

**Looking Back, Looking Forward:
A Conversation with Workplace
Educators**

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to all the colleagues who participated in a conversation with about their experiences as workplace educators and thoughts for the future. The role of workplace educator for the purposes of this paper has been defined broadly to include instructor, researcher, needs assessor, program developer, instructor trainer, mentor, educational advocate and more. Please see biographies for participants in this conversation on the next page.

Many thanks and much appreciation to the following people for their time and thoughtful comments:

Mary Ellen Belfiore

Tracy Defoe

Fiona Frank

Paul Jurmo

Tamara Levine

Nancy Steel

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Contributors' Biographies

Mary Ellen Belfiore has been involved in adult education since the early 1970s beginning with ESL and moving into workplace and literacy in the mid 1980s. She has worked in a variety of settings (community, workplace, college, university) as a teacher, researcher, writer, facilitator and always as a learner. She co-authored *Teaching English in Workplace*, *English at Work: A Tool Kit for Teachers* and authored/edited *Understanding Curriculum Development in the Workplace* and *Chronicling the Learning Curve* (a collection of stories from workplace educators).

Tracy Defoe is a workplace education consultant with a special interest in new challenges. Her career in adult education began in 1978 and has included job titles such as Instructor, Curriculum Developer, Head Teacher, Program Designer, Content Expert, Program Coordinator, Researcher, Writer, Consultant and Mentor. Since 1989 she has focussed on learning at work. Tracy has worked with people in a wide range of workplaces from factories to hospitals, credit unions to government offices, sawmills and lumber camps to hotels and high tech computer companies, and all three levels of government. Tracy holds a Master of Arts degree in Education (Curriculum and Instruction) and a Bachelors in French. She is passionate about learning context, and about plain language and clear design. Both of these themes are signature elements in her writing and curricula.

Sue Folinsbee has worked in the field of workplace education since 1986. She has played a number of different roles including instructor, curriculum developer, researcher, joint committee facilitator, project manager, program evaluator and writer. For the last two years, she has operated a national consultancy through her company Tri En Communications in Toronto. Previous to that, she was Director of Workplace Education at ABC CANADA for six years. Sue has been involved in various aspects of workplace education all across Canada and in various parts of the United States. She has been involved in the publication of numerous practitioner resources and professional papers promoting a collaborative approach to workplace education. Presently she is working towards a Master of Adult Education degree with a focus on workplace literacy through St. Francis Xavier University.

Paul Jurmo has been an adult educator since the mid-1970s, when he began five years in village literacy programs in West Africa. He served as senior program associate from 1984 through 1990 at the Business Council for Effective Literacy in New York. He earned a doctorate in nonformal education from the University of Massachusetts in 1987, with a dissertation on participatory approaches to literacy education in the U.S. Since 1991, he has been executive director of Learning Partnerships, a New Jersey-based nonprofit organization which provides research, evaluation, curriculum development, policy analysis, staff training, and Internet connections to adult literacy efforts inside and outside the U.S.

Learning Partnerships specializes in collaborative approaches to practice and policy, with an emphasis on work-related literacy and leadership development

Tamara Levine co-ordinates the Workplace Literacy Project at the Canadian Labour Congress, where she works to raise awareness of and commitment to literacy from a labour perspective within the Congress and its affiliated unions. She came to the CLC in 1996 from her job as the Eastern Ontario Co-ordinator of the Ontario Federation of Labour's BEST (Basic Education for Skills Training) program. With BEST since its beginnings in 1988, she worked to create fertile ground for both English and French literacy training in unions and workplaces by helping locals negotiate BEST programs and training and supporting co-worker instructors. Prior to BEST, she worked in the federal government in Citizenship and Women's Program and was part of the team that helped set up and staff the National Literacy Secretariat in 1987-88. She was a member of the union, The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), active in health and safety issues in her workplace.

Fiona Frank founded the UK based Workplace Basic Skills Training Network at CSET, Lancaster University, in 1994 and is now its Communications/Coordination Manager. The Network is now funded by the DfEE (for 2 years from April 2000) to help to develop partnerships between its training provider members, and business, in order to help to increase the quantity and improve the quality of basic skills at work programmes. Fiona has a background in access to education for disadvantaged groups, and worked for many years in drug rehabilitation and with ex-offenders before joining CSET in 1991, when she carried out a Leverhulme funded research project looking at workplace basic skills training programmes. She has an 8 year old daughter, Anna, and plays Irish and European traditional music on a 2 row handmade French button accordion.

Nancy Steel has practiced workplace essential skills education for 13 years. She has worked in a variety of industries across Canada to promote programs among business and labour, assess needs, develop programs, evaluate programs, train trainers, and undertake research. Her experience in workplace education evolves from her early roots as a community literacy coordinator, and influences her practice today. Nancy lives and works in Calgary as an independent workforce education consultant, and is currently contracted by Skilltest, a Division of Bow Valley College, to implement Prior Learning Assessment services for the college and community. She enjoys the energy and diversity that the workforce education field offers, and believes that the best professional development is more work and new challenges.

Introduction

A. Background

The impetus for this piece is based on a presentation I gave to the Manitoba Association of Workplace Educators and Consultants (MAWEC) in March 1999, as part of the Workplace Education Practitioners' Think Tank coordinated by MAWEC and sponsored by the National Literacy Secretariat. The original question MAWEC asked me to respond to was "How can workplace educators prepare to serve their clients' needs?"

I wanted expand the thinking on this original question by getting the perspectives of a small number of colleagues who had been working in the field for the last 10 years or more. I thought that talking to people who had started at the beginning of the development of the field, could deepen and enrich the thinking about where we have been, where we are and how we need to develop in the future as workplace educators. As such this discussion provides "food for thought" rather than illustrate a representative sampling of workplace educators. I wanted to talk to colleagues who had played a variety of roles in workplace education, worked in diverse contexts, and could hold the big picture as well as be firmly rooted in the practical. It also seemed prudent to include colleagues from other countries in this discussion. As such, this conversation includes workplace educators from Canada, the US and the United Kingdom.

B. What is Workplace Education?

Workplace education is used here as a generic term to describe workplace literacy programs that address the reading, writing, numeracy, second language learning and basic computer needs of the work force. Educational programs that address these needs may be job-specific, or a combination of job-related and non-work related, and they may be for any member of the work force.

They may take place on or off site in various formats. They may be offered by the union, jointly with management or in the community. Adult educators or peer trainers may deliver them.

C. An Historical Context in Canada

While English in the Workplace programs have been around since the early seventies, it was not until the mid-eighties that a more concerted effort to address literacy needs in the workplace occurred. The formation of the National Literacy Secretariat in 1988 with a financial stream which addressed workplace literacy through its business/ labour partnerships initiative paved the way for the development of the field of workplace education and workplace educators. In the mid-eighties, there was little Canadian material in terms of any kind of practitioner resources, research or professional development for workplace education. In 1984, the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture sponsored a two-week practitioner institute. Staff from the National Institute for Industrial Language Training (NCLIT) shared a holistic approach to workplace education in multicultural workplaces. Several western provinces sent representatives to the institute. This institute represented the first significant, large-scale attempt to offer development to those who would later practise workplace education. Following that event, a number of practitioner institutes for workplace education were offered in Ontario and Nova Scotia during the late eighties. As other provinces developed their approaches to workplace education, other practitioner development opportunities followed.

In contrast to the mid-eighties, the dawning of the millennium represents a very different story. Today there are innumerable Canadian and international resources on workplace education. These resources represent "how to" guides, case studies, research, specific curriculum, trainer the trainer programs and other areas related to workplace education. Most provinces and territories have offered some kind of practitioner development for workplace education over the last decade. The National Adult Literacy Database reported over 300 workplace entries on its database.

D. The Colleagues and the Questions

This paper focuses on the role of the workplace educator. I have defined the term workplace educator as someone who is connected to the learning process in the broadest sense. Within this definition, the workplace educator can play a variety of roles including instructor, researcher, needs assessor, program developer, instructor trainer, mentor, educational advocate and more.

i) The Colleagues¹

The colleagues involved in this discussion have played a variety of roles in workplace education over the years. They have shaped and contributed to the discussion on best practice in the field. In addition, they are all widely published. They have worked in a variety of contexts: within the college and university systems, for government, for non-profit organizations, within labour organizations, and as independent educators. They have all been in the field for 10 -15 years.

I have named and given credit to their substantive ideas and thinking where appropriate. I have included my own views from my original presentation and current thinking along with theirs. Direct quotes have been used wherever possible to represent people's ideas in their own voices. I had an hour-long telephone interview with each person.

Those of us responding to these questions are, in fact, survivors in a field where most of the work is sporadic, part-time and precarious; and where few have full-time, well-paying jobs.

ii) The Questions

The questions under discussion were:

- ◆ How would you define the role of a workplace educator?
- ◆ Who are a workplace educator's clients?
- ◆ What prepared you to do workplace education when you first got into the work?
- ◆ How did you continue to develop and grow once you got into the field?
- ◆ What is the difference between resources and professional development available 10 years ago as opposed to now?
- ◆ What are the current skills, abilities and knowledge workplace educators need to do this work successfully?
- ◆ What will workplace educators need above and beyond what they need know now to be successful in the new millennium?

¹ Please see biographies for those who participated in this conversation on page 2.

ii) Why These Questions

I chose these questions because they are key to the idea of "best practices" for workplace educators. How we view our role, our relationship to the workplace, and how we prepare for our work seem central to our success as workplace educators. I hope that this discussion will provide food for thought in terms of possibilities for future professional development and informal learning for both the novice and experienced workplace educator.

I. The Conversation

A. Introduction

I was struck by the many similarities among us even though we are from three countries and some of us have never met! Not surprisingly, everybody expressed a deep commitment to and respect for the adult learner or worker, seeing the worker or adult learner as the central client. This was coupled with the recognition that workplaces are complex and that there are other stakeholders to whom one must be accountable.

Secondly, there was a great respect for the knowledge among workers and within workplaces, and the skills that adult learners have gained through a variety of means. Thirdly, people have come to workplace education from many different sets of experiences and have used creativity and ingenuity to immerse themselves and develop and grow in their work. Mentoring and learning from colleagues were key themes in people's growth and development.

Obvious divergences came from the different cultural contexts of the educators, their constituencies, the different roles they play and their work contexts.

B. The Role of Workplace Educator

I was curious to learn how people would actually define the roles a workplace educator plays-- both the similarities and differences in thinking. Do people see the role as a broad one or one that is more connected directly to the learning process?

Almost everyone saw the role of workplace educator as more than just instructor and agreed that it was a multi-faceted one.

The role of workplace educator was seen as one that that included researchers, program planners and implementers, learning facilitators and evaluators.

Mary Ellen:

"There's the consultant's role...looking at the broader picture and making recommendations. There is a role for teachers--teaching courses and clear language. There's a role for researchers delving into important issues and looking at trends in business and labour."

Tamara:

"I see the role of workplace educator as facilitator and catalyst...someone who can spark an interest in adult learning. Someone who cares deeply about adult learning for those who did not have a fair break and respects other learning and the skills that people have...someone who can uncover unrecognized skills and qualities and what learning makes sense given people's roles as workers, parents, union members and citizens"

Paul:

"Ideally the workplace educator has the time and expertise to develop basic skills learning opportunities that are relevant for workers in a particular workplace context that are negotiated with management and the union. A workplace educator plans, implements, and improves learning opportunities."

Several people used words like "bridge," "lynch pin" "link" to describe the relationship between workplace educators and the workplace. Others alluded to this connection.

Fiona:

"A workplace educator is somebody who can live comfortably in two different worlds and make the link between the two...bring lessons from education to business. And the person has to be a good political animal."

Tracy:

"When you go to a workplace there is local expertise. What is usually missing is an understanding of learning. You bring learning to the workplace. Our role is to bring what education knows and make it available I need to hold two frames--the big picture and whatever people are trying to learn."

Nancy:

"In the process role, you are the bridge between essential skills and the world of work. As a bridge, you allow the employer and labour to see the relationship between essential skills and work."

Several people noted that workplace education does not mean taking a pre-packaged course that is offered in a more academic setting and plunking it down in the workplace.

C. The Workplace Educator's Client(s)

The predominant theme in people's responses to this question was that the worker or program participant is the central client but the reality is that there are other stakeholders that have invested and need to be considered. Everyone alluded to the complexity of serving the needs of the various stakeholders.

Tracy:

"There are lots of clients. The learners come in different suits. Sometimes a formal committee is a community of learners. Government funders are clients or the HR person or union leader is the client. My client is the worker. In a large workplace the joint committee may be a client and behind the committee all the employees have their interests. I feel if any of those levels were unhappy I would answer to them."

Sue:

"In the workplace we have to serve a number of clients: workers, unions and management while keeping in mind that the heart of this is the needs of the learner."

Nancy:

" Well...the client is multi-faceted. No one client...In the end it is the workers' program but it is too simplistic to say I just serve workers. We also have to serve the needs of management and labour."

Fiona:

"Nice to think its just the learners but someone else is paying the bill--the company, a local or national agency. We have to serve a lot of masters and keep our integrity."

Tamara:

"My role is to serve workers and their union although I don't think of them as clients. Sometimes I work with joint committees, but I am accountable to the union."

Paul:

"Hard to say. As an adult educator I say the learner...but other people are investing money. Management and the union are interested stakeholders. Is a stakeholder a client? It is important to try to understand and serve all interests...find a focus of mutual interests."

D. Preparation for Doing the Work

Everyone indicated that there were many different facets to their preparation for doing literacy work in the workplace. There was no one course or experience that prepared people. Everyone indicated that working with colleagues and/or mentors was pivotal in their development to do this work. Life and other work experience as well as formal or academic training were also cited as other important preparation. A few people said that they read a lot.

While some people stressed experience and working with colleagues or a mentor as the main preparation, others emphasized the importance of their academic training or transferable skills from other work.

Several people brought their experience from English as a Second Language and community literacy work, while others brought transferable skills and knowledge from drug rehabilitation and education, intercultural and international work.

For many, jumping into the work and learning as they went along--from mistakes and successes--has been the best teacher.

Nancy talks about the importance of ambient knowledge. Ambient knowledge is knowledge one obtains that is not directly related to workplace literacy that provides a foundation for this work. This knowledge can be about health and safety, work processes or other workplace issues. This knowledge is obtained from being in workplaces and builds a foundation that can be applied to literacy work in the next workplace. This knowledge allows us to make generalizations based on experience in previous workplaces.

Fiona discusses the isolation that workplace educators face. Often they are paid by a college but work in a company. They are ambassadors but they have little support and no colleagues. They may be in the company a long time and have to remember who they are and who they are serving. She talks about their need to have a sense of integrity and role. She suggests that a mentoring situation where an educator is mentored by any of the three masters (learners, employer or college) could help break down barriers for the educator.

Mary Ellen:

"My background in ESL and adult education prepared me. As well, I learned from teaching and working with other teachers on a book about teaching in the workplace and tours of workplaces. Doing a workplace ethnography, masters courses at Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE) and courses in conflict resolution were also part of my learning. Much of my learning has been hooking up with different educators. The biggest opportunity to grow and work with different colleagues on projects and in different arenas was through my work at ABC CANADA which began in 1993."

Paul:

"My experience as a Peace Corps volunteer running a village level program with peanut farmers in Africa (which included workplace literacy); good colleagues; trying it out at the field level and very good training through my graduate work (practical and theoretical) prepared me. Also the opportunity to try ideas out with a group of colleagues--give it a shot and reflect on it. It is interesting and difficult work. Relationships [with colleagues] are what keep you going.

Workplace educators are like Peace Corps volunteers. They are plunked into a foreign situation and have to be bright, creative and energetic...learn the culture they're in and find out how it operates."

Nancy:

"I worked with a mentor. I was competent as a literacy coordinator in understanding reading and writing and cognitive processes. I did not understand a workplace perspective. I had to transfer my skills to a workplace context. The learning curve was high--trying things out and revising them. Good old experience --listening to learners and how they use essential skills on the job also helped. And I read everything in the oil industry about needs and trends."

Tamara:

" I guess there was a consciousness of minority, my background in ESL and community development, my involvement with my union around health and safety issues in my workplace. But it was primarily life experience. Learning on the run...uncovering my own instincts. A lot of trial and error...fumbling and falling and picking myself up again. Our staff group at BEST (the Ontario Federation of Labour's workplace literacy project that began in 1988) received our own training which was important and valuable...but then we were on our own in our respective regions, though always part of a team and a vision. I've always tried to seek out soul-mates in this work, and it's heartening that the numbers are growing."

Tracy:

" Everything I had ever done prepared me...my dad's union background, seeing leaders with little education. There were lots of things...I studied languages, I travelled, my cross-cultural marriage... teaching English for Special Purposes (ESP), running a printing press where I had to stand for 8 hours. The biggest thing was intercultural education. I don't expect people to be like me...that makes you a person who can be places. This is the biggest skill that separates people who do well from those who don't long term."

Fiona:

"I was a field worker in drug rehabilitation and education and I went on to do a diploma in Adult Education. I met a woman involved in workplace literacy while I was doing this diploma in 1989-90. Through her, I began doing research into workplace literacy programmes. I got a lot of support from Mary Hamilton at Lancaster University, who applied for my first grant - and from two other contract researchers who were working at the university at the time on literacy-related projects - we became very close. I've gone on since then to set up the Workplace Basic Skills Training Network and get a lot of support from a steering group of professionals around the country - and now from our expanded management team. I also receive professional support and mentoring through regular consultations with a friend who is self-employed as a training consultant. I've also had good appraisal sessions at the university."

Sue:

"Such a multitude of experiences that prepared me. I think the biggest thing was the opportunity to work with a group of colleagues on something new in the mid 80's...and not being afraid to jump in, try something, make mistakes and refine a process. An interest in being in new situations was also key. My ESP teaching experience and background in Sociology also helped. Working and sharing with colleagues informally and the opportunity to work with mentors has continued to be the best preparation for the work."

E. Continuing to Develop and Grow

A common theme in how people continue to develop and grow in their work was around gaining more experience in different areas that interest them. For others, networking and mentoring with colleagues, reading, bridging practice and theory, academic work and learning new things outside the field are ways they continue to grow.

Nancy:

"I prepare to be challenged by taking on projects that carry new dynamics that you have to accommodate. The best PD for workplace educators is more work because the pieces of work are so different they bring new challenges."

Mary Ellen:

"I keep on learning by taking courses at the Justice Institute. There are opportunities to move in a totally different circle of people. Being able to take up workplace issues with people with different work experiences and backgrounds is illuminating. For me, this is more useful than professional opportunities in our own field. We have to position ourselves in a broader education and training perspective...more stable and more possibilities. We have to look at what others are doing around organizational change."

Tracy:

"I continue to pursue things that interest me. I maximize informal leaning and learn new stuff all the time. I say, 'Oh sure, I can do it' and I jump right in. I read, sleep, eat and dream it. I become an "expert" as much as I can."

Sue:

"For me the best opportunity for professional development in a long time has come through my role as a researcher ...doing ethnographic research in a textile factory. The ability to be challenged through a new aspect of workplace education and to work and observe along side the production worker, has provided me with renewed commitment to my values around this work. This new set of workplace experiences at close range can only make me a better practitioner in the end."

F. Current Resources and Professional Development

I was interested in people's reflections on the development of resources and professional development opportunities from the time they started in the field up to the present. Most people agreed that ten years ago there were few resources, professional development opportunities and people involved in workplace literacy. However, their range of optimism about the present state of affairs showed some divergence.

Some people stressed the positive developments of the current state of resources and the development for the field.

For example, access to the Internet, the WEB and list serves was cited as creating greater access to resources and information within and across disciplines. In addition, increased numbers of mentors, regional networks, union-based networks, informal practitioner networks, conferences, think tanks, and an abundance of materials were noted as positive accomplishments over the last 10 years. Others saw a current lack of professional development and networking opportunities. For example: whereas previously there were government sponsored PD events, now practitioners have to pay, this being difficult since most work part-time and can't afford it.

Paul Jurmo indicated that in the US there have been peaks and valleys and that with the decline of the National Workplace Literacy Program, the US is now in a valley. He noted that the period of 1989-1995 was the period of greatest growth with the development of alternative approaches that promoted participatory practices.

Paul:

" We have a bit more expertise, but it is not well-pulled together. Workplace education is off the radar screen.

Tamara:

There is a stronger network of people participating at a national level. There are a good number too in the regions...loosely organized kindred spirits, people to call upon for help. But we have not done particularly well in terms of professional development...there is so much more that could be done. We also need to make sure that practitioners understand the politics of the workplace as part of their training, because the workplace is not neutral ground."

Nancy:

"Today it is drastically different from ten years ago. Employers see essential skills are critical. Labour people have developed a political position. There are a great number of practitioners who have developed resources and engaged in discussions. There is an informal network in Western Canada and a network of practitioners who meet at think tanks and conferences."

Tracy:

"There's way more than there used to be. The Internet and WEB have opened huge doors across disciplines. The list serves make it easier to figure out who to know and who to ask. There are a lot more mentors in Canada and the US. Ten years ago in Vancouver there were few people doing this work."

G. Current Knowledge, Skills and Abilities Needed by Workplace Educators

Not surprisingly intercultural abilities, instructional and planning skills and a deep respect for people and different kinds of work were mentioned most frequently with respect to the skills, abilities and knowledge needed to be a successful workplace educator.

Tracy talks about a triangle where people need to be able to research, record and reflect. Sue sees four quadrants that include relationship skills (the ability to work successfully with a wide range of interests groups); tools of the trade (skills that are unique to us as workplace educators); ability to use technology and consulting skills (those skills that are generic to any kind of consulting).

Paul lists three major categories for development: analysis and planning; good adult education principles and practice and an understanding of workplaces. The list that follows comes from the collective response to what workplace educators need to be successful.

Knowledge

i) Principles of adult education

- ◆ belief that learning is possible for everyone
- ◆ good understanding of these principles
- ◆ ability to look at what adults bring to the learning process rather than what they lack

ii) Content knowledge

- ◆ understanding of the cognitive strategies and processes that underlie reading, writing and /or oral communication
- ◆ understanding of learning disabilities

iii) Business and labour trends

- ◆ knowledge of current business and labour trends

Abilities

iv) Respect for people and work

- ◆ great respect for all kinds of people and different kinds of work
- ◆ belief in equity and the ability to bring out the best in everyone

v) Intercultural abilities

- ◆ ability to communicate with all kinds of people
- ◆ ability to work successfully in different cultural contexts
- ◆ ability to recognize and face racism and other biases in oneself, in education and at the workplace
- ◆ ability to figure out how workplaces are organized, the work processes, what the current workplace issues are and how technology is used
- ◆ comfort in one's own skin and with one's skills
- ◆ political astuteness about workplace politics and who one is accountable to

- ◆ ability to maintain integrity of one's educational role while understanding the discourse and dynamics of other stakeholders

v) Flexibility

- ◆ ability to be comfortable in open-ended situations
- ◆ ability to act based on stated and perceived needs rather than what you think people need

vi) Creativity

- ◆ ability to be resourceful in developing learning materials from what is available

Skills

vi) Instructional skills for workplace literacy

- ◆ ability to instruct in literacy and ESL relevant to the needs of the population
- ◆ ability to work with groups and spread power to the group
- ◆ ability to plan a curriculum

vii) Planning and analysis skills

- ◆ project planning skills
- ◆ listening skills--understanding and analyzing needs and translating these into programs and services

viii) Advocacy skills

- ◆ skill in making a case for public and private investment in workplace literacy

Tamara:

" Workplace education by definition isn't a wonderful thing but it has incredible potential. If interests of workers are not paramount, we are falling down a slippery slope. Education that is narrow and geared to production isn't education at all."

Nancy:

" You have to be able to listen to the client and understand, analyze, synthesize and generalize...to act as a bridge from the workplace to essential skills with broad content knowledge and understand how it looks in terms of essential skills programming."

Tracy:

" Whatever you bring with you in your bag is not as important as what you find when you get there and the answer is not in a book."

H: Preparing for the Next Millennium

I asked everyone where workplace educators needed to focus on to be prepared for the new millennium. While some emphasized the need to keep up with technology, labour trends and new approaches in the field, others focused on the need for advocacy. Still others saw the need to keep abreast of new developments in other disciplines.

For those who emphasized technology, it was seen as a way to have greater access to people and resources across the world. It is also seen as a tool for delivering a polished product. Those who emphasized advocacy skills saw the need to be vigilant in promoting a strong worker-centred approach; in supporting and building bridges to the public education system; advocating for funding for workplace projects; and in developing an infrastructure to build support for practitioner training.

Mary Ellen:

"In the future...I think we need lots of entry points for professional development. New people need the basics and more experienced people need to get ideas and practice from outside our field. For myself, I want to continue to be exposed to ideas, practice, theories from fields that converge but come at it from a different viewpoint."

Fiona:

"We need to be able to cope with e-mail. We need to act locally and think globally and get learners to think the same way. By going on the WEB, learners- as well as practitioners- can realize that they are part of an international community. This is key."

Paul:

"There is a need for advocacy and building an infrastructure for practitioners so they can get support and training to do the work. Funding through seed money is needed to get projects going and provide opportunities for people to develop expertise."

Tracy:

"We have to be computer literate to access on-line friends, resources and research. We don't have to skulk around in libraries. We also have to be faster at responding and able to work with people who do different work."

Sue:

"Technology is an area that is growing in leaps and bounds and has an enormous impact on our work. We have to be comfortable with this technology-- researching on-line, using e-mail, participating in on-line conferences, understanding our clients' needs and even for PD. We also need to ensure that the interests and needs of workers continue to be met through workplace education. This is critical in an era where the growing focus is to reduce workplace education to its narrowest form."

Nancy:

"In the future, workplace educators have to know everything they already know and the appetite to know more. Change is unpredictable. Keep abreast of economic swings, labour demands and new approaches and ideas."

Tamara:

" I see workplace education going in dangerous directions. We have to be even more vigilant in promoting a worker-centred approach with a focus on the whole person. We need to put workplace education on the bargaining table so that workers will have the right to learn with dignity and respect. At the same time, we need to build very strong bridges to public education and address public policy to ensure strong public education for all ages to the end of secondary school as a right and universally free."

Conclusion

The results of this conversation raise questions and possibilities. It is fascinating to see the similar threads in the perspectives from seven workplace educators representing three countries, many of whom have not yet met in person. In addition, the fact that there are these complementary perspectives from people who have survived in the field for this long counts for a lot.

This conversation illustrates that there are definite areas to "think on" with respect to both informal and formal professional development for workplace educators. For example, there may be ways to better understand, enhance and formalize mentoring relationships that have worked so successfully for people. Professional development might include a mentoring component both for those new to the field and the experienced workplace educator who wishes to move into a new area. Perhaps mentoring can have an international component too.

In addition, those involved in this conversation stress, in numerous ways, the need for intercultural thinking and abilities to do literacy in the workplace well. More attention needs to be focused on these intercultural abilities that are so critical to our success when working in various work contexts with people at all levels and from different backgrounds. How can we put ourselves in the shoes of others while keeping our own role and identity intact? How can this be learned?

As we have illustrated even through this small piece of work together, technology is critical. Even though most of the interviews were set up by "old-fashioned" telephone, the preparation for the interviews and the follow up afterwards took place with the immediacy of e-mail. Without the Internet, this conversation would have been much more difficult.

How then can workplace educators gain the specific skills that will enhance their work, provide for meaningful discussions with colleagues within the field and related fields internationally and enhance their ability to serve the needs of their clients?

It is not only business that is growing internationally and globally but workplace literacy providers too! It is thanks partially to the Internet and technology that we can enjoy and afford these long-distance relationships with colleagues who are kindred spirits. The fact that we have these connections paves the way for all sorts of possibilities for collaboration and idea/information sharing in the future. It also suggests the possibility of developing a more formalized international network and the potential strength of such a network in shaping and enriching learning and development for workplace educators. A critical component of developing this network needs to focus on how we can be more inclusive in our networking and that means figuring out new ways of communicating across different languages. The strength of such a network is that it could provide a powerful venue for advocacy work on issues that we collectively and globally believe are important.