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Originally published in *Focus on Basics*, Vol. 7, Issue B, Nov. 2004

**Workplace Literacy Education**

**Definitions, Purposes, and Approaches**

**by Paul Jurmo**  
*"Workplace literacy" became a focus of attention for news media, policymakers, employer organizations, and labor unions in the United States from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s. This was evident in media campaigns, state and federal workplace education initiatives, corporate and union worker basic skills programs, research reports, and how-to guidebooks that appeared in that period (Jurmo, 1998). The terms "workplace literacy," "employee basic skills," and "workplace basics" were used to describe the essential communication, math, teamwork, and problem-solving skills that employees needed for work places that were increasingly high-tech and oriented toward individual and team-based decision-making and problem-solving (Carnevale et al., 1990;*[*Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills*](http://wdr.doleta.gov/SCANS/)*, 1992; US Department of Education & US Department of Labor, 1988).*

Much of the interest in delivering basic skills services in the workplace came from the adult literacy field. Nonetheless, many who worked in workplace programs moved away from using the term "workplace literacy." They felt that the term suggested that reading was the main issue when, in fact, employers and others were defining basic skills in a much more comprehensive way. Feedback from workplaces (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1992) indicated that workers needed not just the traditional basic skills (reading, writing, oral English, and math) but the ability to work in teams, solve problems, track down information, and behave responsibly. The term "literacy" was also avoided because it was feared that calling a program a workplace literacy program would make it anathema to workers who believe that literacy programs are only for people who can't read.

Many of those calling for investment in workplace basic skills programs argued that employee basic skills were key factors in keeping workplaces productive, safe, and competitive. Some also argued that worker basic skills played a role in workers' personal and professional development, such as their ability to retain their jobs, qualify for promotions, manage their benefits, earn a high school credential and move on to higher education and training, and have positive relations with co-workers (Jurmo, 1998).

In response, employers and labor unions — individually and in associations or consortia — set up basic skills programs for their employees. These were typically run at employees' workplaces, although sometimes they were held in union facilities or local educational institutions. The term "workplace literacy program" (and similar ones such as "employee basic skills program" or, more simply, "workplace education program") came to refer to an education program typically carried out in a setting provided by the workers' employer or union and designed to help incumbent (employed) workers to strengthen their basic skills. Basic skills included reading, writing, math, oral language, and/or other skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, research, and sometimes basic computer operations. These skills were required to improve the organization's performance and/or advance the workers' personal and professional development.

**Approaches**  
Workplace basic skills education has evolved in response to lessons learned through experience and research, changes in workplace conditions and available resources, and shifts in the political environment. Workplace basic skills programs can be broadly organized into two major categories: decontextualized and contextualized. Within those two categories is a wide variety of program models. These vary according to the content being taught, key decision-makers' perspectives on how adults learn and how workplaces should operate, and the time and other resources available. This variety is, on the one hand, positive because it reflects flexibility and willingness to let program-level staff create their own responses to the workforce challenges they face. On the other hand, it probably also indicates that the field has not evolved very far and has only limited agreed-upon standards and guidelines for good practice.

Outlined within this article are three approaches: one decontextualized and two contextualized. For each approach, arguments for and against that approach are presented. Planners of workplace basic education programs are encouraged to consider each approach as they create a means of service delivery appropriate to their particular situations.

**The First Workplace Programs: The Decontextualized Approach**  
Some of the earliest workplace basic skills programs were implemented by the US military, which recognized that some personnel lacked the technical reading and other basic skills needed to understand manuals, participate in training, and qualify for promotions. These early programs generally adopted basic skills curriculum models used in schools. This so-called academic approach was characterized by a focus on mastery of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and/or math skills (possibly with the earning of a high school credential as a goal) with little or no direct connection to how participants used those skills in their work or possibly other real-life contexts.

Users of this approach often argue that it is important — whether in a workplace or other program setting — first to teach what they would term the basics in discrete pieces (for example, vocabulary, rules, letter-sound combinations) of oral or written language that learners will, it is assumed, eventually be able to combine and apply to real-life literacy or language tasks. In practice, users of this approach tend to rely on commercial workbooks or software that requires learners to fill in the blanks and otherwise produce an answer predetermined by the authors (Prevedel, 2003). This approach is found in many workplace education programs today.

**Advantages**  
A strength of this approach is that it requires limited planning, because learning activities can be transplanted from existing, prepackaged curricula. It is easy to predict and organize: a matter of assembling ready-made lessons in a predetermined sequence. Only limited teacher training is necessary, since teachers can be handed lessons and jump right in and begin teaching.

Its familiarity makes it popular. Most learners, employers, and other stakeholders have experienced schooling using this approach: it is similar to traditional curricula historically used in schools. Stakeholders thus know what they are getting into and do not require lots of explanation to clarify what will be taught.

With this approach, the teacher is positioned as the expert: the holder of knowledge that will be dispensed to learners. This hierarchical relationship between teacher and student is familiar to and preferred by many stakeholders.

It is relatively easy to assess whether learners have mastered discrete skills, using standardized tests that are easy to administer and grade. These tests produce data that can be used to compare participants to each other and to national averages.

In addition, some researchers support the view that literacy skills should be taught in a discrete, carefully sequenced way. This approach is thought to be especially appropriate for people at a low level of skills, some of whom might have learning disabilities that make it difficult for them to process too much input at once (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2001).

**Disadvantages**  
Workplace education programs have very limited time to help workers master specific literacy and language tasks they face on their jobs. Some have argued that this limited time is most efficiently spent by focusing directly on those tasks. This provides opportunities and incentives for learners to build on what they already know, focus on tasks that are important to them, and get more immediate reinforcement to guide their learning. Otherwise, learners might end up mastering pieces of literacy and language skills in a vacuum and never learn how to apply them meaningfully in actual situations (Mikulecky, 1997; Sticht, 1997).

**An Expert-Driven, "Functional Context" Approach Arrives on the Scene**  
The decontextualized approach came under fire in the 1970s and 1980s from researchers (Sticht, 1997) who drew on findings from cognitive science. These researchers argued that if improved job performance was the goal, employee basic skills programs should focus more directly on job-related content, build on learners' job-related knowledge and motivations, and teach the strategies they need to apply basic skills to the tasks they face on their current or may face in future jobs.

This contextualized view was supported within the United States by the [National Workplace Literacy Program (NWLP)](http://www.ed.gov/pubs/Biennial/413.html), an eight year, $130 million initiative of the US Department of Education. The NWLP funded demonstration projects, which were held to a fairly narrow interpretation of contextualization: curricula had to focus on skills employees presumably needed for their jobs, with the assumption that such learning would result in improved employee job performance. Typically the job tasks that employees needed to improve were defined by the employer; then a basic skills specialist conducted what was termed a literacy audit (or literacy task analysis) to clarify the basic skills required by that job. After that — through a customized, job-specific assessment — the basic skills specialist determined whether employees possessed the required skills (US Department of Labor & US Depart ment of Education, 1988).

The resulting curriculum focused on the skills identified as necessary through this assessment process. This could be a curriculum that taught carpenters how to make precise measurements, bank tellers the customer service skills they needed to explain new financial services to customers, or production workers how to interpret the statistics issued by computerized equipment. This so-called functional context approach to contextualized learning was promoted in a number of handbooks and papers (BCEL, 1987). It was also adopted by several state-level workplace education initiatives as their standard.

**Advantages**  
Those favoring this approach argue that by mastering literacy and language skills that produce clear, tangible, more immediate results in job performance and job prospects, learners are more likely to see the relevance of developing literacy skills and the value of practicing those skills on a regular basis. They will thereby master those skills more quickly and retain and develop them more fully.

This approach relies on both external and internal experts to develop the workplace education program. Outside experts — trained adult educators who specialize in worker basic skills — know how to conduct needs assessments, create customized curricula, and otherwise organize an effective worker education program. Internal experts — production managers, human resources specialists, technical trainers, supervisors — know the workplace and the workers to be served by the program and can shape the content of the program to ensure its relevance. Involving these important internal stakeholders will also increase the likelihood of their providing the supports crucial to keeping the program on track, such as release time for workers, classroom space, or guest speakers.

A job-specific focus also helps employers and public funders to see how workplace education can contribute to increased productivity and competitiveness, which are important goals of both the private and public sectors.

**Disadvantages**  
A number of criticisms have been raised of this interpretation of contextualized learning. One is that some contextualized programs do not focus on the right skills. For example, some workers have created alternative strategies for handling particular job tasks so they don't need the particular literacy or language skills program planners assume. Another criticism is that planners focus on job skills that will soon become irrelevant to workers, either because the workers change jobs (within the company or to a new workplace) or because their jobs change in ways that planners had failed to anticipate (Belfiore, 2004; Gowen, 1992).

Another argument is that when key planning decisions are made solely by higher-level experts and participating workers have little or no input, contextualized programs can ignore the key factor of learner motivation. If learners do not see particular job tasks as interesting or motivating, they are not likely to invest their energy and brainpower in mastering those tasks. In some cases, workers might not want to learn a particular job because it pays poorly, is a low status (dead-end) job, the working conditions are not good, or the job is the focus of contention between labor and management.

A contextualized adult basic skills program runs the risk of neglecting the basic skills side of the curriculum and becoming merely a narrow job-training program. In such a program, learners might master particular job-related knowledge but it does not strengthen the underlying reading, writing, or other basic skills they need for work or other life roles. If workers' continuing professional and/or personal development is at least one goal of the program, then workers need transferable skills they can apply to a number of job situations and in future training and educational opportunities (Schultz, 1992).

Customizing a curriculum to a particular job context and worker population takes the time of company personnel, who have to give input into curriculum development, and the expertise of one or more professionals. These represent investments that some stakeholders might not be willing to make.

**An Alternative Interpretation of Contextualization: The Collaborative, Problem-Posing Approach**  
Although the expert-driven functional context version of contex tu alization became the focal point for many workplace basic skills policies and programs, it too came into question on a number of grounds. Most of the critics agreed that contextualized learning was a good idea, but they questioned the particular way that the NWLP and other sources interpreted contextualization (Evaluation Research, 1992; Imel, 2003; Sarmiento, 1991; Hull, 1993; Schultz, 1992; Gowen, 1992; Folinsbee & Jurmo, 1994). These proponents of an alternative version of contextualized learning argued for an approach that emphasized involvement of a broader range of stakeholders (including participating workers) in the setting of program goals, balancing the need to improve job performance with the goal of employee development, and integrating traditional literacy and language skills with problem-posing and problem-solving and other aspects of team-based, high-performance organizational models.

Collaborative programs build stakeholder involvement through a systematic, inclusive decision-making process. Representatives of various company departments work with adult educators and labor union representatives to clarify how basic skills fit into the company's strategic plan for workplace and worker development. The organization is seen as a technical-social system that relies on both material and human resources. Members of the workplace education planning team are encouraged to think critically about how a worker education program can help the workforce solve technical and social problems.

This process might result in a curriculum in which workers are organized as problem-solving teams rather than as traditional classes. These teams identify workplace problems and go through a problem-solving process to identify sources of the problems and steps to take to solve them. In the process, participants develop problem-solving, listening and speaking, research, teamwork, math, and presentation skills, while contributing to improvements in workplace operations. While somewhat similar to the functional context approach in its focus on job-related skills, this collaborative approach differs in its emphasis on involving a wider range of stakeholders in making decisions about how to run the education program and how to improve the larger work organization (Folinsbee & Jurmo, 1994; Anorve, 1989).

**Advantages**  
Advocates for this collaborative approach to contextualized education argue that the desires and interests of all key stakeholders — especially participating workers — must be taken into account when planning a workplace education program. For a program to be relevant to and supported by key stakeholders, they should be given a chance to set program goals, have a say in planning curricula and schedules, and participate as resources persons (Cichon & Sperazi, 1997). In this way, a supervisor is more likely to be willing to release his or her workers to attend class, encourage learners to use their new skills when they come back on the job, visit the class as a guest speaker, and generally serve as a champion for the program. Learners likewise need to see the program as relevant to their interests; otherwise they are not likely to invest themselves in making the program work (Evaluation Research, 1992; Sarmiento & Kay, 1990). Program planners should realize that workers want opportunities to advance professionally and personally. Others point out that if a truly high-performance organization requires proactive thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving at all levels, as well as workers with an ability to handle a wide range of job tasks, then these skills need to be a focus of its basic skills program (Sarmiento, 1991).

An additional advantage that proponents cite is that learners bring lots of expertise to their jobs, developed in previous jobs or in their lives outside work. Some job-specific programs ignore workers' prior knowledge and abilities and assume instead that workplace education should be a mechanism for getting learners to memorize procedures and information developed by others (Gowen, 1992).

**Disadvantages**  
Some believe that involving larger numbers of stakeholders in making decisions about the program is too time-consuming. This more broadly collaborative approach may also subject the planning process to too much debate and possible conflict about what goals to focus on and how best to meet them.

Another concern is that the approach is naive, since many believe that relationships among employers, workers, and workers' labor unions are inherently adversarial. Attempts to build collaboration, some feel, are doomed at best to token cooperation. Concern has been voiced that inviting workers to identify and solve problems can lead to conflict. Workplace education programs should stay focused on having workers build the skills they need to carry out procedures defined by employers.

**Make Informed Decisions**  
The above summary of workplace basic education's purposes and approaches shows that considerable thought and work have gone into building models that others can learn from and adapt. Yet government support for workplace basic education has declined in the past decade, and the pool of available experienced workplace educators and resource materials has shrunk.

Although our nation has largely been ignoring the issue of workplace basic skills education for the past decade, the need for a well-equipped workforce will not go away. It will be up to a new generation of adult educators, employers, union representatives, policymakers, and workers to decide how best to deal with the basic skills needs of our current workforce. As a first step, we should take the time to study the various approaches and models that have already been developed.

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