

The cost of not educating the world's poor: The new economics of learning

By Lynn Ilon. Routledge, Abingdon, 2015, 232 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-88749-7 (hbk), ISBN: 978-1-315-71408-0 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-317-49994-7 (ePDF), ISBN 978-1-317-49993-0 (ePUB)

Gail Spangenberg¹

¹Gail Spangenberg (✉)

National Council for Adult Learning, New York, USA

e-mail: gspangenberg@ncalamerica.org

The Cost of Not Educating the World's Poor: The new economics of learning, by Professor Lynn Ilon of Seoul National University, is an intellectually charged book, brought to life with tables, a conversational approach, and the author's passion for her subject matter. It will be enlightening to education policymakers and planners, and also function well as a graduate textbook. Its fundamental premise is that the world today is "a complex, global system and like all systems its weakest link is its point of vulnerability. The cost of not educating the poor is the cost of an unstable world" (p. 226).

The book synthesises, analyses and interweaves changing theories about economics, international development, human capital theory, and the worldwide availability of learning and education. It explores the consequences of shifting from the old industrial production market economy to today's "knowledge economy". One of many behaviours challenged is the traditional "them vs. us" approach which long governed the flow of foreign aid from developed to developing countries.

Profound shifts in attitudes, policies, delivery and affordability of education have been taking place for decades as technology has spread, Professor Ilon explains. The advent of computers in particular has made it possible to acquire all kinds of education informally without regard to physical place or time, geographical boundaries, economic class, or whether a country is "developed" or "undeveloped". It has made certain forms of education prolific and inexpensive. Education is no longer something controlled by the privileged elite or "given" by those who "have".

In the industrialisation model, wealth comes from production. Schooling largely consists of teachers instructing at the front of a classroom ... and specific standards are set with eventual employment as the goal. But technology has changed things by spreading non-

formal education outward and downward on a worldwide basis, creating a new kind of wealth with real economic value and payoff. Computers have broken down arbitrary borders among nations and people, and gradually changed the structure of work and everyday life. We are in the midst of adapting to what we know about the nature of this change. This book aims to move the process along!

The collective ability to innovate has become increasingly valued in the “knowledge economy”. The world is more interconnected. We talk more about teamwork and innovation, building on ideas and knowledge generated by collaborative group process. In this new economy, portable skills are essential, non-formal learning is as important as formal learning – although it doesn’t supplant it – and learning combinations are constantly evolving in an infinite number of settings, reaching people of all ages and economic circumstance wherever they are. Independent learning is commonplace. Large public databases are available to everyone. *Knowledge itself is the primary unit of economic value.*

Professor Ilon recognises that the backbone of education is formal education, testing, and regulatory frameworks. So are government policies and funding to ensure the mastery of disciplines and common knowledge foundations on which to build.

But Ilon concludes that the best government policies today will work to ensure fair and equitable use and distribution of learning and systems of learning for everyone, including the lowest-skilled and poorest people. A theme pervading the book is that “everybody is part of everybody else’s world” and everyone will benefit.