

Productive and Participatory:
Basic Education for
High Performing and Actively Engaged Workers

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Introduction

The adult basic education field in the United States has experienced an ebb and flow of interest and investment in “worker education” over the past three decades. While the rhetoric around workplace basic skills tends to focus on such outcomes as productivity and competitiveness, some proponents of worker basic education see it as a tool for democratizing U.S. workplaces.

But efforts to use employee education to increase worker control, responsibility, and reward vis-à-vis workplace operations have been hindered by inadequate coordination; lack of sustained, accessible funding; and limited evaluation, documentation, and dissemination of program models. Further complicating these efforts is an economy in which the notion of “democracy in the workplace” is often seen as a vestige of food co-ops, labor unions, Saturn auto plants, and other allegedly marginalized experiments at worker decision-making and ownership.

But American workers, employers, educators, policy makers, and other stakeholders are now being challenged to think differently. We are being asked to rekindle the ingenuity and contribution of all workers, find new solutions to unemployment, be more competitive, and create a new kind of American economy. Those who are interested in creating economic models which rely on a highly-engaged workforce can learn from the past three decades of worker-centered education. Advocates for worker education as a tool for both worker productivity and more democratic workplaces now have an opportunity to fill a leadership gap in the adult education and workforce development fields.

This chapter summarizes how worker education programs have promoted “worker productivity” and “worker participation.” It then suggests how advocates for democratic workplaces can develop a new model of worker basic education which enables workers to contribute to organizational efficiency while also participating at high levels of control, responsibility, and reward vis-a-vis their work.

In What Ways Do Workers “Participate”?

When discussing how adult basic education can serve U.S. workers, it is important to be clear about what a “worker” is. “Being a worker” can mean many things, depending on:

Employment status

Is the individual a job seeker, incumbent worker connected to one employer, “free agent” (consultant/contractor) (Imel, 2001), or retiree (Stein, 2002)?

Venue for participation

Is the worker a job seeker trying to navigate the employment system external to a workplace? Is he/she an employee operating within a particular workplace owned by someone else? Or is the worker self-employed, operating within an organization owned by the employee and perhaps others?

Level of participation

At which of the following levels of participation is the worker operating?

- Level 1: Nominal participation: The worker is nominally present in the organization, doing part-time, contracted, and perhaps low-status and short-time work assignments with limited commitment by the worker and/or employer to an on-going relationship.
- Level 2: Actively following orders: The worker is actively engaged in carrying out work procedures that are defined by others.
- Level 3: Limited input in decision-making: The worker is given opportunities to give some input into how the organization is run, with final decisions made by others.
- Level 4: High level participation: The worker has high levels of control, responsibility, and reward vis-à-vis the work. This is where what is sometimes referred to as “workplace democracy” can occur.

What do workers need to participate at high levels?

To attain, retain, and participate effectively in a job, a worker needs both “career tools” and external supports:

“Career tools” are the strengths/assets that the worker possesses (Jurmo, 2008), including:

- transferable basic skills such as the communication, decision-making, interpersonal, and lifelong learning skills defined by the Equipped for the Future standards (Stein, 2000);

- other technical and cultural knowledge and skills required to navigate particular work systems;
- self-efficacy (a belief that one can achieve something valuable through effort) (Brown, 1999a);
- credentials (academic, occupational, legal) required for employment (Brown, 1999b);
- a career and educational plan (Wonacott, 2002; Comings at al, 2000)

External supports are found in the various institutions within which the worker functions. These supports are necessary if the worker is to be able to apply the above-described “career tools” to get to work each day and participate actively and productively in that workplace. Workers need to be able to manage housing, food, clothing, transportation, healthcare, childcare, and eldercare responsibilities if they are to be able to get to work. These personal supports are typically provided through collaboration with family members and/or other institutions. At the workplace, a worker needs to have tools, equipment, and a safe environment, as well as moral support, guidance, and efficient work procedures provided by employers, co-workers, and perhaps a labor union. Workers also need to be rewarded financially, with appropriate pay and benefits.

To participate at higher levels (Levels 3 and 4 above) within a workplace, workers not only need the above basic internal career tools and external supports but additional special tools and supports, as well. These include:

- leadership skills (e.g., critical thinking, teamwork, decision-making, conflict resolution, planning) and high levels of productivity skills (i.e., a strong ability to carry out the technical requirements of the work);
- a work environment that provides opportunities and incentives for workers to participate at high levels.

How Has Adult Basic Education Been Used to Prepare U.S. Adults for Work?

Historically, most adult basic education programs have focused at least in part on the goal of helping participants prepare for the world of work. They do this in response to funder requirements but also because most people who come to these programs are motivated by work-related goals: to get a job, perform a current job better and/or more comfortably, and prepare for career advancement. Many adult education programs use generic basic skills curricula to help their learners achieve their work-related goals on the grounds that these curricula help adults (a) develop portable basic skills they can use in any work-related task they face and/or (b) earn the GED that they need to move into better jobs and further education (Jurmo, 2004).

In the 1980s and early 1990s, there was a spurt in interest in creating special programs which focused specifically on work-related basic skills. Workplace literacy initiatives were established at national levels by federal agencies, trade associations, and labor unions, and at the state level (Jurmo, 1996). Special curricula (usually variations on

contextualized approaches) and program models were developed, to engage employers and unions in establishing worker basic skills programs to enhance worker productivity, ability to handle new work procedures and technologies, safety, and job security, while helping employers to stay competitive in a new global economy. The language surrounding these efforts tended to emphasize employer goals like “enhancing worker productivity” and “building business competitiveness.” However, some voices argued for an alternative, “worker-centered” view of worker basic education. (See next section.) While considerable work was done from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s to build workplace education models, support from federal and state agencies, employers, and labor unions declined significantly from the latter 1990s to today (Jurmo, 1998b; Imel, 2003; Rosen, 2008).

While the above workplace education initiatives focused primarily on the skills of incumbent (already employed) workers, from the early 1990s to today there has also been a fluctuating interest in how to ensure that unemployed out-of-school youth and adults are prepared to move into work. Every few years a new national report has stated that school-aged youth or various adult populations are not ready for the new U.S. workforce (Johnston and Packer, 1987; Venezky et al, 1987; Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 1990; Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 2006; National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2008). Most of these reports have argued for the kinds of contextualized learning approaches that were developed in the workplace basic education initiatives described above (Wrigley et al, 2003; Maguire et al, 2009; Center for Law and Social Policy, 2009).

How Have Adult Educators Focused on Helping U.S. Workers Participate at Higher Levels?

While much of the workplace education rhetoric focused on the need to upgrade workers’ basic skills for the sake of organizational productivity and competitiveness, there were a number of national, state, and local adult basic education initiatives aimed at helping workers participate at high levels of control, responsibility, and reward vis-a-vis their work. These efforts were largely carried out by (a) adult education professionals who were guided by participatory, learner-centered principles of adult learning and/or (b) workplace education professionals who wished to promote collaborative workplaces, workplace democracy, and/or social justice.

Proponents of what was sometimes called a “worker-centered” perspective questioned assumptions about worker basic education being circulated by the media and policy makers (Jurmo et al, 1994; Working for America Institute, 1999). “Worker-centered” proponents argued, for example, that the mainstream viewpoint too heavily favored employer interests and neglected workers’ (Harris, 2000), focused too heavily on training workers for immediate and/or narrow tasks rather than preparing them for longer-term success and advancement in a variety of jobs (Gowen, 1992), did not reflect the actual skill demands of U.S. jobs (Hull, 1993), and in some cases denigrated workers’ abilities (Schultz, 1992) or reduced workers to resources to be manipulated (Schied, 2001).

“Worker-centered” advocates made the case that workers need to be respected for their abilities and contributions and able to protect their self-interests in workplaces and an economy that presented a number of threats to worker well-being (Hull, 1997). These threats included significant job insecurity and reduced wages and benefits as jobs disappeared, were re-configured, or lost protections historically provided by employers, unions, and government policies (Sarmiento, 2001). To deal with these challenges, workers needed skills and knowledge to:

- protect themselves against unfair labor practices in their places of work: Workers need particular skills to be able to protect themselves against discrimination (by age, race, gender, disability, sexual orientation) and unsafe working conditions, unfair wage and benefit policies, and inappropriate work requirements. This self-protection can include being able to participate in a labor union.
- respond to changing working conditions and pursue new job opportunities within their companies, while ensuring that they retain appropriate wages, benefits, and rights.
- protect themselves in the event of layoff, by creating effective career plans, navigating unemployment systems, and otherwise taking action to secure meaningful, rewarding employment.
- participate in decisions regarding workplace practices and/or policies.
- create and operate their own businesses.
- prepare for and succeed in retirement.

Drawing on these worker-centered arguments, adult educators created programs designed to help workers meet the above goals. Many of these programs also focused on employer goals, on the grounds that for companies and workers to survive in a competitive economy, both stakeholder groups need to be supported (Working for America Institute, 2001). Examples are described below:

Curriculum frameworks and models

- The Equipped for the Future (EFF) Systems Reform Initiative (Spangenberg and Watson, 2003) advocated for the reforming of the U.S. adult basic education system. EFF expanded the concept of “basic skills” to include problem-solving, teamwork, planning, research, self-advocacy, conflict-resolution, and other key skills that workers need to participate actively in the job search process and in the workplace. EFF proposed the use of contextualized educational practices which focus instruction on real-world uses of basic skills relevant to learners. These practices would maximize learning efficiency and help learners see learning as a tool for achieving personally meaningful goals. EFF also argued that administrators, policy makers, and funders need to create an infrastructure to support this work and thereby develop a more rational system of adult basic education.
- Problem-Posing at Work: Some workplace education programs pushed participants to move beyond solving of problems defined by others to “problem

posing” (as defined by Paulo Freire). In this approach, workers are invited to identify problems in their workplaces, analyze contributing factors, identify potential solutions, and – in some cases – present their findings to supervisors. In upstate New York, employees in several manufacturing sites worked in teams to present recommendations to management for improving workplace operations (Jurmo, 1998a). In a company-sponsored employee education program at a corporate headquarters in New York City, mailroom staff analyzed how the conveyor system that delivered mail could be improved (author research). In California in the 1980s, an instructor worked with English language learner factory workers to take photos of various artifacts in the worksite (e.g., safety equipment) and use them to trigger theme-based discussions of workplace issues (Añorve, 1989).

- Understanding and Protecting Worker Rights: A number of curricula (Wallerstein and Auerbach, 1987) help workers understand and protect their rights as workers. In one example from the University of Massachusetts Labor Extension Program (2003), participants learn about “Your Pay and Your Paycheck,” “Rights of Workers Under Eighteen,” “Protection from Discrimination,” and “Unions and the Right to Organize.”
- Reflecting on Workplace Issues: In New England, adult educators engaged learners in research about the work histories of their family members; the hourly wage; “women’s work;” the challenges of balancing work and family life; unions, using the film “Norma Rae” in the classroom; homophobia, racism, and sexual harassment in the workplace; immigrants in the U.S. workplace; and workplace safety (New England Literacy Resource Center, 1998).
- Work-Readiness Curricula: Several “work-readiness” curricula (Equipped for the Future National Center, 2006) adapt the Equipped for the Future standards and focus in particular on problem-solving skills needed in a variety of workplace settings, including healthcare (Industry-Business Institute, 2009a) and the transportation/logistics/distribution industry (Industry-Business Institute, 2009b).
- Financial Literacy for Working Adults: Some financial literacy programs have been developed on the premise that adults not only need to be able to attain and retain employment and thereby earn income and benefits; workers also need to be able to manage their income and benefits in smart ways. In Albany, New York, community college instructors worked with a company’s human resources department to help employees to understand and efficiently manage the financial (e.g., investment plans), health, and vacation benefits available to them. The company saw this as a way to not only help employees maximize these benefits but to reduce the demands that workers were placing on human resources staff when they came asking for information, did not fill out forms correctly, or otherwise failed to perform the tasks that the new benefits packages required of workers (Jurmo, 1998a).

- Protecting Worker Health and Safety: Some curricula help lower-skilled adults maintain their health by learning about diet, exercise, stress management, risk avoidance, and dealing with healthcare providers and health insurance plans. Some programs also focus on how to avoid and deal with particular workplace hazards, including repetitive stress injuries, poor ergonomics, toxins, falls, fires, noise, eye injuries, and workplace violence. These programs argue that, for workers to be able to get a job, retain it, attend regularly, and avoid injury, they need to know how to maintain their health and safety (Utech, 2005).
- Leadership Development for Adult Learners: “Adult learner leadership” has been promoted by a national adult learner organization, several state-level learner groups, and at the program level within the adult literacy field. This is done through leadership training (at conferences and workshops), hiring of learners as staff, and creation of roles for learners on program boards and committees and as advocates and spokespersons. Advocates argue that, by practicing leadership skills within the supportive environment of an education program, learners are then prepared to transfer those skills to their roles in the workplace, family, and community.
- Career and Educational Planning: Some curricula help job seekers (unemployed individuals or incumbent workers who want to move into new positions) to develop career and educational plans. Learners identify career goals, explore career options, identify target jobs to pursue, decide how they will manage personal responsibilities (e.g., childcare, transportation, housing, manage personal finances, further education) that must be dealt with to successfully hold a job, prepare a plan for moving ahead to pursue a job, prepare a resume and cover letter, get ready for job interviews, and establish an ongoing support system (Colette et al, 1996; Women Employed, 2008; Oesch and Bouer, 2009; Industry-Business Institute, 2009).

Other Ways that Adult Education Programs Help Learners Prepare for High Levels of Workplace Participation

In addition to using instruction, adult education programs help learners for active roles in the workplace by:

- Creating leadership roles for learners within the program, as staff members, members of boards and committees, and as spokespersons and advocates.
- Providing a safe and positive environment where participants can try on new roles, meet new people, re-think who they are and what they want to achieve, fail and try again, and learn from the examples provide by staff and fellow students.
- Helping learners get access to support services (e.g., income, childcare, housing) which provide the practical and emotional supports they need to get a job and perform it with confidence.

What Advocates Can Do to Build a “Productivity through Participation” Approach

At a time when the need for a well-educated workforce continues to grow, those who see worker education as a tool for both worker productivity and more democratic workplaces now have an opportunity to fill a leadership gap in the field.

Outlined below are actions that advocates for a “productivity through participation” approach to worker basic education can take:

Re-think the model. In the past three decades, there has been a tendency to reduce the arguments for worker basic education into two camps: Those who favor an employer-oriented approach (emphasizing worker productivity and company competitiveness) and those who promote a worker-centered perspective (which stresses quality of work life -- including job security and meaningful roles -- for workers). Rather than see these as mutually exclusive goals, advocates for a worker-centered perspective might argue that both sets of goals must be achieved if companies are to survive and thrive and if workers are to stay employed and advance.

Build systems which adapt effective practices. There is a big tendency in the work-related basic education field to not learn from experience and research, to continually re-discover the worker basic skills issue, and to re-invent educational practices. The field thus never advances very far. Policy makers and practitioners should all take the time to learn from past experience, agree on guidelines for effective practice, and then continually refine those guidelines and associated practices.

Advocate for quality. At all levels – at the policy and funding level and within programs – practitioners need to continually advocate for effective practices and resist the urge to “just settle” for what we can get.

Persevere. Though workforce basic education has often been marginalized, we all need to persevere and remember that this work is vital to the building of a more productive and just economy.

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