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ABSTRACT

The globalization of business has influenced the development of customized, job-specific workplace literacy programs. Work-centered participatory literacy receives support from both business and labor and additional impetus from the National Literacy Act of 1991. The worker of the future will be a thinking and communicating problem solver. The three groups participating in the workplace literacy enterprise--employers, employees, and educators--would probably agree with the Act's purpose but differ in motivation, conception, and methods. While these differences might appear irreconcilable, they may end by producing a necessary perspective for enlightened workplace literacy programs. Most programs are still traditional, but this paper discusses three that are innovative: the Russell Athletic Corporation (Alabama) program; the program run by the ABC's of Construction (the Association of Builders and Contractors Union, Louisiana); and a Job Training and Partnership Act program called "Training Women for Non-Traditional Work," in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Although there are many "micro" successes at the grassroots level, there is a failure at the "macro" level of policy and management, due to insufficient attention to the learners served. Other problems come from unexamined assumptions about literacy and workplace literacy programs. An enlightened workplace literacy programs is likely to be a participatory or collaborative program where learners contribute on all levels. (Contains 24 references.) (NLA)

Workplace Literacy in the 90's:

Definitions, Descriptions, Opportunities, and Cautions

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If you have turned on the TV in the last four years or so, you have been bombarded with media hype for literacy programs. If you have thumbed pages of popular magazines like Time and Newsweek, you have read of lives transformed through literacy programs; and, so it's hinted, lives "lost" because of illiteracy. The 1988-1990 ad campaign of a coalition of literacy groups and the American Advertising Association (Skagan, 1986) has succeeded. American society believes the US is in crisis, a literacy crisis. Moreover, one of the major victims of that crisis is workplace USA.

Kairos in the Workplace

The perception of a literacy crisis creates *kairos*, a momentous opportunity, for workplace rhetoricians in the academy, business, industry, and government. The power structure is persuaded that workplace training in language is necessary, and the chance for funding programs has never been greater. Business is ready to act on the literacy problem; it is ready to pay for literacy programs for its employees; and it is ready to change literacy programs to meet specific workplace needs.

The mass marketing of the literacy crisis has made business ready to act. Business leaders have joined the front lines of the movement. Harold McGraw, Jr. of McGraw-Hill Publishing Co. established business' own political action coalition group, the Business Council for Effective Literacy (BCEL) in 1980. This organization publishes a fact-packed newsletter which describes literacy policies and programs. The BCEL also provides resources for companies' training departments and "literacy providers," the term the literacy enterprise uses for private and public, commercial and non-commercial literacy educators.

Dissatisfaction with traditional literacy programs has made business open to new kinds of programs. Although the effect of traditional literacy programs is difficult to measure, retention figures from the American Management Association in 1986 indicated that only twenty to fifty percent of students stayed with the traditional programs they began (p. 55). This spotty success record suggests that workplace literacy programs will continue to move away from traditional models. In fact, programs customized to specific workplaces are becoming so popular that the National Alliance of Business has produced a quick-fix approach, a "Literacy for the Workplace" series of videotapes and books (1992). According to the catalogue description, this series describes "what leading companies are doing" in workplace literacy, provides "a step-by-step demonstration" of program development, and shows companies how to customize programs to meet company needs. In addition, the series includes "worksheets to calculate the costs, benefits, and the return on investment," as well as providing guides "to assess and quantify indicators of illiteracy in the workplace using simple formulas" (p. 2).

The globalizing of American business may have contributed to the trend toward customized, job-specific programs. Large businesses are becoming increasingly multi-cultural in order to compete successfully the world over. These attitudes would seem likely to increase understanding of the diversity among a company's own employees. If so, workplace literacy programs may experience even greater curricular changes. Programs may change from the conventional, teacher-dominated structure to "participatory literacy" (Fingeret and Jurmo) where workers collaborate with literacy providers to instruct and manage their own programs. In fact, the worker-centered nature of participatory literacy receives support from both business and labor. Paul Jurmo, who is presently with the BCEL and Anthony Sarmiento with the AFL-CIO both support

workplace literacy programs with greater collaboration between workers and literacy providers in program development and execution (Fingeret and Jurmo; Sarmiento, Worker-Centered Literacy).

In addition to business' heightened awareness of the importance of a literate workforce, business' active financial participation in literacy efforts and willingness to try new approaches, business is open to literacy programs now because expectations of workers have increased. In effect, "literacy" is being redefined upwards to include more and greater skills. The old definition of literacy--basic skills in reading, writing, and math--is necessary but not sufficient for workers in the Information Age.

Consider the following list of skills for non-professional employees of the future.

> Knowing how to learn
> Reading, writing and computation
> Listening and oral communication
> Creative thinking and problem-solving
> Self-esteem, goal setting/motivation, and personal career development
> Interpersonal skills, negotiation, and teamwork
> Organizational effectiveness and leadership (Carnevale et al., 1988, p. 9)

The American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) compiled this list as the result of a comprehensive survey of employers in 1988. Only one of seven skills relates to the basic skills associated with literacy in the past.

The workplace is changing. No longer is the manually dexterous but non-thinking assembly-line worker the ideal. If the above list is any guide, the worker of USA 2000 will be a thinking and communicating problem-solver. The

purpose of this paper is to introduce general concepts of workplace literacy, to describe and critique three different programs and the milieu in which they operate, and to suggest how technical communicators and writing specialists might contribute to the workplace literacy enterprise.

Defining workplace literacy

What is workplace literacy?

A definition of the larger term "literacy" could answer that question somewhat. However, there is little consensus among researchers, literacy providers, business leaders, unions and workers on a definition for literacy. The necessity for policy making has stimulated the agreement that has occurred. The following definition of literacy became our government's official definition recently, after twelve literacy leaders deliberated on it for a year. According to the National Literacy Act of 1991,

> . . . the term "literacy" means an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential." (Sec. 3, Public Law 1-2-73, 7/25/91, 102cd Congress, 105 Stat. 333)

The overlap between the terms "literacy" and "workplace literacy" is obvious. It is unlikely that a twenty-first century American will be able to develop his/her knowledge and potential without some monetary power, which, for most, will come from work performed for others. And, if the ASTD is right, the success of that work will depend in large part, upon competent execution of the seven skills mentioned earlier. This connection between, literacy and success in life is highlighted in the Literacy Act's purpose statement which ties the mythic "American dream" to literacy. The 1991 National Literacy Act says that its purpose is " to enhance the literacy and basic skills of adults, to ensure that all

adults in the US acquire the basic skills necessary to function effectively and achieve the greatest possible opportunity in their work and in their lives . . ." (underlining mine).

The three groups participating in the workplace literacy enterprise--employer, employee, educator--would probably agree with the Act's purpose. The groups probably differ, however, despite the commonalty of the workplace they share, differ in motivations for literacy, conceptions of literacy, and acceptable methods for acquiring literacy. Although employer and employee may agree that good work is necessary to sell quality products or services, they most likely disagree on how that "good work" is to be evaluated and compensated. The employer and educator may agree that "good work" is more likely to come from literate employees, but they likely will disagree over subjects to be taught and methods of teaching those subjects. Finally, educators and employees may agree that employees' work and lives will likely improve as employee literacy improves, but they may disagree on the subjects and methods likely to improve that literacy.

These tensions affect the changing nature of a definition of workplace literacy. Whereas a skills definition--reading, writing, computation plus _____ (fill in this black with the needs of the moment)--has prevailed in the past and and has changed as work has changed, research on how literacy is acquired is showing the skills definition to be incomplete. Glynda Hull (1991) cites a telling passage from Simon, who said in 1983 (p. 243),

> 'Skill in our taken-for-granted sense of the word is something real, an objective set of requirements, an obvious necessity: what's needed to ride a bicycle, for example. It is a technical issue pure and simple. However, what is forgotten when we think about skills this way is that skills are

always defined with reference to some socially defined version of what constitutes competence.'

That is, Hull says, " . . . notions of generality and neutral technique" presuppose that workplace literacy is "abstract competencies" which are "context-free and universal." That notion belies the variety and the multiplicity of literate acts in the workplace and how they get accomplished. For Hull, also, workplace literacy is more "social practice" than "neutral technology" because different workplaces valorize different literate acts. Hull suggests a rival definition of workplace literacy which includes literacy's multiple manifestations in time and place. She sees workplace literacy as " . . . constructed practices which draw their meaning from social components of work and communities of workers" (23).

Hull's evaluation of skills-based definitions of workplace literacy explain why no one definition of the term has prevailed. Accepting a skills definition means opening oneself to seeing workplace literacy as only a "skills bundle" which contracts or expands with changing needs of the workplace.

These competing definitions--the operational skill-based definition from literacy providers and the descriptive definition from sociolinguists and anthropologists--would seem to be mutually exclusive. Philosophically, perhaps, they are. Practically, however, both provide a necessary perspective for an enlightened workplace literacy program. The operational definition specifies goals for learning and enables measurement; the descriptive definition provides understanding of the worker and her community that will make teaching successful.

Workplace Literacy Programs

Most workplace literacy programs are still traditional programs that companies set up or refer workers to or hire workers from. Programs have been

administered by adult education specialists, for the most part. Increasingly, however, these programs are becoming "job-specific." "Job-specific" is the term that workplace literacy proponent Jori Phillipi uses to distinguish workplace literacy from other forms of literacy. In fact, a report evaluating thirty-nine workplace literacy programs for the Department of Labor dates the beginning of workplace literacy to the first use of job-specific materials by Thomas Sticht in 1975 (Pelavin, 1991). Sticht found improved job performance from military personnel who used job-specific materials instead of general academic materials. Sticht's approach to literacy has come to be called the "functional context" approach because it advocates that the learner's context shape curricula. Characteristics of functional context programs are most clearly seen in specific workplace literacy programs.

Education at Russell Athletic Corporation

Education is important at Russell Athletic Corporation, an Alabama-based textile company which produces yarn and apparel at eighteen plants in the South. This company has a traditional reading and math basic skills program, which is available on computers twenty-four hours a day. Thirty percent of the skills material is job-specific, devised through a "literacy audit" by an adult education specialist. Russell's specialist studied the specific communication acts that workers use on the job. Then she turned these communication acts into goals and materials for Russell's program. Thus, Russell's literacy program might have a section on reading documents from the Occupational Safety and Health Agency (OSHA), as opposed to reading about the Revolutionary War, a topic typical of earlier literacy reading materials. In addition to their own training, Russell refers workers to local and state basic skills programs to work on their GED's. In fact, Russell gives workers time off to work on their GED's.

Other educational benefits that Russell provides its workers supplement their literacy emphasis for employees. For eight years the company has provided a ten-week reading program for employees' children at one of its eighteen plants. This program provides fifteen tutors for thirty children from the second to the sixth grade. The children meet twice a week for an hour and a half and show an average one-year gain after the course. In addition, Russell provides unique educational support by giving time off to parents for parent-teacher conferences. Since 1990, Russell workers have taken time off for 1200 parent teacher conferences. Given this kind of support for the workers from the company, I would suspect that the traditional basic skills programs work for Russell because Russell actively and monetarily supports education for its workers and their families.[1]

ABC's of Construction

The ABC's of Construction program is a construction skill apprentice program run by the Association of Builders and Contractors Union in south Louisiana, in conjunction with the Louisiana Department of Education and local business and industry. Fourteen hundred mostly white males from rural parishes are involved in this four-year program which, upon completion, will enable students to work at skilled crafts in the construction industry.

The ABC's program was developed because Louisiana's recession in oil and gas in the early 80's caused most certified journey craftsmen to leave the state. As a result, when the oil and gas industry began to revive in the late 80's, skilled workers were needed to build new facilities to meet more stringent requirements from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and OSHA. Not enough skilled workers were available, however, so the ABC Union decided to "grow" its own. In an arrangement with its client companies--companies along the Mississippi River like Dow, Exxon, Ethyl and Georgia-Pacific--a ten percent

surtax was added to each bid by all contractors bidding on every job. Then, the bid winner's ten percent was directed to the Union for training.

The literacy portion of ABC's apprentice program is voluntary--open entry, open exit. The program uses the "functional context" approach to literacy. This approach includes a literacy audit. In this case, for example, the literacy audit for skills in the building trades revealed a need for reading diagrams and charts; consequently, part of the reading program focuses on this job-specific skill.

Training Women for Non-Traditional Work

Training Women for Non-Traditional Work is a Jobs Training and Partnership Act (JTPA) program, a federal job skills program which must meet guidelines for dislocated workers under Title 3. The program has been located in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, for thirteen years. Twenty students are taught every thirteen weeks. Women attend class from eight to three Monday through Friday, taking courses in electricity, math, electro-mechanical principles and practice, employment preparation (interview skills, writing resumes and letters, etc.), and aerobics. When appropriate, women work with the program's job developer and are tutored in troublesome areas by instructors or computers. At night students complete four hours of homework. At the end of the program, or before, women may be hired at the entry level by electrical contractors, automotive businesses, painting contractors, etc.

This program's success is due to its business and industry partners and to a sensitive JTPA staff which translates changing workplace needs into a curriculum credible for a demanding workplace. An Industry Board meets once a month and advises the program of new needs. For example, the Board recommended the addition of computers as the workplace began to depend more on computers. The Board also recommended some basic chemistry be taught as companies became more concerned about environmental matters.

Moreover, when JTPA graduates were unable to perform the physically demanding labor their jobs required, the Board recommended an aerobics class which the women's program added. This Women in Non-Traditional Jobs program is a good example of how the definition of literacy as basic skills has changed; the workplace now requires competence in more and different areas than it has in the past.

Problems with workplace literacy programs and policies

The three programs described above are characteristic of the innovations that individual workplace literacy programs often achieve. According to anecdotal evidence, there are many such "micro" successes at the grass roots level (Pelavin, 1991). However, according to David Lawrence who evaluated the Modern Language Association's 1990 literacy conference, there is failure at the "macro level of policy and management" (5). Some of this failure is undoubtedly due to developing skills-based programs with insufficient attention to the community of learners being served. Other problems, however, come from macro-level, system-level failures that exist because of prevailing but problematic assumptions about literacy and the workplace.

Unexamined assumptions about literacy and workplace literacy programs

Four unexamined assumptions trickle down to adversely affect workplace literacy programs. First, employers assume that workplace literacy programs will lead to an improved bottom line. Second, the public believes that low literates are unintelligent.[2] Third, the public believes that literacy programs are open to those who need them. And, finally, employers and the educational establishment believe that workplace literacy programs can be evaluated like conventional education programs with standard measures. The three workplace literacy programs described earlier show some of the effects of accepting these assumptions.

Russell Athletics is acting on the first assumption--that an improved bottom line will result from its workplace literacy program. The Head of Education at Russell is in the midst of a pilot project with IBM to test Russell's workplace literacy program on all 170 workers at one plant. The department head said that an earlier test of sixty workers at another plant with 170 workers had not worked because not enough employees had been tested to show a difference in the plant's bottom line. Russell has assumed an unproven causal relationship between worker literacy and improved bottom line. Like many other companies jumping on the workplace literacy bandwagon, Russell believes that literacy leads to better job performance, which leads to greater productivity, which leads to an improved bottom line (Skagen, 1986).[3] Glynda Hull questions this reasoning (See Sarmiento and Kay, as well). Hull says that workers' poor literacy cannot be the sole reason for current problems in American business and therefore cannot be held solely responsible for improving companies' bottom lines. For proof she cites literature on work, notably the World Competitiveness Report (1989), which presents ten factors that affect a country's international competitiveness. Training falls within only one factor, that for human resources. Hull also cites Harvey Graff (1979, 1986) who has pointed out that great spurts of economic development have occurred in regions without high literacy. Graff calls the tendency to believe otherwise 'the literacy myth'.

Hull's insight is an important one. Believing that workplace literacy will improve bottom line is an oversimplistic reduction of a complex problem. For literacy providers the fallacy is fatal; it magnifies expectations of workplace literacy programs. If workplace literacy programs are instituted and bottom line does not improve, then literacy providers are at fault. Workplace literacy has promised more than it can deliver.

The second unexamined assumption--that low literates are also unintelligent--is a prejudice that educators have known about for some time. Hull mentions it also and cites literature on work that questions it. Kusterer (1978), for example, has shown that workers have considerable work knowledge. In addition, some ethnographic studies suggest that complex literate acts occur in workplaces where literacy would seem to be unimportant--at a dairy, for example (Jacob, 1986). Of course, writing specialists have been aware of the disjunction between writing ability and intelligence since basic writers first entered college classrooms in the open admissions environment of the early seventies (Shaughnessy, 1977).

The low-literacy-equals-intellectual-deficiency assumption has for workplace literacy damages thoughtful policy-making and program guidance. The failure to believe in workers' intelligence and capabilities leads to a low expectations prejudice that adversely affects curriculum and instruction. For example, the Director of the ABC's program says that she was unable to persuade the manager of her federal grant to buy calculators for the workers on her project. Although the government position may reflect its desire that grant money be spent on instruction rather than equipment, the implication of the prohibition was that calculators were technical, reserved for higher literates. The government maintained this position, even though supervisors who were role models for students carried calculators at all times.

Such bureaucratic prohibitions also exist in the entry requirements of some job skills and literacy programs. The training program for women in non-traditional jobs described earlier can only accept women who meet specific guidelines for dislocated workers. "Dislocated workers" are defined as those who have worked six months full-time in the last five years but currently are unemployed . The job that an applicant held during the previous five years is

termed her "career path." If the Jobs Services office in Baton Rouge has openings for a woman's "career path" at the time she applies to the non-traditional jobs program, then that woman cannot be accepted into the program. In practical terms, if an applicant has been a hamburger flipper during the past five years and such a position is open when that woman applies to the non-traditional jobs program, she cannot be accepted. Once a hamburger flipper, always a hamburger flipper.

The fourth and final unexamined assumption, that workplace literacy programs can be evaluated like standard educational programs, presents major problems to workplace literacy policy and practice. Standardized tests appear to be unsuitable for the populations they are measuring. For example, the Education Head at Russell said that scoring sheets for a test had to be redesigned because employees could not read the self-scoring sheets for the pre-test. That situation makes one question the efficacy of using a literate instrument to measure lack of literacy. If an employee cannot read a test, the test will not capture his/her knowledge.

There are other problems with standardized tests as well. Even if workers can record answers, workplace literacy providers say that standardized academic tests do not capture the knowledge of their adult students' work or lives. Five years into a literacy program for hourly workers at an automotive plant, Soifer, Young, and Irwin (1989) said that standardized tests were inappropriate for their program. Those tests could not "satisfactorily assess the affective and cognitive results" (p. 70) of instruction. The Pelavin report on thirty-nine workplace literacy grants in effect from 1988-89 reported such dissatisfaction as well. That report catalogued the many tests workplace literacy programs have found inadequate. Some of those tests found wanting were the Test of Adult Basic Education, the Adult Basic Learning Examination, and the

Wide Range Achievement Test. Another type of standardized test, the life skills test which measures functional competencies, is being tried now. One example is a new test for young adults from the Educational Testing Service (ETS).

The ETS test is a test of functional skills. It has three sections: one on the ability to read prose--finding information in a sports article, for example; a second section on the ability to read documents--map use, for example; and a quantitative section where the ability to calculate is checked by calculating the tip on a restaurant tab (*BCEL Newsletter*, Oct. 1991). Whether or not this test or other life skills tests will be appropriate for the workplace remains to be seen.

ETS' development of the new test reflects the educational establishment's belief that workplace literacy can be quantified and standardized. In fact, Pelavin Associates recommended some form of standard evaluation for future workplace literacy programs, despite its catalogue of programs which found standard evaluation unsuitable. That report found the anecdotal evidence of workplace literacy program success--interviews with participants and participants' supervisors, participants' lists of books read, writing samples, teacher-made pre and post tests and attendance records, etc.--unconvincing.

In addition to practical problems with and theoretical questions about using standardized tests to measure workplace literacy, there are major attitudinal questions about testing workers. Workers' self-images for test-taking are often very low because of past failures on similar instruments in school. These attitudes often adversely affect scores. In addition, many workers are skeptical of testing. They may believe, as one workplace literacy provider stated, that literacy tests will be " . . . used to admit a few and eliminate many" (Anorve, p.40). As Tony Sarmiento of the AFL-CIO explains,

> As the most vulnerable participants in the proposed activity, many workers will be highly skeptical when they examine the employer's overall record

> and not merely the most recent promises. Based on their own first-hand knowledge of this larger context, workers will decide if the literacy audit is likely to lead to a literacy program or to literacy 'triage'--a screening and evaluation process to identify for the employer who would be cost-effective to retrain and who should be let go (WorkAmerica).

Consequently, organized labor suggests that unions be equal partners with employers from the development of a workplace literacy program throughout its execution and evaluation (Sarmiento and Kay).

Evaluation presents a tremendous challenge to workplace literacy programs. The goal--to measure "adult competencies in the US"--is huge (Sarmiento, Forum, p. 67). How can workplace literacy be measured when work and workers vary so greatly? How can a literate instrument like a test capture working knowledge for a low literate whose entire experience with tests is that of failure and who may be suspicious of her employer's purpose for testing? The Pelavin report may be missing the mark in recommending standardized evaluation for all workplace literacy programs. Even if a series of standardized tests could be developed for different occupations, the changing nature of work is likely to make such tests outdated. Rather, a portfolio of "soft evidence" like that already used in workplace literacy programs may describe a worker's progress more accurately. Workplace literacy professionals may find that they have to insist on such measures being included, just as writing professionals have insisted that writing evaluation include writing samples.

Workplace literacy and Technical Communicators

Analyzing micro and macro levels of the workplace literacy enterprise presents the following truths-of-the-moment :

1. First, literacy is not monolithic--a one-size-fits all competence--and it will not be so in the future. In the workplace, the nature of competence will change as the nature of work changes.
2. Workplace literacy programs and the competencies they promise are not a panacea for all problems in American business, and they are unlikely to be the sole cause for increases and decreases in bottom line.
3. Low literacy does not equal limited knowledge or low ability.
4. Workplace literacy programs are not available to all who want or need them.
5. Traditional literacy programs have a spotty success record; retention is low. Lack of retention may be due to use of traditional school methods, materials, and measures.

Thinking of literacy as rhetorically situated presents an insightful but partial picture of the history of that enterprise. A rhetorical triangle of the major players and purposes in the literacy enterprise has the following characteristics. The school or employer's literacy message occupies the writer point of the triangle because the power structure sends the literacy message. The worker/learner becomes the audience point, and the subject/skill the message point. Seen in these terms literacy programs of the past have focused on only the power structure's agendas, that is, the religious and moral instruction in the nineteenth century and the basic skills instruction for society's "disadvantaged" in the 1960's and early 70's. In the late 70's and 80's workplace literacy enlarged its focus to include the subject point of the triangle by adding job-specific forms of reading, writing, and computation to the curriculum. In the 90's, workplace literacy has enlarged again, finally, to consider the third point of the triangle, the worker/learner.

An enlightened workplace literacy program which considers all three points of the rhetorical triangle--employer, job-specific subject, and worker--is likely to be a participatory literacy or collaborative literacy program where learners contribute on all levels to their own programs. This program is likely to have contextualized rather than academic subjects and to respect workers' differences. The knowledge of how literacy is attained in different communities will be used to select appropriate teaching methods for workers, as the societal context of the workplace becomes as great a contributor to program design as is the job workers are expected to perform. Anecdotal evidence will prevail in evaluation, as literacy providers stand firm in their rejection of unsuitable standardized tests, and the changing nature of work makes developing standardized job-specific tests too costly an option. Business' knowledge of and attitudes toward language competence will enlarge as technical communicators and writing consultants help business, government and industry overhaul some of the unreadable documents which have undoubtedly contributed to the literacy problem in the workplace. Moreover, business' need for communication competence will increase where teamwork or Total Quality Management (TQM) supplants hierarchical organization.

Workplace literacy is ripe for input from technical communication and writing specialists because concepts of literacy and workplace literacy are changing. In fact, we are uniquely equipped to contribute to workplace literacy. I say this for three reasons. First, we know the workplace. We work there; we do research there; we teach those who work there. Second, our knowledge of theory and research on communication is broad, deep and diverse. Technical communication is based solidly on rhetorical theory--we draw our principles from both classical and modern theories. In addition, we have imported and modified qualitative and quantitative research methods from numerous

disciplines to help us answer questions about the doing and teaching of technical communication. Third, and finally, we have rich pedagogical knowledge which promises to equip us to reach a diverse group of workers. On the one hand, we have taught workplace professionals in our consulting. On the other, we have developed successful approaches for the basic writers who began entering writing courses in the early seventies. We have developed, taught, and administered writing centers for students who needed individualized pedagogies for their specific problems. We have tailored all our courses to the growing numbers of ESL students. Many of us have taught critical reading in composition and literature courses. Finally, some of us rewrite the business and industry manuals workers are reading. Our knowledge of the workplace, our knowledge of theory and research, and our knowledge of pedagogy uniquely equip us to contribute to workplace literacy programs.

How should technical communicators and writing specialists contribute to improved literacy in the workplace? Carefully. Although literacy specialists may seek us for our extensive language expertise, our abilities as rhetoricians will make or break our collaboration in the workplace literacy enterprise. It will be as important to present our analyses of workplace situations delicately as it is to present them honestly. Our new, quasi-outsider perspective is important to workplace literacy specialists, but any contribution we make is only possible because of adult educators' twenty years of work with literacy.

The nature of collaborative workplace literacy programs requires workplace rhetoricians who know and appreciate the particulars of different businesses and the particulars of different work communities who bring different agendas to the workplace. We can help adult educators, vocational educators, volunteer literacy groups--all those who have labored in the literacy vineyard--to

answer the major curricular question in workplace literacy: What does reading, writing, listening, etc., mean for these workers, in this organization, at this time, under these job conditions? If we answer this question sensitively, workplace literacy programs can represent value added to both employer and employee.

Notes

1. The Education Department at Russell receives input from an Advisory Committee comprised of different levels of employees.

2. Glynda Hull mentioned the first two unproved assumptions in a 1991 report to the National Center for Research in Vocational Education. The second unproved assumption, that low literates are unintelligent, has been noted by basic skills instructors for years and appears debunked most prominently in organized labor's guidelines for a workplace literacy program (Sarmiento and Kay, 1990).

3. Indeed, a major government "how-to" guide is called The Bottom Line: Basic Skills in the Workplace (1988).

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