

LEARNING IN SOLIDARITY: A UNION APPROACH TO WORKER-CENTRED LITERACY

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What do unions have to do with literacy? Aren't they supposed to negotiate collective agreements and defend the rights of workers? Isn't literacy the job of the school system? It may come as a surprise to some that unions in Canada have a long track record of being at the forefront of creating learning opportunities for workers and their families. Despite employer resistance and provincial cutbacks, Canadian unions are developing a holistic and democratic vision and practice of worker-centred literacy that is emerging as a significant presence within the adult education field.

LEARNING: A LABOUR TRADITION

The education deck has been always been stacked, with access to education and literacy traditionally shaped by class, gender and region. Before public education was universally available throughout Canada, children could only go to school if their family could afford the fees and if their labour at home, on the farm or in the mine wasn't needed to keep the family going. In the minds of many workers, the only way to move beyond a life of grinding poverty and horrendous working conditions was to organize towards the possibility of

securing an education for their children. An education would at least provide the hope of a better life for future generations.

One of the earliest industrial unions in Canada and the US was the Western Federation of Miners, formed in 1893. While the WFM fought to improve the lives of miners working in dangerous low paying jobs, it also recognized how education could help bring about a better world for workers and their children. Education, Organization and Independence was its motto, and its crest bore a feather quill that represented the power of the written word. The WFM made many efforts to promote the importance of education and literacy among its members and built some of the first hospitals, schools and cooperatives in western Canada.

At its height in the late 1880s, over 100,000 workers belonged to the Knights of Labour, whose vision of justice for workers and their families was not only social and economic but educational as well. The Knights played an important role, for example, in pressuring the Quebec government to set up night school courses for workers. The response surpassed all expectations: within the first week, 5,000 had registered. Although the political backlash against the schools succeeded

in reducing their budgets and eventually abolishing them in 1893, the contribution of the Knights was significant. This is especially so considering that public education for children was neither compulsory nor publicly funded in Quebec until 1943 (see *A Quest for Learning: The Canadian Labour Movement and Worker Literacy Education*, 2001).

For the labour movement, getting involved in literacy continues the tradition of providing learning opportunities for workers while advocating for a strong system of public education. Union literacy is linked to labour education, one of the largest informal adult education programs in Canada.

Labour education brings rank and file union members together at week-end and week-long schools in their communities, offering courses to develop an understanding of the labour movement and skills to run the union effectively. Labour education includes both traditional “tools” courses like shop steward and health and safety training as well as courses on international solidarity, women’s rights and anti-racism. The history of this community of adult education practice has been traced by Jeffrey Taylor in *Union Learning: Canadian Labour Education in the Twentieth Century* (2001). With over least 100,000 Canadian workers taking part in these courses each year, Taylor situates “union-based education as the most significant non-vocational education available to working people.”

ASKING THE TOUGH QUESTIONS

But if we’re honest within the labour movement, we need to ask ourselves which members benefit the most from these courses. Which of our members do we consider “activists”, ie the small percentage who are actively involved in union programs and activities? Who isn’t participating? Why? Are there barriers to their involvement? Is it possible that literacy or language issues are making it difficult for some members to attend union meetings? Are we looking at how we run our meetings and courses to see how well we welcome new members, listen to their concerns and include them in our planning? Are we concerned not only about removing barriers but about creating ramps for inclusion and participation? How do we avoid replicating the hierarchies within our own organizations that we so roundly criticize in society at large?

For unions, literacy is an opportunity to reach out to some of those largely “inactive” members who want to improve their skills, who may have had to leave school early or for whom school didn’t work out the first time. Literacy training may also be of interest to workers whose skills have become rusty because they haven’t had to use them for many years, or for immigrant workers who need to improve their skills in English or French. Literacy also provides unions with the awareness and a set of tools to help look at how we can work to make our programs and communications more accessible and inclusive for all our members. Ultimately, it is about democracy, about sharing the skills for participation and about working towards making sure the

face of the union reflects the members it represents.

AN EXAMPLE

Here is an example of what can happen in a real-life classroom when literacy is understood in its fullest sense - as the exercise of critical reflection and action, both individual and collective.

A group of night cleaners were participating in a literacy class that their union had negotiated with their employer. The class took place in their downtown office building at 11 p.m., partly on work time, instructed by a co-worker who had been trained by her union. One night Michel, a participant, came in with his hand in a bandage. When the other participants asked him what had happened, he said that he had cut himself on a rusty metal garbage can. His co-workers all knew about the problem with the garbage cans, as others had been hurt in recent months. Although they had raised the issue with their supervisor, nothing had been done.

Gisèle, the instructor, understood the situation well. After all, she was a cleaner on the same shift. She seized the opportunity to help the group find a way to deal with the situation, starting in their workplace literacy program. She asked Michel and the other participants about their experiences with workplace injuries, writing key words and phrases on the board. Then she asked them to write down these stories and to share them with the group. Spelling patterns and verb endings were discussed. They talked about what they could do about the problem of the rusty garbage cans.

The clauses in their collective agreement dealing with safety on the job became a reading exercise as the group worked together to understand the difficult terms and rewrite the clauses in clear language. Together, they decided to write a letter to the health and safety committee to raise the issue. They discussed what should be included in the letter, and reviewed several drafts. They would refer to Michel's accident, indicate how long the problem had been going on and suggest a solution: the replacement of the garbage cans. Ultimately, the letter was sent on behalf of the class and the rusty cans were replaced with plastic ones.

This was a process that took place over several weeks, in between other learning activities. It included a number of literacy tasks, like writing about one's experience, reading sections of the contract and composing a letter. It developed participants' skills, such as reading for understanding and spelling. But these tasks and skills came out of the reality of the experiences of the workers, from their real lives, and the process went beyond looking at an individual situation. It helped the group work towards an understanding of how decisions are made and where change is possible by dealing with the systems surrounding an actual incident. This way of learning not only helped the participants understand these systems better, but it engaged them in a process of how they could stand up for themselves to effect positive change.

In a traditional classroom, Michel's injury could have been ignored or handled in a cursory way. Or, it could have been dealt with as the problem of

one individual worker, perhaps including some of Michel's experience and possible recourse into the content of a skills building literacy exercise. But it is in taking the next step of linking an individual situation to that of the larger collectivity - in this case, his co-workers and fellow union members - and the context in which they operate, that the way the system works is revealed. When the group learns about the system and where both its access points and the potential power of the collectivity might lie, the possibilities for how change might be effected become clearer.

In this way, the synergy from learning about skills, tasks and systems comes together. Hopefully, there will be a positive outcome as described in the example. Even if the outcome doesn't result in the desired change, the kind of learning that has taken place will have developed not only new skills but also a new level of understanding about how the world works and how we can interface with it. In the words of Paulo Freire, the renowned Brazilian popular educator, it is about "reading the world, not just reading the word".

"Often, it is this system level, the broader context of how our world works, that is ignored by mainstream literacy definitions and practices. Yet it is only when we include literacy skills for dealing with this level of activity that we can claim to be developing literacy for democratic participation, indeed, for citizenship" (CLC, 2001).

A WORKER-CENTRED APPROACH

As the above example suggests, this approach combines much of what we have learned from popular education

traditions developed in the third world with principles of good adult education. Unions today are honing a vision that promotes such a worker-centred approach to workplace learning and are making efforts to put the vision into practice.

Over the years, Canadian unions have developed a checklist to guide the development of our programs. This is the framework within which we talk to one another and the package we present to employers.

Worker -centred learning:

1. builds on what workers already know;
2. addresses the needs of workers as whole persons;
3. enables workers to have more control over their lives and jobs;
4. involves workers in decision-making;
5. reflects the diverse learning styles and needs of adult workers;
6. is developmental;
7. looks to integrate literacy with other aspects of workplace training;
8. assures confidentiality;
9. is open to all; and
10. is accessible.

THE WORKPLACE AS VENUE

Union literacy programs build on the sense of community that many people develop on the job. This can help sustain workers for whom it is often very difficult to "go back to school". For those who had a negative experience the first time around, there is often a legacy of fear and failure connected with traditionally structured education.

Schools have a special way of coding, storing and transmitting knowledge, a way that many union members have found alienating and exclusionary. Furthermore, there are not always appropriate programs available through the community college, school board or community-based program. Most significantly, life gets in the way: shift work, child-care and other family responsibilities, the role of women in the family, transportation, second jobs, and physical exhaustion. These realities often mean that the prospect of pursuing one's own learning goals can be daunting if not insurmountable.

Many unions know that if they can negotiate favourable conditions for worker-centred education, the workplace can be an important venue for learning because it is convenient, especially if the classes take place at least partly on work time. For example, as workers have already traveled to the workplace and have made child-care arrangements, it would not be necessary to make additional child-care and transportation arrangements if the classes take place during working hours. With the right kind of support, classes can be arranged to accommodate workers on various shifts, as described in the earlier example where the class begins at 11pm for the night cleaners. The workplace surroundings are familiar and accessible, and most workers have a social network there.

Workers who have the chance to participate in a quality workplace learning program usually find out that they have a lot in common with others in their classes. They will generally be relieved when they realize that their co-workers have experienced similar issues

around learning and gratified when their various skills are acknowledged and recognized.

However, just because the program takes place in the workplace doesn't mean that everything that goes on in the class has to come from the workplace. In fact, the learning will happen more effectively if the materials and content come from the range of activities and interests of the workers, whether from work, home, the union or the community.

There are times when the workplace isn't an appropriate venue because it isn't a safe place to learn. If the union/management relationship is too fractious, if there isn't a quiet, private space for learning to take place, or if the class is made up of workers from different workplaces and/or employers, the program will have to happen elsewhere. Unions have to weigh the pros and cons of having programs take place at the workplace versus running them at union training centres, in union halls or in community spaces and make judgement calls in consultation with their members.

COUNTERING THE PRODUCTIVITY ARGUMENT

Union literacy is growing just as employers across Canada are becoming increasingly aggressive in cutting back and contracting out, in pushing for deregulation and for privatization. These aren't easy times to develop democratized learning programs, when so many workers are feeling stressed and insecure on the job.

Too often, workplace literacy is framed as a remedy for the ills of the

workplace, whether we're talking about industrial accidents or low productivity, problems that we know are caused by a multitude of factors. Unions have grave concerns when workers get blamed for these ills. Too often, workplace literacy programs are defined in narrow terms. Sometimes referred to as "competency-based", the training offered is limited to the skills needed for the job the worker is currently performing or to boost productivity. This kind of training is inferior because it is neither developmental - building a foundation for further education and training - nor portable.

Employers tend to get involved in literacy to boost the bottom line. Unions, on the other hand, get involved to enhance workers' lives, to strengthen the union and to improve the workplace, believing that successful workplace literacy programs have to be centred around the needs and aspirations of workers.

Having the union take the lead on workplace literacy initiatives makes sense. No matter how progressive an employer may be, workers will often be wary of the motivation behind an employer-initiated program. Just by volunteering to attend, this self-disclosure could bring recrimination or threats to their job security. Workers may not have the support of their supervisor or co-workers, and they may worry that what goes on in their classes will not be kept confidential. Generally, they will feel more comfortable talking to their peers and knowing the union is representing their interests in the decision-making process.

A CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN THE WORKPLACE

If this kind of literacy work makes so much sense, why don't we find it everywhere? The resistance to doing union-based literacy shouldn't surprise us. Our approach challenges existing hierarchies of status and knowledge, from which many employers draw direct, if short-term, benefit. A comprehensive initiative has the potential of turning long-standing traditions within the workplace on their head.

We know who traditionally gets training in the workplace: the people who already have the most education and the most senior positions. We know about attitudes toward manual labour - workers were hired for their brawn, not their brains. We know what some employers say when it is proposed to them that workers have the chance to learn during working hours - "Won't they just want to screw off work?"

There is clearly a double standard operating in most workplaces. People in management, technical and administrative jobs have fairly ready access to training, usually at the employer's expense and on the employer's time. Not only do workers at the bottom have little or no access to workplace learning, but their motives are often challenged. At the same time, both employers and unions are learning how rapidly the workplace is changing, and how much there is to be gained by investing in the workforce at every level.

Promoting union-based literacy, then, means taking on these attitudes - struggling for respect - and challenging

the practices that reflect and reinforce them. It will only happen when the union's leadership is open-minded and determined that the union become a vehicle for participation and learning for all its members.

Workers who have the opportunity to participate in a worker-centred literacy program generally develop increased confidence and skills. They can usually communicate better with co-workers, supervisors, the public and customers. They can understand written instructions better, deal with new material more easily and work more independently. They are more likely to participate in further training and education. They will likely feel more valued as an employee and make a more significant contribution to their organization.

At the same time, they will probably feel more confident about helping their children with their homework or participating in parent/teacher meetings. They will have a better sense of their rights as workers and citizens. They will be more likely to stand up for themselves and their co-workers, and they will probably ask more questions. They may become more involved in their union and in other aspects of their community.

Potentially, the workplace, the union and the worker all have much to gain. Nonetheless, the management and the union won't necessarily have easier lives when previously disenfranchised workers begin to taste the new found skills and openings of spirit that a good literacy program can provide. A more empowered worker isn't always going to toe the line, either on the job or at the union meeting!

THE ROLE OF THE UNION

For the union, literacy programs can be a golden opportunity to broaden and deepen its roots in the membership and to strengthen its role as advocate. Unions are part of the workplace, and union representatives regularly sit across the table from management on a range of issues. In this capacity, unions are positioned and have the potential clout to bring workplace literacy to the bargaining table, and are beginning to do so in various ways.

They are bargaining for quality workplace education programs, for at least an equal role in the decision-making about how programs are planned and implemented, for resources and for paid time for learning. They are working to ensure that training is offered equitably at every level of the workforce.

Increasingly, unions are seeing the potential that can come out of their involvement in literacy. Many national unions across Canada as well as provincial and territorial federations have launched their own literacy initiatives in recent years. They are promoting awareness of what literacy means and its potential to strengthen the union. They are putting literacy in the negotiating table, and achieving favourable ways and means for workers to learn basic skills at the workplace and at union training centres. They are training union representatives on joint committees to understand their role and to work towards high quality worker-centred programming.

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), for its part, launched its Workplace Literacy Project in 1996. It

provides co-ordination and technical support to affiliates, and develops literacy and clear language resources through its Learning in Solidarity series of publications. Through the CLC Literacy Working Group, it brings union co-ordinators together to share ideas, tools and encouragement.

The National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) of Human Resources Development Canada has provided vitally important seed money and resources to affiliate initiatives as well as to the CLC.

LEARNING FOR THE FUTURE

There is still a long way to go. Unions need to continue to hone a labour vision of workplace literacy, and find ways to support how the vision gets realized in practice. We need to push literacy up on our bargaining agendas, knowing that gains made in bargaining will not only benefit union members, but will often have a positive ripple effect into unorganized workplaces. We need to work with literacy and other social justice organizations to push the envelope of public policy at both the federal and provincial levels so that adult education is not relegated to being a charitable enterprise, but is entrenched as a right. We need a publicly supported system of life-long learning.

Sometimes, the odds against this work seem overwhelming. Government funding is often fickle and precarious if it exists at all. Employers compete with each other in the race to the bottom. Unions are preoccupied with crisis management and can be painfully slow to change.

We know that literacy work is not a quick fix. It takes creativity and stamina to pursue an agenda of this kind of “learning in solidarity”. Meanwhile, a small but growing core of literacy activists is beginning to have a positive impact on how the labour movement approaches learning. We still have so much to learn.

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