



Contextualized ABE/Literacy

workplace education

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ince the mid-1980s, workplace education has become recognized as an important piece of the adult basic education (ABE)/adult literacy field and as a tool for personal, organizational, and economic development.

A range of program models and philosophies has been developed that to varying degrees respond to these three development goals. These models range from solely workplace driven paradigms to approaches emphasizing the needs of workers. Enhanced productivity and quality of goods and services are the most often articulated expected outcomes for the former and the development of workers the anticipated result for the latter. Programs often incorporate both of these goals to respond to the motivations of both employers and employees.

In recent years, a consensus appears to be emerging that these models—while substantially different in a number of ways—do have certain elements in common. In particular, workplace educators generally attempt to “contextualize” instruction by embedding it in the real-world contexts in which workers operate on and off the job. In their attempts to redefine contextualized learning for incumbent workers, practitioners are dealing with the following issues:

- “Basic” skills has been broadened to include problem-solving, research, critical thinking, and related “SCANS”-type competencies.
- The workplace “contexts” that workers need to be ready to participate in are less the traditional, assembly-

line setting and more the “re-engineered” workplace characterized by efficient technologies, ongoing learning, and flexible work roles.

- Workplace education is increasingly viewed as a tool for helping workers to retain their jobs, grow with and within their organization, acquire better wages and benefits, and to further their own professional and individual growth *in addition to* enhancing their technical skills and job productivity.

- The view of workers as individuals with skill deficits is changing to one that recognizes workers as individuals who bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to work. The workplace classroom encourages workers to build on what they know, using skills and knowledge already developed in a variety of contexts. They are also encouraged to get in plenty of “time on task” to further strengthen their skills, by applying them on the job and in other situations outside work.

- Learners, teachers, managers, and union representatives are increasingly involved in planning, running, supporting, and evaluating workplace learning activities through education planning teams, peer-instruction, and other collaborative learning and governance arrangements. These mechanisms solidify stakeholder investment and provide multiple opportunities for workers to develop and use skills.

These new ways of thinking about and “doing” workplace basic education illustrate the field’s commitment to be responsive to worker and workplace needs and to continuously improving itself. These innovations draw from

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work done in a variety of disciplines, including community-based literacy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) programs, organizational development, labor education, citizenship and democracy education, and community and economic development.

This sharing of resources across disciplines is not only helping practitioners to improve the quality of workplace education services at the site level but leading some to develop a new policy framework for adult basic education. In this framework, workplace education is viewed as one of many strategies a community can put in place to enable adults to develop the knowledge and skills they need. They are thereby better equipped to participate effectively in the multiple roles they play in the community as workers, family members, voters, and so forth.

This framework links previously separate disciplines (e.g., workplace education,

citizenship education, family literacy) through a planning and implementation process at the local level that draws on both private and public sector resources. Adult learning centers are positioned to assess and respond to the learning needs of local workplaces and workers. In the process, educators are better able to reach workers who, for a variety of reasons (such as busy schedules and lack of child care and transportation) would not otherwise find their way to learning centers in the community.

The principle governing this emerging framework is responsiveness to community and learner needs. The ultimate outcome should be a continuum of well-coordinated services that provide adult learners with convenient, ongoing, and well-supported access to learning opportunities. These opportunities will equip learners to meet increasingly higher expectations at work, at home, and in their community.

With traditional funding sources now being reorganized, workplace educators are faced with the challenge—and opportunity—to redefine what constitutes “good practice” and “good policy.” Advocates might now make the case that any new guidelines and funding mechanisms build on the above-described lessons learned in the field. Policymakers can thereby promote better use of resources available inside and outside the workplace, to respond to the actual needs of the stakeholders being served.

This system can help create workplaces and communities that are both technically efficient and socially responsible, by equipping adults to be productive workers, responsible family members, and active participants in their communities.