Performance Work Practices: Implications for Skills and Wages

Peter Cappelli, "New Work Systems and Skill Requirements," International Labour Review, (1994)

Eileen Appelbaum, Thomas Bailey, Peter Berg, and Arne Kalleberg, Manufacturing Advantage : Why High-Performance Work Systems Pay Off (2000)

Laurie Graham, "Inside a Japanese Transplant: A Critical Perspective" Work and Occupations (1993)

Bailey, Thomas R. and Annette D. Bernhardt. 1997. "In Search of the High Road in a Low-Wage Industry." Politics and Society. 25:179-201.

Osterman, Paul. 2000. "Work Reorganization in an Era of Restructuring: Trends in Diffusion and Effects on Employee Welfare." Industrial and Labor Relations Review. 53:179-196.

Week 8. Understanding Modern Quality Control Techniques

Mary Walton, The Deming Management Method (selections)

Other selections to be announced

Weeks 9-10. Cognitive Skills, Education, Training, and Policy Responses

The Problem

National Commission on Excellence in Education A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform, report to U.S. Secretary of Education (1983)

Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), What Work Requires of Schools U.S. Department of Labor (1991).

Cognitive Skills: Trends in Levels and Rewards

National Center for Education Statistics, Trends in Academic Progress: Three Decades of Student Performance. NAEP 1999.

Murnane, Richard J., John B. Willett, and Frank Levy. 1995. "The Growing Importance of Cognitive Skills in Wage Determination." The Review of Economics and Statistics. 77:251-266. **JSTOR**

Harry Holzer and Michael Stoll, "What Happens When Welfare Recipients Are Hired?" working paper (2000)

Educational Attainment and Jobs Skills

Lester C. Thurow, "Education and Economic Equality" The Public Interest (1972)

Henry Levin, "Educational Performance Standards and the Economy." Educational Researcher (1998)

Peter Cappelli, "College, Students, and the Workplace: Assessing Performance to Improve Fit." Change Nov./Dec. 1992.

James E. Rosenbaum, "Do Employers Really Need More Educated Youth?" Sociology of Education, (1997)

Richard Arum, Yossi Shavit, "Secondary Vocational Education and the Transition from School to Work," Sociology of Education (1995)

Michael Handel, "Skills Mismatch in the Labor Market"

Policy Responses

James E. Rosenbaum, "Policy Uses of Research on the High School-To-Work Transition," Sociology of Education (1996)

James Heckman, "Is Job Training Oversold?" The Public Interest (1994??)

Peter Cappelli, "The British Experience with Youth Apprenticeships," Phi Delta Kappan (1996)

Thomas Bailey, Donna Merritt, "Making Sense of Industry-Based Skills Standards" National Center for Research in Vocational Education, University of California—Berkeley (1995)

Week 11. Tacit and Practical Skills

Paul Attewell, "What is Skill?" Work and Occupations (1990)

Sylvia Scribner, "Thinking in Action: Some Characteristics of Practical Thought" (1986)

Ken Kusterer, Know-How on the Job: The Important Working Knowledge of "Unskilled" Workers (1978)

Katherine Newman, No Shame in My Game, excerpt (1997)

Weeks 12-13. Soft Skills, Work Attitudes and Habits, and the Issues of Race and Gender Bias

Positive Work Attitudes or Cognitive Skills?

Peter Cappelli, "Is the 'Skills Gap' Really About Attitudes?" California Management Review (1995)

Carol Axtell Ray and Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, "Restructuring Students for Restructured Work: The Economy, School Reform, and Non-College Bound Youths." Sociology of Education (1993)

Soft Skills and Race

Joleen Kirchenman and Kathryn Neckerman, "'We'd Love to Hire Them, But...' The Meaning of Race for Employers." In The Urban Underclass Christopher Jencks and Paul Peterson eds. (1991)

Philip Moss and Chris Tilly, "'Soft' Skills and Race: An Investigation of Black Men's Employment Problems," Work and Occupations, Aug 1996; pg. 252, 25 pgs

Gender and the Social Definition of Skill

Ronnie J. Steinberg, "Social Construction of Skill: Gender, Power, and Comparable Worth," Work and Occupations (1990)

Week 14. Is There a Skills Crisis?

Michael J. Handel, "Is There a Skills Crisis? Trends in Job Skill Requirements, Technology, and Wage Inequality in the United States," Jerome Levy Economics Institute Working Paper 295 (February 2000).

Michael J. Handel, "Trends in Direct Measures of Job Skill Requirements," Jerome Levy Economics Institute Working Paper 301 (May 2000).

Harvey Krahn and Graham S. Lowe, "Literacy Utilization in Canadian Workplaces." (1998)

Ruy Teixeira, "Rural and Urban Manufacturing Workers: Similar Problems, Similar Changes" (1998)

Paul Barton, "Skills Employers Need: Time to Measure Them?" Educational Testing Service (1990)

Week 15. Class Presentations of Final Projects