What Role for Workers?

The ability of workers to have a meaningful voice in the scope and structure of workplace learning cannot be separated from issues of power and control. Both of these are rooted in the need of employers to maximize profits and minimize costs. Bluestone and Bluestone (1992) make the point that—

It is precisely this unvarnished profit motive that has historically motivated managers to develop strategies to control as much of their economic environment as possible. Executives aspire to a world where they can have control over the prices they pay for raw materials, control over the prices they can charge for their products, and control over the stream of inputs into the production system-free of interference from labor and government. (p. 116)

In this context, the concerns of employers often conflict with the needs of their employees. As individuals, wage earners have little ability to affect employer policies and decisions. Organization into a union provides employees with an opportunity to modify the more onerous aspects of managerial authority. This often leads to problems because “out of enlightened self-interest, labor seeks control of much the same work over which management already lays claim” (ibid., p. 117)

Work-based education and training have no special immunity to the inherent tensions between labor and management, according to Parker and Jackson (1994):

Much current training is designed to further management’s agenda and does not necessarily produce better-skilled workers. A union agenda for training recognizes the separate interests. It includes training connected to work and to workers’ experience, training available by seniority, training that captures new work for the bargaining unit (such as new technology), broad training for marketable skills rather than company-specific training, basic skills upgrading, and career ladders into the higher-skilled jobs. (p. 35)

In their view, individual growth and development on the job can only become possible through concerted, social intervention.

In order for organized labor to participate fully in the development and implementation of workplace learning, it must have a coherent model from which to work. Worker-centered learning encompasses many of the elements identified by Parker and Jackson. Unfortunately, the respective size of the literature about this model is directly proportional to the relative power exercised by management.
and labor in the workplace itself. The sheer scope and diversity of employer-oriented material on education and training is inversely matched by available writing and research on worker-centered learning. Outside of the fields of adult education and labor education/labor studies, little interest has been evinced in developing models of education and training based on the self-determined priorities of employees and/or their organizations.

As indicated previously, employee “ownership” over individual learning trajectories, established within predetermined institutional limits, cannot be equated with worker-centered learning. The latter emphasizes the importance of balancing the long-term educational and vocational concerns of wage earners with the economic needs of employers. True worker-centered learning can only exist where employees have real and meaningful input into an organization’s decision-making process. In order for that to occur, employers must generally be forced to share some measure of their power. That can happen only through the existence of independent worker organization (Herzenberg, A lic, and Wial 1998).

The concept of worker-centered learning has evolved most fully in connection with the issues of literacy and English as a second language (Fingeret 1989; Johnston 1994; Martin 1994; Soifer, Young, and Irwin 1989). As a result, it must wrestle with many of the same issues that affect popular attitudes toward the acquisition of basic reading and writing skills. Hull (1993) believes that inherent social biases color all efforts to deal honestly with workplace literacy. “When applied to workers, the stigma of illiteracy is doubly punitive, for it attaches further negative connotations to people whose abilities have already been devalued by virtue of their employment. There is a long-standing tendency in our society and throughout history to view skeptically the abilities of people who work at physical labor” (p. 31).

This bias was readily apparent in a workplace literacy program implemented at King Memorial Hospital in Bayside, Florida (Gowen 1992). The hospital viewed literacy training as a mechanism to reshape employee behavior. “Management holds a whole set of beliefs about literacy’s power to transform individuals into workers who are silent, obedient and easily controlled—more fully acculturated into the work environment management wishes to maintain” (p. 31). The workers who participated in the program had significantly different goals, centered around individual growth and job mobility. These issues were rarely addressed, however, because King employees played no role in the shaping or delivery of the literacy curriculum.

Jurmo (1989) identified three key areas where increased participation in the decision-making process improved outcomes of adult literacy programs. Direct learner involvement enhanced efficiency of skill acquisition, fostered greater personal development, and engaged students in efforts to address the root causes of illiteracy. Building upon Jurmo’s foundation, Folinsbee (1995) defined the parameters of employee involvement in literacy training:
Collaborative initiatives involve workers in program planning and decision making at every stage of development and work hard to marry individual and organizational needs. They respect and value the knowledge and experience that people individually and collectively bring, and are designed to assist people in developing new skills and self-confidence. These initiatives recognize that the workplace culture, communication systems, problems, and issues must be taken into consideration in order to ensure that expectations of education programs are realistic. (pp. 63-64)

Sarmiento and Kay (1990) felt it was important to extend the concept of worker-centered learning beyond the boundaries of literacy training. They viewed it as the basis for union involvement in all aspects of work-related education. For them, worker-centered learning was “a democratic, inclusive and open process. Ideally, program content is as broad as possible, not limited to the most basic literacy skills.... Individual needs and differences are respected, and each learner takes responsibility for setting his or her learning goals.” They go on to identify the desired outcomes of such a process: “A worker-centered approach does more than help workers acquire new skills and knowledge, though. It helps them gain confidence in their individual and collective abilities and to assume greater control over their lives” (p. 25).

In examining a retraining program involving skilled workers from the Rouge Steel plant, Saganski (1995) described an operating model of worker-centered learning and the importance of having all stakeholders actively involved in the development of the process. “This reliance on a critical dialogue between the trades, and between workers and faculty, differs from the usual approach in which educational specialists define what skills are needed and then deliver the training ‘package’ to the workplace. In contrast, a worker-centered approach originates from the perspective of the workers themselves, and draws educational specialists into their dialogue” (p. 329).

The similarity between these approaches and those put forth by such proponents of organizational learning as Senge, Marsick, Watkins, Schön, and Argyris is no accident. Organizational learning and worker-centered learning both have their roots deep in the field of adult education. In a sense they represent two branches of an evolutionary tree. The former, heavily influenced by human resource management and human resource development thinking, focuses on the individual within a broader organizational context. The latter, melding adult education with workers’ education/labor education, stresses individual development and growth that may or may not produce some measurable return to the firm.

The ties between workers’ education, adult education, and worker-centered learning are strong and direct. The economic and social forces that contributed to the growth of corporate schools in the early 1900s, also gave rise to the field of workers’ education. A mixed bag of social reformers, radicals, educators, philanthropists, and labor activists believed that education, broadly defined, was a key to bringing the largely immigrant, industrial work force into the mainstream of...
A merican life. Given its diverse origins, it was not surprising that workers’ educa-
tion encompassed a number of different aims and purposes, including “raising
workers’ educational levels, stimulating their cultural interests, aiding their citi-
zenship efforts, increasing their understanding of unionism, training them for
union activism, helping them understand the society they wanted to change, and
radicalizing the labor force” (Kornbluh 1987, p. 10).

The establishment of the Workers Education Bureau in 1921 and the founding of
the first labor extension program at the University of California at Berkeley that
same year, marked a major turning point in the effort to bring order to a frag-
mented and chaotic discipline. It became increasingly focused on strengthening
the existing labor movement through the training of local leaders and by teaching
workers about the economic and social environment in which unions operated.
At the same time, union and community-based workers’ education programs
continued to provide English language training and other classes designed to
assimilate immigrants into A merican society.

Workers’ Education/Adult Education- Uneasy Ties

The diversity apparent in workers’ education was more than matched by the lack
of coherence existing in the broadly defined field of adult education. Under the
auspices of the Carnegie Corporation, an effort was undertaken in the early 1920s
to rationalize the field (K nowles 1962; Lageman 1987; Stubblefield 1988). The
actions of the corporation led to the founding of the A merican A ssociation for
A dult Education (A A A E) in 1926. A ccording to Stubblefield and Keane (1994),
A A A E established the general boundaries of adult education. “Its leaders held
that adult education in a democracy must create informed citizens, promote
tolerance and understanding of differences, and maintain social stability. T his
concept of education’s role and of the existing social structure precluded any type
of support for a type of adult education that would address conditions related to
class or ethnicity” (p. 194).

Quoting Morse Cartwright, the first executive-director of the A A A E, Stubblefield
(1988) made clear the desire of the association to distance itself from other, more
controversial purveyors of adult education: “A dult education as an idea could not
be identified with immigrant education, workers’ education, university extension,
or with any aspect that ‘did not make directly for a safe, sane and careful up
building of the central idea of adult education as a continuing cultural process
pursued without ulterior purpose’” (p. 28).

Concerned almost exclusively with the idea of extending liberal education to large
numbers of citizens, adult education as a discrete field of practice isolated itself
from other, closely related disciplines. A lthough they often used similar ap-
proaches to enhance the learning experiences of working adults, a sharp line of
demarcation developed between workers’ education/labor education and propo-
nents of adult education. Similarly, the successor organization to A A A E, the
A dult Education A ssociation, rejected an overture for merger from the A STD in
1958. A lthough pedagogically all three subspecialties share many common as-
sumptions and approaches about education, each has veered off in very specific, and sometimes conflicting, directions, based largely on the individual constituencies they serve.

The institutionalization of the labor movement in the aftermath of the Depression and World War II had a profound impact on workers' education (Dwyer 1977; Kornbluh 1987; Peters and McCarrick 1975). Retreating from a concern over the general condition of wage earners in American society, it became increasingly focused on the needs of unions as organizations, according to Hewes (1956):

The major emphasis in today's programs is on training for specialized union services. Courses in steward training, union administration, public speaking, parliamentary procedure, and labor law are in great demand. The business of negotiating contracts requires knowledge of job analysis, time study, and a variety of technical subjects required by today's industrial organization. These are not adapted for the rank and file, whose needs of a different kind are often neglected. (p. 215)

A reflection of this change was the growing use of the term “labor education” rather than workers’ education. The name change reflected the desire of both union leaders and university-based education programs to purge the field of any taint of its more radical roots and to make it a respectable discipline that could withstand the scrutiny of Cold War anticommunism. Despite this shift to the ideological right, one aspect of workers’ education/labor education remained the same; it rejected any identification with vocational education.

According to Hewes, “By general agreement workers’ education has always been distinguished from training in trade skills to attain higher wages.” Acknowledging its links with adult education, she pointed out that the workers’ education held out “no promises of gain to the individual worker-student” (p. 214).

What it did offer workers was the chance to become engaged with the cultural and political institutions of a democratic society that could produce better conditions for all working men and women in the long run. Starr (1951) felt that it was important for organized labor to establish cooperative relationships with existing organizations that provided vocational education and technical training but that unions should not try to provide such services by themselves.

The types of vocational training relationships envisioned by Starr did flourish in the construction trades and in a variety of industries where partnerships between unions, employers and, in some cases, government, helped to establish third-party training entities. Beyond such efforts, however, unions and labor education programs generally shied away from active involvement in providing skills training for workers. This was largely an outgrowth of the structure of existing collective bargaining relationships. The issues of vocational preparation or skills upgrading remained firmly in the sphere of management’s rights. In exchange for annual improvements in wages, benefits, and working conditions, organized labor gener-
ally removed itself from playing any significant role in the daily operation of the workplace, including the organization of work processes and the development of the work force (Marshall and Tucker 1992).

The dramatic, rapid changes that occurred throughout the U.S. economy in the 1970s and 1980s forced the labor movement to rethink many basic assumptions. An increasing inability to secure decent contracts widened the existing gap that had developed between the leadership of unions and their members. Employer efforts to institute teamwork, statistical process control, total quality management, and other innovations put additional pressure on unions to question long-held assumptions and policies. As union density continued to decline, organized labor and some labor education practitioners began to think more broadly about the role of the labor movement in relation to the needs of individual union members.

The Human Resources Development Institute, established by the AFL-CIO in 1968, played a key role in defining the parameters of labor's involvement in the realm of work-related training and education. Their efforts and those of labor leaders on the state and local level took on an added urgency as plant closings and workplace change efforts accelerated in the 1970s (McMillan 1991).

Labor's involvement in retraining, basic literacy training or skills upgrading is shaped both by strategic concerns and educational philosophy. This was spelled out in an AFL-CIO report on union involvement in training (Roberts and Wozniak 1994). According to the report, “well-planned innovative and carefully designed joint training, education and employee development strategies can improve labor-management relations and workplace morale, raise productivity, and strengthen employment security and mobility for workers by equipping them with a wide range of transferable skills” (p. 1).

In an era of diminished power, unions can ill afford to cede further terrain to management. In exchange for labor's involvement in restructuring work, many employers, albeit reluctantly, have agreed to joint training programs that give unions significant control over their scope, structure and content (Appelbaum and Batt 1994; Cohen-Rosenthal and Burton 1987).

These types of programs differ markedly from traditional company training, according to Ferman and Hoyman (1991). In their view, employers “are concerned with the internal labor market and with making the company more competitive by increasing the human capital stock of its workers. The goals are to provide for mobility in the internal market by developing or upgrading workers' skills so as to fill existing needs of the plant or company” (pp. 186-187). Ferman and Hoyman believe that joint programs reflect a very different agenda, shaped in large part by the input of unions. “In contrast, joint training programs are participant-driven. The emphasis is career development and lifetime employment. The program is structured on the expressed needs of the worker, not the job needs of the plant” (p. 187), a view echoed by Savoie and Cutcher-Gershenfeld (1991).
In attempting to maintain its organizational position in the workplace, the labor movement has interjected an educational philosophy into the formulation of work-based training and education that mirrors its ambivalent relation to adult education. Advocates of worker-centered learning share the belief of adult educators that wage earners, both as individuals and members of institutions, must have input into, and control over, the learning process. Drawing heavily on the work of Freire (1985), they are increasingly adopting the position that individual empowerment through learning is not enough; workers should use their ownership of knowledge to extend their social power as well (Heaney and Horton 1990; Jurmo 1989; Law and Sissons 1985).

Worker-centered learning, in its purest state, becomes a mechanism to accomplish two related goals. It prepares individual workers to function in a complex economic environment through the attainment of varied technical and personal skills. At the same time, it should move them toward an active role in rebuilding and strengthening the movement that helped to create opportunities for learning that meets their specific needs.

This formulation presents a major challenge to labor education. In much the same way that adult educators originally rejected organic ties to the professional training community, many labor educators, especially those based at institutions of higher learning, retain the belief that there is a distinct separation between education and training. Although this bifurcation is strongest in relation to joint labor-management processes, it has carried over into the more generalized environment of both “hard” and “soft” workplace skills preparation. More focused on the organizational needs of unions, labor education as a field has yet to embrace the broader issues embedded in the concept of worker-centered learning.

Although labor educators and adult educators continue to wrestle with their appropriate roles in relation to training and worker-centered learning, a number of unions have moved to operationalize many of its components. The next section examines some of these efforts. Of particular importance is the question of whether the direct participation of organized labor in the design and implementation of work-based education can really be considered worker-centered learning, or is it more a union variant of traditional management training practices? Similarly, does the existence of an active, independent voice for wage earners at the job site change the fundamental scope and nature of the learning that takes place there? Finally, if there are significant differences, what are the implications for wage earners, employers, and policymakers in terms of preparing Americans to be productive and creative workers?