

Chapter 5

UNDERSTANDING, LESSONS LEARNED IN EMPLOYEE BASIC SKILLS EFFORTS IN THE U.S.: NO QUICK FIX

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ABSTRACT

Workplace education efforts in the United States have too often been hampered by a tendency toward prepackaged 'quick fixes' which aren't based on an understanding of the skills - related problems to be solved or the range of possible solutions. Planners of employee education programs should take advantage of the valuable knowledge and positive motivations which workers already possess. To do so, planners must establish a positive relationship with workers and develop an ongoing, systematic means of developing instruction around the realities of workers' lives rather than on preconceived and often misleading assumptions about what workers need to know.

The Growing Interest in Workplace Literacy

In the latter half of the 1980s, workplace literacy became a hot

topic in the United States. Public policy makers, educators, researchers, vendors of educational products, and the news media bombarded employers and unions with the message that something had to be done to improve the skills of the American workforce. At the same time, many employers and unions were learning first-hand that many American workers were not prepared to handle the new demands of a changing workplace.

In response to this new awareness of the employee basic skills issue, employers and unions have on the whole been paying more attention to employee training and education issues. Some businesses have been forming task forces, examining workforce resources in their communities and in their industries, assessing the basic skills of their own employees, and actually jumping in and setting up programs for their employees. Unions have also begun establishing programs for their members, and in some locations such as New York, Boston, and Chicago, unions have formed consortia with other unions to share resources around this issue of worker education.

On the surface, this growth in interest and activity seems like a good thing. It appears that key players with an interest in a well educated workforce have now become aware, done some planning, and devoted some resources to begin tackling the employee basic skills problem. On closer examination, however, it becomes clear that we shouldn't be too satisfied with where we stand today, because the quality of existing programs and the level of commitment to quality programs are not what they should be.

I would argue that, if we - as educators, employers, unions, or public policy makers - really want to develop effective employee basic skills efforts in the United States, some hard questions must be dealt with and a good deal more ground-work must be done before we go much further. With careful preparations, we in the U.S. - and those concerned with workplace literacy in other countries as well - can learn from the U.S. experience and avoid the mistakes of all too many workplace efforts to date.

The remainder of this chapter discusses a number of key lessons learned.

Lesson #1: There is No Single "Business Perspective" or "Labour Perspective" on Workplace Literacy

It is safe to say that employers, which include for-profit businesses as well as governmental and nonprofit agencies, and unions have been challenged to look more closely at the employee basic skills issue in recent years. The response of employers and unions to the issue, however, has not been uniform.

In some cases, employers and unions haven't really given the problem much thought at all and haven't really developed a position on the topic. Many of these employers and unions have been busy keeping their heads above troubled economic waters and haven't had the time to look in any depth at less immediate issues like employee basic skills. This is true even when the strength of these employers and unions is declining due to inadequate skills in their workforce.

Other employers and unions have looked at the issue and concluded that, indeed, their employees do have a basic skills problem. However, whether for lack of resources, plans to eliminate low skilled jobs, or other reasons, these employers and unions have decided to ignore the problem and hope it goes away.

Other employers and unions recognize an employee basic skills problem and assume that the solution will ultimately have to be a long term effort to improve the U.S. school system. What is ignored here, however, are the facts that (1) a significant percentage of the U.S. workforce for the next twenty or more years is already beyond school age, (2) the problems of dropouts, drug abuse, poverty, and child abuse which contribute to the illiteracy problem will not go away soon even if all the proposed school reforms are implemented

immediately, and (3) immigration, which is also a major contributing factor to the adult illiteracy problem, is likely to remain at a high level for some time. Waiting for school reform to work is not by itself going to solve the employee basic skills problem.

In some cases, employers and unions admit that they do have some kind of employee basic skills problem, but they decide that the solution should not cost them much time or money. These employers and unions typically look for an educational institution or vendor to provide a low cost, 'quickie' solution, usually in the form of a standardized curriculum - whether using textbook, computer, video, or other formats - not tailored to the particular workers or workplace involved.

Some employers recognize that the skills of potential or current workers are not what the workplace demands. These employers conclude that an efficient way to deal with the problem is to set up a test or other screening device aimed at keeping underskilled workers out of the company's workforce to begin with or somehow preventing existing underskilled employees from moving into more demanding jobs.

And finally, there are a few employers and unions who have, through careful investigations, identified a basic skills problem in their workforce, looked at the options open to them, and realized that an effective response will require real vision and resources. These resources will include time, thinking, commitment, a collaborative spirit, and funds devoted not to just "fixing the schools" - and the other problems of poverty, malnutrition, disintegrated families, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy which contribute to adult illiteracy. Resources also must be committed to dealing with the millions of undereducated adults who will make up a major share of the U.S. workforce for the foreseeable future. While it would be nice to be able to say this kind of response represents **the** business or labour perspective on the workplace literacy issue, that simply is not the case.

The reality is that businesses and unions are at present responding to the worker basic skill question in many different ways.

Lesson #2: Effective Programs Require an Understanding of the Problem and of Possible Solutions

In too many cases, corporate leaders, union representatives, and public officials become aware that some kind of basic skills problem exists in their workforce and then jump too quickly at implementing an employee education effort without really understanding the problem or the available range of possible solutions.

The necessity of careful needs assessment

Understanding the "workplace literacy problem" in a particular workplace requires careful study by all the parties concerned. A team of managers, union representatives, educators - and particularly employees themselves - should be put together, and team members should first "do their homework" to learn from the considerable work already done by researchers and other employers and unions.

For example, a number of national level reports (Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer, 1990; Committee for Economic Development, 1985; National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990; National Alliance of Business, 1987) have already been issued in which employers tell us that they now want employees who can apply reading, writing, and math to real workplace tasks. Workers must also be able to work in teams, communicate verbally, and solve problems as they come up, rather than wait for someone else to solve them. And because of the increasing racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the U.S. workforce, U.S. workers and their employers need to know how to understand and communicate with others in their workplace who are 'different' from them (Johnston and Packer, 1987; Business Council for Effective Literacy, January 1987).

These reports show us that employee basic skills is no longer defined as the 3Rs we learned in grammar school. An employee education planning team should use these broader categories of technical and social skills as a frame of reference when it

takes the next step of looking at the particular needs of its own workplace.

If, for example, the record-keeping or decision-making skills of particular employees are areas which the team wants to focus on, then the planners should be aware that traditional, academic reading, writing, and verbal English tests are generally not designed to measure those specific real world skills. A planning team should consider using alternative measures like interviews with the employees and their supervisors, observation of workers actually carrying out those tasks on their jobs or in simulated situations, and review of employees' production records as ways of producing a clearer picture of *what skill areas require attention*.

The need to develop appropriate responses

But once that initial needs assessment is done, the planning team can't stop there. Planners need to continue their systematic planning and investigate possible strategies for responding to the problems they've identified. Rushing in to set up an educational program might not always be the best response.

The solution to many supposed employee basic skills problems might in fact be a restructuring of particular jobs to enable workers to perform more efficiently and safely with the skills they already have. The reading materials used in a job might, for example, be rewritten in a way that makes them more easily understood by the workers who have to use them.

But in other cases, there might be no way around the fact that an instructional program has to be set up. Then this is another point where thoughtful planning is needed and one where many workplace programs get lost. In too many cases, planners of employee basic education programs have little prior experience putting together a literacy program, and they naturally assume that any old instructional method will do. They assume that teaching reading is basically the same process they went through back in grammar school.

Planners might also be told that they shouldn't go to the expense of setting up a school in their workplace and that, as a

more cost effective alternative, technology is the way to go (Chisman, 1989; Packer and Campbell, 1990). But when technology is defined too narrowly, employers might assume that developing an employee basic skills program is simply a matter of choosing the best educational software to plug into the company's computers. Experience is showing us, though, (Freyd and Lytle, 1990; Smith, 1986; Soifer et al, 1990; Sperazi, 1990; Young and Irwin, 1988) that when many of the existing software programs are looked at carefully, it turns out that they are merely traditional fill-in-the-blanks workbooks in disguise.

Instructional theory and contextualized approaches:

This brings us to the question of instructional theory, a sticky topic which is naturally foreign to employers, unions, and public policy makers who don't specialize in such matters. "Instructional Theory" is basically a question of what it is we want to accomplish in an educational effort and how best to reach those goals. Like it or not, this is a question which we all have to be concerned with if we really want to set up effective workplace education programs.

When we look at the research emerging from not only workplace literacy programs, but from the fields of reading and writing education, linguistics, and other disciplines, we see a growing body of evidence which indicates that traditional, academic approaches to literacy instruction - whether in workbook, computerized, or video formats - don't work very well. This research indicates that alternative, contextualized approaches are what we need to be developing.

Research is showing us that, too often, traditional literacy programs have simply adopted academic instructional approaches found in schools. These curricula are seen as having little direct relevance to the particular job tasks which the employees face on their jobs or might face in future jobs (Mikulecky, 1981; Resnick, 1987). If mastery of job-related literacy tasks is at least part of the program's purpose to begin with, such standardized curricula are not a very direct route to those job-related objectives.

There is an even more fundamental flaw in many traditional

literacy curricula, however. Such curricula are often based on questionable assumptions about how people learn to read and write, and they place undue emphasis on rote mastery of fragmented pieces of written language which are irrelevant to adults' lives, rather than on helping learners to develop the strategies we all need to make meaning out of written language. (Meyer and Keefe, 1988).

As a reaction against curricula which try to teach skills in a vacuum, or isolated from meaningful uses, some literacy practitioners have developed an alternative, contextualized approach to instruction. The contextualized approach argues that literacy is the use of written language to accomplish real world tasks of interest to the reader and writer (Harman, 1987; Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1984). A contextualized approach to instruction is structured in a way to enable the learner to learn by doing, to develop the strategies used in fluent reading and writing by actually practising those strategies in real, meaningful literacy activities. These strategies include selecting, predicting, searching, tentative choosing, and other thoughtful means of developing meaning from print (Goodman and Niles, 1970).

Different interpretation of the contextualized approach

When we look at how workplace educators are applying this principle of contextualization in practice, we find that no two programs look the same. In some cases, practitioners are defining the context rather narrowly for the learner, assuming for example that, because a low literate worker operates a particular machine, then the basic skills curriculum should focus primarily on literacy tasks associated with that machine.

Others recognize that, to capture the interest of workers and make the program more relevant to them, a planning team must *involve employees from the start* in defining what literacy tasks and topics to build the curriculum around. Otherwise, if the learner is left out of the process of defining what is meaningful, there is a real possibility that the curriculum will focus on a literacy task which the worker already knows how to

handle - or on reading materials found in a job which is actually of little interest to the learner (Business Council for Effective Literacy, July 1989). No matter how well intentioned program planners may be, when these kinds of uninteresting literacy tasks become the focus of a workplace literacy program, the worker will very likely see the curriculum as something *imposed* and not something to be much interested in.

A new model

A growing number of workplace educators are now developing a third alternative for employee basic skills education which rejects the two instructional approaches described above - the academic model and the artificially-job-specific model - which until now have dominated the field. The alternative has not received much attention but, in my view, holds a great deal of promise.

This third alternative might go by a number of names: 'participatory,' 'collaborative,' 'learner-centred,' 'worker-centred,' 'partnership education,' or other terms (Fingeret, 1990; Jurmo, 1989; Sarmiento and Kay, 1990). Participatory programs reject the notion that the worker is an empty piggy bank into which someone else deposits technical information. To use a different metaphor, the worker is not seen as a mechanical appendage of a machine which merely needs some technical fine-tuning (Freire, 1985). Rather, the worker is seen as a human being with considerable strengths and interests.

A participatory workplace program sees these qualities as assets and is structured to provide multiple opportunities for workers to build on their strengths, to enable them to think critically, analyze and solve problems, and communicate clearly (Soifer, Young, and Irwin, 1989).

Using the participatory approach

In practice, we now see this participatory approach in action in a number of workplace literacy settings. Workers in some of these programs work in teams with their instructors to review

what goes on in their jobs, to identify problem areas, literacy tasks, and uses of verbal communication they would like to focus on (Añorve, 1989; Auerbach and Wallerstein, 1987; Business Council for Effective Literacy, October 1989). The emphasis in this kind of needs assessment process is not so much on workers' deficits as on their existing abilities, interests, and potential. The workers then study articles in the company newsletter, work-related statistics, and other texts related to the topics which interest them. They also write about those topics, share their writings, and debate and give feedback to each other about the content and form of the writings (Soifer, Young, and Irwin, 1989). Verbal communication and math activities – even for complex tasks like statistical process control – are likewise built around real world interests which workers bring with them from their jobs (Business Council for Effective Literacy, July 1988).

But in these programs the workers don't necessarily focus solely on job related topics. They might bring in issues from their lives outside the workplace, topics like "How much cement will I need to re-do the driveway at my house?" or "How can I help my child do better in school?" or "What it was like for me growing up in the hills of Appalachia." Including these non job related topics is not seen as something superfluous or distracting from job related goals. Rather, by encouraging workers to focus on a wide range of topics of personal interest, participatory programs continually reinforce workers' abilities to use print to relate new experience to prior knowledge. In so doing, workers come to see language as a personal tool which they can use to accomplish many meaningful, interesting goals.

Proponents of this approach tend to reject traditional measures of learner and program achievement on the grounds that they don't accurately reflect what impact the program is actually having on the learner in the context of his or her life on or off the job. These practitioners might use standardized tests, "head counts," and other traditional measures if that is what their funders demand. But participatory educators tend to prefer qualitative measures tailored specifically to measure

how well learners are able to perform real life tasks of interest to the workers and their employers.

As described above, in the early planning stages learners and their supervisors might be interviewed to identify a set of learning objectives drawn from workers' lives' on and off the job. To monitor learners' progress toward those goals, staff then continually call on learners to assess what they are achieving as individuals and as a group. At the end of a given instructional period, learners and their supervisors might again be interviewed to determine what if any changes have occurred in learners' skills, attitudes, and other personal and job related variables.

Evaluators can also check learners' production and safety records, review samples of their written work, observe learners on the job, and pose simulated problems to the workers to see how well they can solve them. All of these qualitative measures are now being used to more clearly define what objectives need to be achieved in the program and how well they are being achieved. In many of these activities aimed at measuring learner and program progress, workers themselves are taking on active roles in defining program goals and assessing their own progress and the effectiveness of the program.

In this collaborative approach to workplace education, employers and educators are seen as partners who help define what is studied in the program, but they don't dominate the process. In this collaborative process, workers' self-esteem and team spirit are reinforced as they realize that they have something to say and have colleagues who are willing to listen (Soifer, Young, and Irwin, 1989). So far, these kinds of participatory programs seem to be producing the kinds of strong reading and writing skills, critical thinking, self-esteem, and social abilities all of us need to participate actively not only in our jobs, but in our roles as family members and citizens, as well.

Lesson #3: To Build a Strong Workplace Literacy Field, We'll Need a Sustained, Thoughtful Effort

That's the good news: Creative, dedicated practitioners and learners are making progress and developing more appropriate forms of workplace education. The field as a whole has much to learn from these new models. But the bad news is that these kinds of carefully planned programs, unfortunately, remain a distinct minority within the field. These 'new and improved' programs require a number of ingredients not yet widely available. Our challenge is to make sure that the basic ingredients of vision, cooperation, qualified personnel, and material resources are in place before we go much further with literacy efforts which should be aiming at creating not only a more productive workforce but a more just and democratic society, as well.

Employers, unions, and public policy makers

For example, employers, unions, and public policy makers faced with setting up a worker education program should not just settle on 'quick fix solutions' because they are under pressure from 'the top' to set up a program or because neatly-packaged curricula seem inexpensive or easy-to-use. They need to do the kinds of careful needs assessment and resource development described earlier. By doing so, they will be doing the same kind of thoughtful planning they should give to any other business decision.

Our leaders in business, labour, and government should, in effect, be exercising the same kind of critical thinking skill, which they are saying U.S. workers need to be exercising at this point in time. Otherwise, high level decision makers are liable to end up throwing corporate and taxpayers' dollars at questionable workplace education projects. And, beyond being concerned about particular workplaces, employers, unions, and public policy makers should likewise become strong, thoughtful advocates for quality education for all children and adults in their communities.

Vendors

Other, often overlooked players in workplace literacy efforts are vendors of educational texts, computer software and hardware, videos, and consulting services. Some of these vendors have in fact moved beyond traditional forms of education and have been creating more meaningful instructional approaches based on the realities of employees' lives. But these publishers and consultants are in the minority. Instead, we see too much evidence of vendors who, often with little grounding in literacy education per se, are selling questionable products and services, and using misleading sales pitches. As a field, we need to encourage workplace literacy publishers and consultants to become our allies in the development of **appropriate** methodologies rather than function as competitors for scarce educational resources.

The news media

It is also time that more representatives of the news media get beyond merely repeating what is already known about the workplace literacy issue or - worse - reiterating overly simplistic, exaggerated estimates of the "menace of worker illiteracy" or conveying the impression that the employee basic skills problem is an easy one to solve. Journalists need to do more digging to uncover what kinds of basic skills are really needed by U.S. workers and show us what is really being accomplished or not accomplished by current employee basic skills efforts. The public needs to know what needs to be done - and by whom - to really create a strong American workforce and society, and the media can help educate all of us (Schalit and Donovan, 1989).

Adult educators

Adult educators also need to take the time to remember that the process of developing a quality educational program requires considerable technical skills and a clear vision. We have as a field been pushed into trying to do our jobs with limited training, inappropriate prepackaged materials and assess-

ment tools, meager salaries and benefits, and instructors who don't really know the learners and communities they are supposed to be serving. In workplace programs, we are being pushed into a focus on 'the bottom line' when in fact we know that employee basic skills education is much more than fine-tuning workers' technical skills to 'increase corporate profits.'

Enlightened business leaders (Business Council for Effective Literacy, July 1990; Time Inc., 1988) don't use that kind of dehumanizing rhetoric, and we shouldn't fall into the trap of adopting that kind of talk because we think it will please corporate and public funders. We need to learn how to negotiate with the business community without selling ourselves short. We need to be sure that we get the training, appropriate assessment systems, and other resources we need to do a good job. And we need to make it clear to the employers, unions, and public officials we work with that effective basic skills programs require much more than quick-fix solutions.

Workers

And, finally, if we believe that workplace literacy efforts should aim at building not only a more technically efficient but also a more just and democratic society, then we need to remember the central role which workers themselves play in these efforts. We mustn't forget that the success of workplace literacy education in this country will be largely up to the workers who will participate in the programs *we create with them*. If we leave them out of the process of putting together our educational programs, we will likely fail to take advantage of their considerable valuable knowledge and positive motivations.

Reports describing "the decline of the American workforce" suggest that the U.S. economy is burdened by a workforce which isn't up to the challenges of a new world economic order. No doubt *all* of us will have to constantly upgrade our skills to take advantage of the new opportunities ahead of us.

But we must remember that workers in the United States have a lot going for them already. And that includes even those who didn't get the opportunity to develop strong English language

literacy skills when they were younger. If the rest of us do our part, we can make sure that *all* of our workforce gets a *real* chance to succeed this time around.

Note: This chapter is based on presentations made during 1990 at workplace-literacy-related conferences in El Paso, TX; Worcester, MA; Baton Rouge, LA; Washington, DC; Chicago, IL; and Atlanta, GA.

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