

Work-Related Basic Education in the United States: A Mixed Bag

by Paul Jurmo

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In Good Practice in Use: Guidelines for Good Practice in Workplace Education, Mary Ellen Belfiore (Belfiore, 2002) summarizes guidelines for effective workplace education programs. These guidelines draw on work done by practitioners and researchers in Canada and several other countries.

A similar study done in the United States for the U.S. Department of Education in 1998 likewise identified guidelines for work-related basic education (Jurmo, 1998.) This report broadened its scope to look at work-related learning in both workplace settings (for incumbent workers) and in community adult education programs (for either employed or unemployed learners). This latter study drew on evidence from both workplace education programs (including the excellent work done in Canada in the 1990s) and job-training and adult basic skills programs which attempted to provide education and other services to help adults get and succeed in jobs.

In the five years since that report, the field of work-related basic education in the United States has been a mixed bag. On one hand, there has been some promising work by creative practitioners and researchers which could be used as building blocks by the field as a whole. On the other hand, policy makers and funders (at the national, state, and local levels, and within all sectors – government, employers, and unions) have largely shown a lack of awareness, support, and leadership for this work. Compounding this lack of support from policy makers and funders is the fact that those who create and benefit from effective work-related basic education programs are generally not organized as an effective constituency to educate and pressure policy makers for the support they need.

In this paper, I would like to describe a few examples of promising developments in the field.

Promising Developments

A. New standards for work-related basic skills

Equipped for the Future (EFF) is a systems reform initiative of the National Institute for Literacy. Begun in the mid-1990s, this effort drew on input from many stakeholder groups – including employers, unions, and adult learners – to clarify what “adult basic skills” should now mean in U.S. society. The result: “basic skills” now was to be

expanded beyond the traditional “3Rs” of reading, writing, and math to include problem-solving, teamwork, research, technology, lifelong learning, and other skills.¹ The EFF skills are also very consistent with the work of adult educators who for years called for a broader and more thoughtful definition of basic skills for adults.

EFF sees these skills as key for any adult who wishes to participate effectively as a worker, family member, or community member/citizen. In addition to naming the skills, EFF researchers have more precisely defined each one, breaking them into components to make it clearer to practitioners and learners what sub-skills are needed to, for example, “read with understanding.” By so doing, EFF makes it easier for practitioners to know what to teach, for learners to know what they need to learn, and for those who evaluate programs to know what learners are achieving.

Unlike previous efforts to define “what adults need to know,” EFF didn’t stop with a tidy list. EFF has – again, drawing on research – also mapped out principles of adult basic education to guide practitioners in their curriculum design. EFF holds that instruction needs to be “purposeful” to learners (focused on goals meaningful to them), “transparent” (i.e. designed so that learners understand *why* they are learning particular things), “contextualized” (built around real-world applications of skills), and “constructivist” (helping learners to build on what they already know). Instruction should also have ongoing assessment built into learning activities, to help learners and practitioners to reflect on what is being achieved and how to keep activities on track, while also providing evidence to incorporate into program evaluations.

EFF staff have also taken on the mammoth task of developing a training system to help interested adult educators learn how to adapt EFF to their particular situations and, in turn, train others to do so, as well. EFF staff are also working with state and federal policy makers to help them understand what *they* need to do to provide professional development and reporting systems which support the EFF framework.

EFF staff are also now (a) developing an assessment system tied in with the National Reporting System for adult education programs, (b) creating a work-readiness credential which learners can earn if they demonstrate proficiency via the new assessment system, and (c) piloting EFF in specific industries, to provide tools for those wishing to incorporate EFF into work-related education programs.

This ambitious systems-reform initiative is making real changes in U.S. adult education programs. For those who focus on helping learners develop the basic skills they need for work, EFF provides many useful tools and a nation-wide network of like-minded professionals (linked via e-mail and periodic institutes). This is especially true for those who support the systematic approach to workplace education outlined in Mary Ellen Belfiore’s report. (See www.nifl.gov/nifl/eff.html for more information.)

¹ Those who read the reports – including the SCANS report, *Workforce 2000, America’s Choice: High Skills or Low Wages*, and the American Society for Training and Development’s *Workplace Basics* – from the 1980s and 1990s, which summarized the skills that employers wanted in the workforce, will find EFF’s list of basic skills very familiar.

B. An Organizational Needs Assessment Success Story for Union Workers

In early 2001, a team of workplace educators adapted the workplace needs assessment methodology pioneered in Canada (Folinsbee and Jurmo, 1994) to document the educational needs of subway and bus workers in New York City. The newly-elected leadership of Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 was interested in setting up education and training programs to help its members deal with the new technologies being introduced into virtually every job held by the local's 36,000 members. TWU brought in two staff from the Consortium for Worker Education (CWE), a city-wide network of union- and community-based basic skills, job training, and job-placement programs to help TWU develop an education strategy.

The CWE staff worked with a committee of TWU members to clarify what questions they needed to answer and where to find needed information. (The CWE representatives had received training in the Equipped for the Future standards and wove EFF's list of necessary skills into their investigations of skills needed by TWU members.) The research team set up focus groups with groups of workers from key departments, including track maintenance, signals, cleaning, car and bus maintenance, and station management. The team found that (a) virtually all workers were concerned about the changes being created in their jobs by technology and other factors, (b) workers wondered what impacts these changes would have on their job security and chances for advancement and further education, and (c) many workers had considerable skills – including familiarity with computers – that they wanted to further develop through various kinds of education and training.

This input from workers – and additional input gained through meetings with Transportation Authority representatives – provided the research team with rich information and ideas. The two CWE representatives – with many years between them as adult educators and researchers – wrote a report which described the context in which workers were now operating, the need for various kinds of education and training programs, and options that the TWU could pursue.

Now – A Member Education Program in Place

It is now two years later. TWU leaders took the report seriously. Working with the Consortium for Worker Education, the TWU has gotten resources and hired new staff to put a member education program in place. The TWU is now operating classes which help 750 members per year develop computer, ESOL, electronics, math, and other skills they asked for. In recent contract negotiations, the union and Transit Authority management also agreed to set up a joint US\$9.1 million education fund over the next three years. It is now planning to set up new computerized learning facilities and counselling services, and is developing career maps to identify job titles and skills sets for 35,000 workers. All of this started with a forward-thinking union leadership and a thoughtful, New York version of an organizational needs assessment. (For more information, call 212-873-6000 for Arthur Goldberg (extension 2152) and Maureen LaMar (extension 2016).

C. Helping Unemployed Garment Workers Get Ready for a New Future

The September 11th attacks affected many workers in New York City, including garment workers in the Chinatown neighbourhood near the lower-Manhattan site of the attack. Many garment shops closed permanently in the months after the attack, as entire neighbourhoods were closed to deal with construction, security, or environmental needs. For Chinese-speaking garment workers who spoke little English and had little experience outside the garment industry, that has meant unemployment and financial and psychological insecurity in the past year.

In fall 2002, the Consortium for Worker Education received a grant from the September 11th Fund to help these workers develop skills in basic English, computers, and job-readiness, to help them move into new jobs inside or (more likely) outside the garment industry. CWE staff quickly set to work to assess the learners referred from a Chinese community development organization, develop curricula, hire and train teachers, and schedule classes. This program – called “STEP” (Skills Training for Employment Program) -- attempted to put into place several features often included in guidelines for work-related basic skills programs, including:

— *Integration of basic English skills with computer and job-preparation skills through:*

- **Cross-training** ESL teachers, computer teachers, the career advisors who provided job-preparation workshops, and the interpreters who helped out in classes where learners spoke very little English. In addition to regular meetings, teachers communicated via an electronic bulletin board.
- **Contextualized curricula** for ESOL classes, computer classes, and job-prep workshops which focused on helping learners get the skills needed to get and succeed in the jobs they were most interested in.
- **Ongoing communication with learners** to clarify what jobs they were most interested in, what learning activities they felt were most useful, and concerns they wanted help with.
- **A mix of learning activities** aimed at helping learners learn in various ways, using different learning modalities: For example, learners went on local field trips, organized holiday parties, created publications illustrated with clip art and photos (hard copy and web-posting), and used a computer lab regularly for keyboarding, surfing and ESOL practice.
- **Portfolios** in which learners stored sample work, to enable teachers, learners, staff, and funders to track learner progress.
- **Focus on both job-related and other skills:** The curriculum recognized that the learners played multiple life roles (worker, family member, and community member)

and had both immediate needs (*e.g.*, get a job) and longer-term ones. The curriculum therefore focused on (a) communication skills needed to handle tasks faced in a wide range of jobs, (b) skills learners could also use in other situations not directly related to work, and (c) helping learners connect to additional adult learning opportunities beyond this program.

- **Intensity of learning activities:** Funding allowed learners to participate in a minimum of 25 hours per week over a 13-week period. This is in contrast to the more common three to six hours of classroom time typically found in adult ESOL classes. In fact, learners could receive a \$300 per week allowance if they successfully participate in 25 hours of classroom activity, making it easier for the unemployed and financially-at-need learners to participate.
- **Support for teachers:** In addition to providing curriculum resources and training to teachers, the program pays what – for adult educators – is a substantial wage, under a contract negotiated with the teachers’ union.

For more information, contact Debbie Buxton at 212-647-1900.

Advocacy needed

These three examples provide ideas and inspiration for those who believe in work-related adult basic education. But in this uncertain time, we need to become more effective as advocates for our work. We need to educate policy makers and funders – who are distracted by many other pressing priorities – about the value of this work and the supports we need to do it.

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