THE LIMITS OF THE POSSIBLE: THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF WORKER-CENTRED LITERACY IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM

by

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study is to outline the limits and possibilities for change that worker-centred literacy offers in the context of global capitalism. To this end, this study examines contemporary Canadian discourses of 'workplace literacy' in the new knowledge-based economy and, in particular, explores how the emerging discourse of 'worker-centred literacy' replicates and resists the current emphasis on learning for work. Generally, 'workplace literacy' refers to adult literacy or basic skills programs that take place in work sites, sometimes on work time and usually with skill-based curricula. 'Worker-centred literacy' refers to certain approaches developed or championed by trade union organizations for their members in unionized worksites. Union organizations do not all endorse a worker-centred approach. There is currently a range of notions about the goals of literacy programming at work, from the development of a more productive, flexible and responsive workforce, to the personal and/or political empowerment of learners/workers. In this study, the 'talk' about these literacies will be analyzed in order to explicate the conflicting sets of interests and political perspectives they represent and the tensions between their competing theories of knowledge making.

The main focus of this study will be an exploration of worker-centred literacy as an oppositional, counter-hegemonic discourse. First, this study will examine why and how labour literacy activists articulate an agenda for literacy that is oppositional to the dominant discourse, with its focus on learning that is geared towards work, and on the skills deficits of Canadian workers. This study will also examine the tensions inherent within the worker-centred approach itself, and the ways in which this project both reproduces and reforms the dominant discourse. Finally, this study will examine worker-centred literacy and the work of labour literacy activists in relation to the evolving role of the labour movement in contemporary Canadian society. This study will conclude that labour literacy activists posit worker-centred literacy as a catalyst for changing the relationship between unions and their membership, and, thereby, for expanding and modernizing the role of unions in response to the pressures of global capitalism.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION, THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.1 Introduction

With reference to Rachel Blau du Plessis' (1987) essay *For the Etruscans* this paper will argue that worker-centred literacy is "(ambiguously) non-hegemonic" (in Rylance, p. 269). Like workplace literacy as a whole, worker-centred literacy is situated on the front line in the war of position between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces. To paraphrase Blau du Plessis, worker-centred literacy has residual elements that posit as a tool for building an inclusive and democratic society. It is also oppositional to the reigning dominant paradigm, which describes the low literacy and skill levels of Canadian workers as a chief contributor to economic woes, and prescribes a competency-based, outcomes-oriented approach to workplace learning as a solution. Contrastingly, worker-centred literacy offers many alternative sources of conditions and consciousness for working people and for the working class. Yet, this approach is joined to the dominant, productivity-oriented system of meanings and practices by its location within the workplace and the trade union.

Worker-centred literacy provides working people with a dual opportunity for advancement and resistance. In some ways, this ambiguity reflects a pragmatic adjustment on the part of labour literacy activists, who may acknowledge that in order to create opportunities for change, some degree of collaboration with the dominant elements is necessary.

However, I will also argue that the ambiguity of worker-centred literacy is reflective of the position that trade unionism itself occupies in relation to capitalism. Unions seek to change the dominant system in favour of one that is more equitable and just for working people and for the working class, while simultaneously seeking to secure better outcomes for their members within the exiting system. In Freirean terms, unions take a stance of both "adhesion" and resistance to the "oppressor" (Freire, 1968/1972, p. 30).
I will demonstrate that this ambiguous position is reflected in both the theory and practice of worker-centred literacy. Worker-centred literacy aims to carve out access for working people to the opportunities and credentials of the dominant system, and, as such, represents an attitude of adhesion. However, when considered from the perspective of a dominant system that prescribes for many working people educational opportunities that are, at best, exploitative and simplistic, simply having a space and an occasion to work towards one’s own goals may be in and of itself a radical event. Further, worker-centred literacy programs may be able to offer moments of personal transformation and shifts in relations of power. However, this does not imply that they are necessarily able to produce any empirical change in the structures of oppression.

For advocates of worker-centred literacy, then, existing in the system of meanings and values that structure literacy learning at work and within unions may be a divided consciousness, envisioning freedom, yet struggling against the limitations of their contexts, and, many cases, their own consciousnesses.

### 1.2 Theoretical Framework

This study will explore the following broad questions:

- How is workplace literacy discussed within the dominant discourse of the knowledge society? How does the dominant discourse frame the ‘problem’ of workplace literacy, and what kinds of programmatic ‘solutions’ does this discourse propose? What particular economic and political standpoints and interests does this discourse represent and serve?

- How does the union-based discourse resist and/or reproduce the dominant paradigm? How is worker-centred literacy discussed within the discourse of labour literacy activism? How do labour literacy activists frame the ‘problem’ of workplace literacy, and what kinds of programmatic ‘solutions’ does this discourse propose? What economic and political standpoints and interests does this discourse represent and serve?
What directions for labour education and the labour movement in general do labour literacy activists propose?

In pursuing these questions, this study will engage, in part, in a critical analysis of the discourses of workplace literacy. The theoretical approach used will be influenced by the post-structuralist discourse-oriented work of Michel Foucault (1972, 1973, 1990) as well as Dorothy Smith (1999), Stephen Ball (1990) and Nancy Fraser (1989). Borrowing from Foucault (1972), this study will posit that the effects of truth are produced within the discourses of workplace literacy, although the discourses themselves are neither true nor false (p. 118). Accordingly the need for increased workplace literacy in Canada—indeed, what some have called the 'crisis' of workplace literacy—is a truth historically constituted and politically maintained through sets of statements that are themselves infused with the power of truth; e.g. literate workers are more productive workers; low levels of literacy are having a negative impact on the ability of Canadian corporations to compete in the global marketplace; the new economy requires brains, not brawn; etc.

Questioning these taken-for-granted assumptions is important, since “posing for discourse the question of power means basically to ask whom does the discourse serve?” (p. 115). This study will ask who is served by the dominant discourse on workplace literacy, and whose interests does the emerging, alternative discourse of worker-centred literacy serve.

In exploring these questions, this study will adopt Foucault's notion of power as “not an institution and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the same one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society” (1990, p. 93). This study will link Foucault's notion of power as a complex strategic situation in a particular society to Fraser's (1989) concept of “the Social,” which she describes as a “complex and polyvalent nexus of compromise formations in which are sedimented the outcomes of past and future struggles as well as the conditions for present and future ones” (p. 157). Also relevant is Ball's (1990) conceptualization of social policy as “not simply a direct response to dominant interests... but... responding to a complex and
heterogeneous configuration of elements (including ideologies that are residual or emergent, as well as the currently dominant”) (p. 3). These views of the complex, interactive nature of power encourage researchers to look not for instances of opposing forces, but for the location of different interests’ interactions.

Building on these premises, this study will posit ‘talk’ about the needs and goals of workplace literacy programs as a political discourse functioning as a “medium for the making and contesting of various political claims” (Fraser, 1989, p. 161). Thus, the discourse of workplace literacy will be examined as a ‘site of struggle’ among competing interests, including ideologies of workplace literacy and adult education that are residual and emergent, as well as those that are currently dominant. This approach will guide this study’s examination of the current policy terrain of workplace literacy, and of how labour organizers position themselves within the complex nexus of interests, ideologies, compromises and strategies that make up this moment in workplace literacy policy formation, and in the relationship of unions to their memberships, the labour movement, and capital. In particular, this study will show how the discourse of workplace literacy posits worker skills shortages as a ‘problem’ in the current direction of economic and social development, and will also demonstrate how the ‘solutions’ proposed flow directly from the way this problem is presented and represented. However, workplace literacy discourse is not a closed system, but the site of conflict among competing interests, including residual and emergent discourses of workplace literacy. This study will argue that labour literacy activists seek to position their project at the fissures and openings in the dominant hegemonic discourse in order to advance, both materially and ideologically, their notion of an alternative, worker-centred literacy. Further, this study will examine the discourse of labour literacy activists in order to articulate their alternative representations of both the ‘problem’ of workplace literacy and its ‘solution’. However, this study will show that the discourse of labour literacy activists is not a closed system either, but is also the site of competing claims and interests. Labour discourse is ambiguous - it both resists and reproduces the dominant perspectives.
Fraser (1989) proposes a “framework for inquiry” for understanding the way that power functions within discourses, such as the discourses of workplace literacy (p. 145). My discussion thus far has been relevant to what Fraser calls the “ideological” aspect of this analytical framework, in that it has been concerned with how policy-makers and labour literacy activists ‘talk’ about workplace literacy. This ideological investigation has been concerned with questioning “the typical way in which issues get framed, given the institutional dynamics of the political system” (p. 145). I have proposed to look at how workplace literacy is framed in policy ‘talk’ and the ‘talk’ of labour organizers, and how these discourses both define and confine workplace literacy needs and outcomes. In Ball’s (1990) words, my investigation of this ideological space has proposed to examine “the limits of the possible” for workplace literacy policy and programming, and the role of different sub-discourses in transmitting or resisting the dominant culture (p. 11).

However, as both Fraser (1989) and Ball (1990) suggest, an ideological inquiry is just one way to investigate the terrain of workplace literacy policy and practice. Fraser suggests that there is also a structural aspect to the inquiry framework, and Ball suggests a similar, political-economic aspect (Fraser, p. 145; Ball, p. 10). In a related notion, Smith’s (1999) discussion of “the ruling relations,” or “the complex of objectified social relations that organize and regulate our lives in contemporary society,” identifies these relations as having both “abstracted discourses and forms of organization creating the matrix of a consciousness outside the local and particular” and also, “the local particularities of everyday experience” (p. 73). The mutually re-enforcing inter-play of ideological and structural, political-economic and material discursive elements recalls Althusser’s (1971) ‘total social system’, or the process of interpellation in concrete social practices and institutions. According to Althusser, ideology belongs to the domain of consciousness, but it is also a material practice that is manifested and reproduced in concrete practices (p. 168).

Whereas the ideological aspects of discourses are linked, in the theories of Fraser (1989) and Ball (1990), to political-economic and structural elements, Smith’s (1999) is a rather more intimate notion, linking ideology, consciousness and “everyday/ everynight
activities” (p. 73). The point, though, is that ‘the complex of objectified social relations’ represented in and by both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses have tangible, material, experiential elements as well as ideological aspects. This study will engage in a rigorous discourse analysis that explores all of these elements and the interactions among them.

Using these notions, this study will engage in an investigation of the ideological, structural, political-economic and material aspects of workplace literacy discourses. This study will investigate how the dominant and alternative discourses frame, in ideological terms, the problem of, and the solution to, contemporary workplace literacy issues. This analysis will also consider the socio-economic context in which workplace literacy programs are promoted, i.e. the funding, resources and support offered to workplace literacy by government, industry and labour. This study will question the contribution that workplace literacy makes to productivity. This study will also examine the material, structural reality of workplace literacy, as seen through program manuals and other related material. These analytical approaches address the position of workplace literacies in relation to ‘capital’ (Ball, 1990, p. 10).

In particular, this study will suggest that the current surge of interest in workplace literacy is linked discursively to the requirements of the global economy, even as the discourse glosses over the worst effects of that economy on marginalized workers. The rhetoric surrounding the new ‘knowledge society’ implies that training and education will lead to greater individual contributions to capital, and, thus, to greater gains for the individual and society as a whole. However, the actual position of workers in the socio-economic system suggests otherwise, as does the actual funding (or lack thereof) for workplace literacy. This study will argue that labour literacy activists propose a transformational vision of and for literacy, but relative lack of support for their project from governments and employers - and even from within their own union organizations - poses challenges to their vision. As a result, labour literacy activists pull back from some of the more radical aspects of their agenda for literacy, or to work towards them in more subversive or strategic ways. The barriers that labour literacy activists encounter within
the labour camp suggests that labour as a whole may yet be reticent to reposition its relationship with capital, at least as far as its most marginal members are concerned.

In investigating the claims made by the dominant and labour-based discourses on workplace literacies, I will draw on adult education literature in order to ‘unpack’ the epistemological implications of various discursive claims. Specifically, this study will draw on theories about liberal, humanist and critical approaches to adult education in order to explicate the ways in which the policies and programs proposed by both the dominant and alternative, labour-based approaches to education are geared towards replicating or towards resisting the status quo. I am interested in whether the approaches to workplace literacy proposed by these two, broad perspectives imply and deliver learning processes that reproduce the position of learners within existing structured relational and power dynamics, that empower and include learners within these structures, or that fundamentally challenge these structures. In discussing the worker-centred approach to literacy, I will carefully ‘tease out’ the liberal and the critical elements of this approach. I will take the position, outlined by Stephen Brookfield (2001), that:

a critical theory of adult learning should focus on how adults learn to recognize and challenge ideological domination and manipulation. Such learning is necessary if adults are to counteract the continuous reproduction of blatantly unequal structures and create more inclusive democratic arrangements (p. 7).

Finally, I will rely on political-economic literature related to the ‘New Work Order’, and the role of the welfare state in post-Fordist society, Human Capital Theory, Labour Process Theory and Skilling/Deskilling theories. I will also reference literature from critical social theory, particularly theories of oppositional and subversive social spaces.

1.3 Research Methodology

To undertake this study, I gathered and examined, using a discourse-oriented approach, a variety of policy and program documents and texts from the fields of workplace and worker-centred literacy. Sources include the Government of Canada, the Government of British Columbia, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Statistics Canada,
the Ontario Ministry of Skills Development, the Conference Board of Canada, the National Literacy Secretariat, the Western Canada Workplace Essential Skills Training Network (WWestNet), the Workplace Education Development Project, the Canadian Labour Congress, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the Hospital Employees’ Union of British Columbia and Capilano College. I also designed, implemented and analyzed interviews with five key players in the labour literacy movement ("labour literacy activists," of which more will be said below). Finally, I gathered and examined program manuals and curriculum material from three worker-centred literacy initiatives, Basic Education for Skills Training (two versions of this program) and Learning and Education Assisted by Peers, of which more will be said below.

My analysis of these documents and texts is divided into three main areas:

1.3.1 Policy Analysis

Chapter Three, the Policy Context of Workplace Literacy, engages in a policy-oriented analysis of certain key workplace literacy documents, mostly from the Canadian Government and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (formerly Human Resources Development Canada). Subsequent chapters, especially Chapters Four and Five, introduce labour-based policy documents and texts, especially from the Canadian Labour Congress, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the Hospital Employees’ Union of British Columbia and Capilano College. I felt I could include the college material as part of the analysis of labour texts, since the material in question was written either for or with union partners.

In choosing among the many policy documents to analyze, I decided to target a few key, recent documents. I chose documents specifically focused on workplace literacy as opposed to literacy in general. Rather than aiming for a broad overview of many texts, I engaged in detailed textual exegeses of these select documents. I relied on political, economic, social theory and adult education literature to guide me in investigating the implications of the policy themes for literacy and learning at work.
1.3.2 Interviews and Interviewees

The primary new contribution of this study will be the discourse analysis of interviews with labour literacy activists. These labour literacy activists are individuals involved in promoting a worker-centred approach to literacy within labour unions, including articulating and implementing worker-centred literacy programs for their unions’ members. It should be noted that the worker-centred approach is not adopted by all union organizations in Canada, and so my interview data is not representative of labour perspectives on workplace literacy as a whole.

In 2003-2004, I designed interviews and carried them out with six labour literacy activists, of which four are used in this paper. I sent the interviewees copies of the research questions in advance, and obtained written consent from all of the interviewees to use the data in this paper. All documentation is appended.

In August 2004, I conducted an interview with Robert Wedel, workplace literacy instructor at Capilano College in North Vancouver, British Columbia, and my co-worker and friend. With Rob’s permission, I have used that interview as data in this study. Parts of this interview have been published in *Literacies* (2004.)

All interviewees agreed to be identified. In fact, it would have been a challenge to keep their identities concealed, given the small number of people in Canada who engage in the field of worker-centred literacy. They are all local, regional and national leaders in the field of worker-centred literacy. I have, therefore, taken no particular precautions around confidentiality; although neither have I found it necessary to spell out exactly who these individuals are. Where the identity of an individual other than an interviewee might be revealed through the interview data, I have taken pains to conceal it.

To position them, two interviewees direct the literacy projects of national labour organizations. One interviewee works on literacy at a regional level within a national union. One is a local activist who was involved in implementing a literacy program in his workplace. One is a college-based adult education instructor who has worked
extensively in collaboration with labour partners to develop and implement the worker-centred approach to literacy. Together, they are representatives from a national labour umbrella organization, a national public sector union, a national private sector union, a provincial public sector union and a provincial public sector educator's union. It should be noted that these activists represent their own views, and not those of their organizations, although in some cases the policy manuals and program materials that also form part of my analysis were written by them.

As mentioned, I decided not to use in this study the data from two of the interviews I conducted. The findings were thematically relevant, but the two individuals were involved in programs other than the ones I describe and analyze in this paper, and I felt that giving them a proper history and contextualization would make this study too long.

In engaging in a qualitative discourse analysis of these interviews, I looked for key themes that were repeated by all interviewees, and themes that were particular to individual perspectives. I compared and contrasted these to themes I had identified in the dominant workplace literacy policy framework, to themes from the literature on liberal, humanist and critical approaches to adult education and to themes from the political-economic and social policy literature.

My research questions changed from the time I designed and conducted the interviews, to the time I actually engaged in the analysis and wrote up the research. I chose to focus on how the interviewees talked about their beliefs about workplace literacy in order to explicate some of the underlying principles of a worker-centred approach. In some ways, I took this direction from the interview data itself, as I found that, in the interviews, we talked about what literacy means to us, rather than specifically about how to evaluate a worker-centred literacy program, which was my original intent.

1.3.3 Program Selection and Analysis

Another part of this discourse analysis concerns program material from three worker-centred literacy programs: the Ontario Federation of Labour’s BEST program, and, in
British Columbia, the Hospital Employees’ Union BEST program and the LEAP program.

To position them, the Basic Education for Skills Training (BEST) approach to worker-centred literacy was developed by the Ontario Federation of Labour in the 1987-88, and was adopted by other unions throughout Canada. In the original model, BEST programs were offered in the workplace, on paid time, and with the assistance of trained “peer co-instructors.” The source of funding for BEST was the Ontario then-Ministry of Skills Development, which had originally come up with a pot of money to try to entice employers to sponsor workplace literacy, in recognition of supposed skills deficits in the workforce. Employers did not apply for the money, but the Ontario Federation of Labour did, and they took the program in an entirely different direction, defining worker-centred literacy in Canada. At its height, the program had eight regional coordinators, and three staff in Toronto. In their training in August 1988, they trained sixty peer instructors who then worked to implement and deliver worker-centred literacy programs in their workplace. They held about three such trainings a year. The program was run entirely through the Federation of Labour and local unions, with no employer input. Employers paid for release time for employees to attend the program.

In 1996, the Hospital Employees’ Union in British Columbia adapted the BEST model by adding a role for a college instructor in the classroom while maintaining the use of “peer tutors.” Funding was provided through the Healthcare Labour Adjustment Agency for employees to attend the program on work time, and for the college instructor. The program ran in several lower mainland hospitals, including Vancouver General, Children and Women’s and Surrey Memorial. Working for Capilano College, I was a college instructor for two years in the VGH program.

Learning and Education Assisted by Peers (LEAP) is an approach to worker-centred literacy developed in 1997 by the Joint Union Management Program (JUMP) of Forestry Renewal BC, and then taken up by the Communication Energy and Paperworkers’ Union and some locals of the Pulp and Paperworkers of Canada. The original goal of JUMP
was to advance the industry through investing in the workforce and creating a learning culture. LEAP programs were run by trained peer tutors, with the college instructors as a distant resource. They were offered in the workplace and were partly on paid time and partly on the learners own time. Both LEAP and HEU-BEST were guided by joint union-management program committees, which usually did not include learner representatives. Although the overall program goals and outcomes were developed by each committee, the programs observed strict confidentiality, which meant that management representatives were not present in the classrooms.

Neither BEST nor LEAP programs are currently running, as such funding as was available through Forestry Renewal BC and the Healthcare Labour Adjustment Agency dried up. For a few years, LEAP programs continued to run without government funding, supported by employer contributions at three sites: Prince George Pulp and Paper and Northwood Pulp (both owned by Canfor) and the Husky Oil Refinery in Prince George. Employer contributions dried up, and the programs have since folded, although the CEP local at Prince George Pulp and Paper has since bargained for training money in their Collective Agreement, and intend to start a LEAP program again at their site.

1.4 Subjectivity, Validity and Reliability

My selection of this particular group of interviewees and programs was subjective. Because I worked in the field of worker-centred literacy at the time, I had access to these individuals, and it made sense to turn to them, as they are among the national leaders in worker-centred literacy. Indeed, three of the interviewees were primarily involved in creating the BEST and LEAP programs that I analyze, they continue to head up regional or national literacy initiatives for labour organizations, and they are nationally recognized names in the field of worker-centred literacy.

The interviewees are both colleagues and friends of mine. I co-authored two of the texts that form part of my analysis and I worked as a college-based literacy instructor in two of the programs. As much as anything, then, this study represents an investigation of my own philosophy and practice of worker-centred literacy.
I believe that my findings have strong internal validity. Since I has known and worked with the interviewees for some time at the time of the interviews, it is likely that there is a high degree of agreement and mutual meanings between my understanding of what we talked about, and theirs. My interpretation of the findings is, of course, my own. Due to the specificity of the topic, the philosophy and practice of worker-centred literacy, I believe that my findings will also have a relatively high degree of external validity. My results should be able to assist others in achieving insight into similar situations. As well, both the internal and external validity of the findings are likely positively impacted by the use of other data sources, in particular policy material. However, because I am so close to the material and the interviewees, it has been impossible to eliminate researcher bias in data analysis and interpretation of meanings. Therefore, the reliability of my findings may be compromised.

1.5 Map of Thesis

The main contribution of this paper will be an exploration and elucidation of dominant perspectives on 'workplace' literacy and labour perspectives on 'worker-centred literacy'. This study will compare and contrast these two broad perspectives in order to determine ways in which they collude, and ways in which they are opposed. The overall goal of this study will be to outline the 'limits of the possible' for worker-centred literacy and its agenda of change.

Chapter Two will present an overview of dominant, liberal perspectives on adult education, as well as critical theories. I will argue that most theories of adult education endorse an inclusive, democratic agenda, but only critical theories recognize that creating equality and emancipation requires an engagement and struggle with power in all its internal immaterial and external material forms.

The third chapter of this thesis will investigate the dominant discourse of workplace literacy, which reflects both capitalist and liberal ideologies. This discourse posits literacy as a tool for creating workers whose skills are tightly aligned with the needs of corporate competitiveness. It also carries residual notions of literacy and learning that are
about democracy and citizenship. I will question whether and to what extent capital really demands more knowledge and knowledgeable workers.

Chapter Four will analyze the ‘talk’ of labour literacy activists and argue that their discourse posits a worker-centred literacy that considers workers’ perspectives and emphasizes education as an agent of individual and collective change. I will explicate both how and why these activists envision literacy as a tool for change aimed at upsetting dominant hierarchies, and how they conceive of and struggle with all forms of power. However, I will also argue that, while explicitly oppositional, the discourse of these advocates also carry traces of the same structured power hierarchies and relations of dominance these activists seek to overturn.

In Chapter Five, this study will turn from an exploration of the ideological elements in worker-centred literacy discourse to an investigation of its practical applications. Using materials from three worker-centred literacy programs, I will trace the ambiguity of these projects in relation to their stated aims and contexts. I will argue that the more emancipatory, critical goals of worker-centred literacy are forced off the agenda or underground in response to the position these programs occupy in relation to both capital and labour.

Having thus outlined the tensions and contradictions inherent in worker-centred literacy, in Chapter Six this study will argue that, in the end, labour literacy activists respond dialogically, as a form of praxis, to this situation by turning their gaze back on their own union organizations. Worker-centred literacy becomes a metaphor and a tool for social change that begins right at home, in a challenge to the structured power relations of the union. In promoting the cause of literacy within labour, literacy activists re-engage unions in the broad, emancipatory goals of their project. Worker-centred literacy thus promotes the necessary renewal, diversification and democratization of the labour movement, made all the more urgent by the pressures of global capitalism. In this, labour literacy activists take a stance with Milband, who, according to Meiksins Wood (1994), wrote in 1990, “The ultimate purpose of counter-hegemonic struggles... is to make
socialism ‘the common sense of the epoch’” (as cited in Meiksins Wood, 1994). For labour literacy activists, this “involves two things: ‘a radical critique of the prevailing social order’, and ‘an affirmation that an entirely different social order ... is not only desirable ... but possible’” (ibid.).

I will conclude that unions, taking the lead from labour literacy activists, need to critically self-reflect on their institutions and their role in supporting, resisting or opposing the culture of learning and work that creates the conditions for the further exploitation of working people. For this, worker-centred literacy can be both a catalyst and a means. These, then, are the limits and possibilities offered at and by this moment in workplace literacy policy formation.

I hope that my analysis will contribute to a fuller, more subtle understanding of the agenda underlying the productivity orientation of the dominant approach to workplace literacy, and of the ways that union-based approaches can counteract that agenda.
CHAPTER TWO: LIBERAL, HUMANIST AND CRITICAL TRADITIONS IN ADULT EDUCATION

2.1 Introduction

The Canadian Labour Congress proposes a Venn diagram of where, in their view, literacy "fits" within the context of other educational traditions. The diagram shows a large circle that is "adult education" in which are contained three smaller circles, with a central area of overlap, representing "literacy," "popular education" and "labour education." "Worker-centred literacy" is situated at the central area of overlap.

Diagram 1.0: WHERE DOES LITERACY FIT?

This chapter will outline adult and popular education perspectives. The following chapter will discuss definitions and concepts of literacy as put forward in the dominant contemporary policy discourse on workplace literacy. Ensuing chapters will investigate the philosophy, principles and practice of “worker-centred literacy” in order to explain both why and how literacy is envisioned, in opposition to the dominant framework, as a means of creating individual and collective change. Ensuing chapters will also examine ways in which even the oppositional agenda of worker-centred is constrained by tensions and contradictions in its theory and in its practice. The final chapter will discuss worker-centred literacy in relation to labour education.

2.2 Liberal and Humanist Traditions in Adult Education

Norton (2000) points out that other theorists have suggested that “humanism is the prevailing philosophy in adult literacy education efforts that work from learner-centred approaches, value the development of self-esteem and advocate personal or individual empowerment” (Quigley, as cited in Norton, ibid, p.13). Humanist traditions can probably be traced back to the Enlightenment. As Halsey, Lauder, Brown and Wells (1997) explain:

Two great social principles of the Enlightenment are, firstly, that the determination of life-chances by the accidents of birth... should be driven from human society; and secondly, that there should be mass rather than elite participation in democratic societies. Education has been seen as central to this agenda, in helping to provide the technical skills for modern society and in selecting the talented for upward mobility (p. 632).

In this view, the goal is to equalize opportunity to education for all in order to generate broad and democratic participation in society. Social mobility is to be determined by skills and talents, rather than by birth or rank, and skills and talents are viewed as qualities or attributes that an individual is born with and can actualize through education. By paving the way for the fulfillment of this promise, education is central to human progress “not only technically and economically, but also in terms of emancipation” (p. 13). By promoting social mobility, the vision of the Enlightenment was to build a rich and progressive democratic sphere, where those who were most capable would have the most decision-making power.
The idea that democracy and education “are interdependent and by their nature lead to individual development and social growth,” has often been ascribed to John Dewey (Merriam, 1995, p. 27). Dewey argued that education has “a prominent role in bringing about social change” (as cited in Merriam, ibid.). In particular, Dewey believed that:

education could lead to social change by educating individuals in democratic values. Thus educated, individuals would in turn work for a better, democratically-based society (Norton, 2000, p. 12).

For Dewey, democracy depends on commonalties and unity, and the role of education is to promote the democratic mindset by widening the area of shared concern. According to Dewey (1916), democratic states have great cause to be devoted to “deliberate and systematic education,” not only because universal suffrage depends on educated and informed citizens, but also because "democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 87). Within a democratic state, education should create situations for students to share experiences so that "each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own" (ibid.). Intellectual stimulation springs from this variety of shared interests, from free and equitable intercourse between people and ideas, and from a diversity of stimulation. Through such shared experiences, young people will learn to appreciate a widened area of shared concern, which central to the democratic life (p. 85). While acknowledging the pluralistic nature of society, Dewey’s goal is to build unity (p. 81, p. 83.) He believed that difference will disappear in light of commonalty. The "interpenetration" of diverse ideas and interests that takes place in the “common school” will result in "the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity" (p. 87). The result will eventually be the creation of the best society possible, a society which draws on the finest traits in each of the member groups and improves on the worst aspects of each group (p. 83).

Merriam (2000) says that a central principle of Dewey’s “newer school of education” was that “the beginning of education shall be made with the experience learners already have,
that this experience and the capacities that have been developed during its course provide the starting point for all further learning” (p. 27). By planting the focus of adult education squarely on the learner’s needs and interests and defining education as the interaction of these experiences and the educational environment, Dewey established some of the major tenets of contemporary adult education theory and practice (ibid.). As Norton (2000) identifies, this humanist tradition in adult education has been further developed in the work of educational psychologists Maslow and Rogers and of the adult educator Knowles (p. 13). Norton cites Elias and Merriam in posting the goal of humanistic education as “the development of persons... who are open to change and continued learning... who strive for self-actualization, and... who can live together as fully-functioning individuals,” (ibid.). Norton identifies the key principles of humanistic approaches to education as:

• Learner-centeredness
• Experience-based and cooperative group learning
• A reciprocal teaching-learning relationship
• Self-directed learning
• The development of individuals’ affective and emotional, as well as cognitive, dimensions (ibid.).

2.3 Critiques of Liberal and Humanist Traditions in Adult Education

Humanist and progressive perspectives in adult education have been challenged by a variety of oppositional critical theories, including critical, feminist, anti-racist and postmodern. Of the postmodern age, Henry Giroux (1997) has argued:

It is a time in which the humanist subject seems to no longer be in control of his or her fate.... The struggle for democracy can be seen in the context of a broader struggle against certain features of modernism that represent the worst legacies of the Enlightenment tradition. And it is against these features that a variety of oppositional movements have emerged in an attempt to rewrite the relationship between modernism and democracy (p. 113).

While they differ in their specific theoretical, ideological and political perspectives, the oppositional discourses that Giroux identifies all agree on the socially constructed nature of opportunities for personal advancement, and the underlying issue of power. Citing first Weiler and then Giroux, Razack (1999) explains:
In traditional, liberal education the existing arrangement of society is taken as given and schools 'are seen as the means of rationally distributing individuals in what is conceived as a basically just society. In contrast... critical education theory recognizes... that... 'men and women are basically unfree in both objective and subjective terms' (p. 42).

As Wilson and Cerevo (1996) argue, power is "the socially constructed capacity to act and not just a personal attribute," and, as such, is mediated by forces that entrench inequality across many lines, including race, gender, class, etc. (p. 7). Our capacity for freedom is mitigated by external (access to resources, opportunities and cultural, institutional and embodied capital) and internal (self-concept, internalized oppression) barriers and obstacles. As Fraser (1993) argues "informal impediments to participatory parity can persist even after everyone is formally and legally licensed to participate" (p. 119). For the democratic vision of the Enlightenment to be achieved, then, we need to take into account the role of education not only in supporting technical and economic progress, but also in terms of emancipation from these external and internal barriers (Halsey et al., 1997).

Another way to examine the difference between liberal and oppositional discourses in education is by comparing their underlying notion of the state. As Torres (1998) points out:

The definition of what are the 'real' problems of education and what are the most appropriate (i.e., cost-effective, ethically acceptable, and legitimate) solutions depends greatly on the theories of the state that underpin, justify, and guide the educational diagnoses and proposed solutions (p. 9).

From this angle, Dewey's dream of democratic unity depends on the notion of the state "as the personification and guarantor of collective wishes" (p. 10). Critical theorists, in contrast, posit a notion of the state as biased, not neutral, and as influenced by power hierarchies. According to Tamir (1995), in a situation of unequal power, "[s]tate neutrality is an ideal that cannot be achieved" (p. 6). The state inevitably promotes the survival and flourishing of the more powerful. From this perspective, the 'truth' that is promoted and endorsed by the state is the truth of powerful. Tamir explains that this situation arises inevitably because the common good of the powerful group "needs no
special measures to protect it. It has become a latent common good" (pp. 4-5). This perspective recalls Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which Jary, D. and Jary, J. (2000) define as the means whereby the more powerful groups in society dominate over other groups by "engineering consensus through controlling the content of cultural forms and major institutions" such as educational systems (p. 261). As Halsey et al. (1997) explain, Foucault also suggests that "social practices and the self are constructed in such a way as to render social life an interminable conflict between 'dominated' and 'dominating,' and... truth and power are inseparable" (p. 13). The 'common good' of the society is therefore a reflection of that which is good for the most powerful group. In similar vein, Fraser (1993) argues convincingly that our political process is enacted through the discursive space of public sphere - which she defines this realm as "a theatre in modern societies in which political participation in enacted through the medium of talk" - as though power inequalities did not exist (p. 110). Ignoring the "powerful informal pressures that marginalize the contributions of members of subordinated groups, both in everyday contexts and in official public spheres," we "bracket" inequalities, and proceed "as if they don't exist when they do," which makes "participatory parity" impossible (p. 120, p. 119). In stratified societies, real equality is impossible without acknowledgement and redress of differentials in the socially constructed capacity to act.

The problem that power differentials pose to the realization of true participatory democracy has both material and immaterial aspects. By material aspects, I mean access to the opportunities and resources that make participatory parity a real possibility. In terms of education, this means access to things like quality education and teachers, educational resources, a supportive home environment, the time and space in which to study, and, by means of access to these, the attainment of the credentials that are socially constructed as necessary for continuing on to higher levels of education, or for entry into higher-skilled, higher-paid jobs. As Halsey et al. (1997) point out, sociological studies over the past thirty years have established a clear link between poverty and educational attainment, and their work turns traditional notions of using skill and talent as a social selection mechanism (p. 13). These are still very live concerns in Canada, where one of the recent winners of the biggest Lotto 649 jackpot in Canadian history told a reporter
that he was happy his winnings would finally enable him to send his son to college, a
dream that was otherwise not possible (CBC’s The National, Thursday October 27).
These are all aspects of what Bourdieu (1997) calls cultural and institutional capital.

By immaterial aspects, I mean those issues internal to an individual’s self-concept, such
as our self-confidence, our notions of what we are capable or worthy of, what we dare to
dream of. These concepts are similar to Bourdieu’s notions of embodied capital and to
Foucault’s notions of the socially-constructed nature of subjectivity. The immaterial
aspect of power is also reflected in notions of “internalized oppression” which Gowen
(1992) attributes to Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi and others (p. 52). Groups with less
structured power are both less likely to be heard than those with more power, and also
less likely to speak up. Thus, the power differential is self-perpetuating. These critiques
of the liberal tradition in adult education have left some critical theorists arguing that if
the democratic agenda of the Enlightenment is to be achieved, then we need to take into
account the role of education not only in economic, technical and individual progress, but
also in terms of individual emancipation and social democracy (Halsey et al., 1997, p.
13).

2.4 Critical Approaches to Adult Education

The second circle in the Canadian Labour Congress’ (n.d.) diagram of where worker-
centred literacy “fits” in the context of other influences is “popular education” (p. 12).
The theory and practice of critical pedagogy and transformational education can be seen
as oppositional approaches to adult education that address some shortcomings of the
liberal Enlightenment tradition. Popular education is more commonly thought of as
methodology for the application and implementation of critical perspectives. I will first
concern myself with popular education, and then discuss the nuanced differences between
this and other critical approaches.

As defined in the Union Based Literacy Course: Participant Notes (Canadian Labour
Congress, n.d.), popular education goes beyond the adult learning principles consistent
with the humanist tradition described above, and “aims at transformation of a social order
which blocks the full and equal development of all” (p. 13). Popular education and critical pedagogy are most commonly associated with the work of Paulo Freire, a literacy teacher in Brazil in the 1950’s (Norton, 2000, p. 13). A profound and dedicated humanist, Freire was deeply committed to the vision of the Enlightenment, and yet fully aware of the structured power imbalances – external and internal- that made it difficult for oppressed people to participate. As described by D. Jary and J. Jary (2000), Freire believed that “effective learning and the development of critical thinking led students to engage with the world around them and the various subjugatory structures that might confront them” (p. 227). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1968/1972) outlines his notion of a critical pedagogy that rests on an understanding of oppression. According to Freire, all people are caught in a never-ending struggle for survival against oppression, whether it be securing access to adequate food and safe housing, or having a voice and power in decision-making in our lives. The oppressed are used to seeing themselves as powerless; they may believe in the invulnerability of the oppressive systems in which they live. Liberation begins when the oppressed gain critical awareness of oppression, and then are able to take collective action against oppression (ibid.).

According to Freire, traditional education is not geared towards liberation. Instead, it uses a banking approach that positions the teacher as the holder of all knowledge and the student as the passive receptacle of this knowledge. Traditional education is a tool of the oppressors, who actively define what counts as knowledge, who can create knowledge and whose knowledge matters. Education as the practice of freedom enables people to see the structured nature of their oppression, to envision a different kind of world, and to take action to achieve that vision. He called this notion of reflective and engaged education *praxis*, which D. Jary and J. Jary (2000), have defined as “[p]urposive action to alter the material and social world” (p. 482). Praxis is a cycle of reflection-action-reflection that “draws attention to the socially constructed nature of economic and social institutions and the possibility of changing these” (ibid.). Freire (1968/1972) describes a liberatory education practice that presents participants with problems and issues from their own life situations, and engages them in questioning and analysing their assumptions and attitudes related to these issues, and in planning, implementing and
reflecting upon actions aimed at changing subjugatory structures. The ultimate goal of liberatory education is action aimed at social change. Through engaging in this process of reflection, action, and then re-reflection, learners begin to take back their own power, and enter their history as active, thinking subjects, instead of passive objects. Liberatory education starts with and values the participants’ knowledge about their lives. Liberatory education is dialogic: teachers and students work as critical co-investigators of reality. Freire lists critical thinking, hope, love and trust as key elements of a dialogic relationship between the teacher and the learners (ibid.).

Freire argued that oppression affects both oppressed and dominant groups, as it keeps us from experiencing our full humanity. For oppression to change, it is the oppressed who must begin to think and act differently, as the oppressor is not able to understand the significance of oppression, and will never change of his own initiative. However, by freeing themselves from oppression, and acting to change social and economic structures that reproduce and perpetuate oppression, the oppressed also free the oppressors and give back to them their own humanity (ibid.). D. Jary and J. Jary (2000) summarize that Freire believed that “humanity’s capacity for freedom… cannot be achieved entirely on an individual level” (p. 482).

Norton (2000) points out that the terms “critical, liberatory and transformational are all used to name educational perspectives concerned with social change” (p. 13). However, under the general rubric of critical, liberatory and transformational approaches to education, there is more variety and diversity among these approaches than is indicated in the Canadian Labour Congress’ (n.d.) manual. Other theorists of emancipatory education share Foucault’s analysis of the socially constructed nature of the self, but differ slightly on the way in which the educational process can address and alter this. Mezirow builds on theory of participatory, learner-centred adult education, and moves it in the direction of emancipation. According to Merriam (1995), Mezirow presents “critical self-reflection and perspective transformation… as central to adult learning and development. In adulthood, development is synonymous with perspective transformations” (p. 126). Mezirow (1995) writes:
We know that we must respond to initial learner interests and self-defined needs, but we do so with the intent to move the learner to an awareness of the reasons for those needs and how learners’ meaning perspectives may have limited the way they customarily perceive, think, feel, and act in defining and attempting to satisfy their needs (pp. 123-124; italics original).

While acknowledging that transformational adult education shares “a rich body of experience and a proud professional legacy from community development and social action education,” Mezirow’s focuses squarely on “individual perspective transformations,” which, he argues, must take place “before social transformations can succeed” (p. 124, p. 128). For Mezirow:

The most significant kind of adult learning invokes bringing psychocultural assumptions into critical consciousness to help learners understand how they have come into possession of conceptual categories, rules, tactics, and criteria for judging that are implicit in their habits of perception, thought, and behaviour... Emancipatory education... helps learners become aware and critical of the presuppositions that shape their beliefs (p. 127).

For most transformational educators, working in this way does not usually include “taking collective political action themselves” (ibid.). Rather than focusing on action, Mezirow concerns himself more with a notion of “agency,” which is not as synonymous with action, but, rather, is defined as “the power of actors to operate independently of the determining constraints of social structure” (Mezirow, as cited in Merriam, 1995, p. 127; Jary and Jary, 2000, p. 9).

bell hooks, another theorist of liberatory education, shares Mezirow’s emphasis on coming to awareness - or, as she calls it, “coming to voice” - as the defining moment of transformation. For hooks, transformation is “that historical moment when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one’s political circumstances” (1988, p. 47). In her essay, ‘when I was a young soldier for the revolution’: coming to voice, hooks describes the feminist focus on coming to voice, on moving from silence into speech, as “a revolutionary gesture” and “a metaphor for self-transformation” (p. 12). While acknowledging that the concept of voice is frequently used as a cliché that oversimplifies or commodifies and turns into spectacle the experiences of oppressed and silenced people, hooks argues that coming to voice is nevertheless a powerful and
important liberatory moment. Marginalized or disempowered groups are frequently silenced, or do not speak, as Audre Lorde writes, “for fear our voices will not be heard nor welcomed” (as cited in hooks, ibid.). Marginalized groups have so few opportunities to speak their own truths in their own “multi-dimensional” voices, that coming to voice is, in itself, “an act of resistance” (hooks, p. 12)

Ultimately, Freire, Mezirow and hooks write from similar perspectives, but with variations. Central to Freire’s notion of praxis is a cycle of action and reflection. Mezirow takes the focus away from collective social action, and onto a more psychologically-informed notion of a personal paradigm shift and a gathering sense of agency. Through her notion of voice, hooks identifies the central importance of this paradigm shift as a moment when the personal and the political meet. However, critical, transformational and liberatory theorists of adult education all share a focus on the subjectivity of oppressed groups, and their approaches emphasize the stories and voices of oppressed groups in opposition to established knowledge. As Razack (1999) explains, “a radical or critical pedagogy is one that resists the reproduction of the status quo by uncovering relations of domination and opening up spaces for voices suppressed in traditional education” (p. 42). In this regard, hooks appears to consciously echo Freire’s own words:

Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless – our beings defined and interpreted by others (ibid.).

However, in her chapter, The Gaze from the Other Side: Storytelling for Social Change, Razack (1999) calls for a close interrogation of “the emphasis in critical pedagogy on voices silenced through traditional education” (p. 36). She argues against the assumption that just because an oppressed person speaks or has voice, some kind of change in oppressive circumstances and structured power imbalances will result. Razack warns:

[T]here are land mines strewn across the path wherever storytelling is used, that it should never be used uncritically, and that its potential as a tool for social change is remarkable, provided we pay attention to the interpretive structures that underpin how we hear and how we take up stories of oppressed groups (p. 37).
Problematizing the notion of subjectivity inherent in critical approaches to adult education, Razack (1999) points out that each story-telling experience involves both the teller and the listener, and the structured power differentials between their two respective positions can both reveal and reproduce “the complex ways in which relations of domination are sustained, lived, and resisted” (p. 36). For example, she argues that critical educators are often guilty of sentimentalizing and essentializing oppressed voices and stories, and such passive acknowledgement can contribute to the maintenance of the status quo, rather than its upheaval, as it serves to reassure participants that Canada is actually “diverse and full of folklore” (p. 37). Listeners of the stories of the oppressed can also easily fall into the trap of what Razack, citing Monture-Angus, calls “appropriating pain,” which Razack herself explains as “basking in the sense of having visited another country so easily and feeling no compulsion to explore their own complicity in the oppression of others” (as cited, p. 52, Razack, p. 52).

Razack (1999) draws attention to a fundamental dilemma in critical pedagogy, namely that the stories of the oppressed are “unproblematically conceived of as suppressed therefore valued knowledge” (p. 45). It then becomes impossible to question or critically evaluate the educational project (p. 44). Thus locked into a dualistic paradigm of oppressor vs. oppressed, we “box ourselves into one subject identity” and we gloss over any differences and tensions within and among oppressed groups and stifle the growth of new consciousness (ibid.). Razack acknowledges that, in part, these shortcomings in critical pedagogy stem from the straightforward and uncritical application of Freire’s work from its origins in the South to a North American context without questioning the category of the “oppressed” (p. 43). She points out that “there have been few critical analyses of, for example, white middle-class educators... leading subordinate groups to which they do not belong into critical pedagogy” (p. 44). However, beyond that, Razack also argues that there is a general tendency in the practice of critical pedagogy “to discourage critical reflection of various hierarchical differences within oppressed groups” (p. 44). The result is often that efforts to come to consensus around what actions to take in the face of oppression are stymied, because rather than engaging in a collective critical reflection, students remain caught in their own histories and are unable to ‘hear’ one
another. In attempting to critique, question and seek clarification, students rely on rationality “and the stories of various groups [then have] to be justified and explicated using the very tools that held these stories to be inadmissible” in the first place (p. 47). This kind of educational project ends up changing nothing about the reality of oppression, since “unless we want to fall into the trap of demanding that the oppressed speak with one voice before we will believe them, we are still left with the difficult task of negotiating our way through our various ways of knowing and toward political action” (p. 50).

Instead, Razack (1999) proposes an approach to education that involves collectively:

reflecting critically on how we hear and how we speak; on the choices we make about which voice to use and when to use it; and, most important of all, on developing pedagogical practices that enable us to pose these questions and use the various answers to guide those concrete moral choices we are constantly called upon to make (p. 54).

This approach to what Razack, citing Spivak, calls “unlearning privilege” would involve a critical self-examination on the part of all participants not only of what stories we choose to tell and how we ‘hear’ the stories of others, but also of what we ‘know’ and how we know it (as cited, p. 54, Razack, 55). Again citing Spivak, Razack concludes that this approach encourages us to “trace the other in self” (as cited, p. 55). The result is a pedagogy capable not only of “untangling how we are constructed” but also, crucially, of successfully defining “what it is we want to change about the world and why” (Razack, p. 46).

Razack (1999) offers a critical of the often-unexamined use of storytelling as a methodology of critical pedagogy, and the accompanying notion of voice. Just because a story of oppression has been told, she argues, does not mean that is has been really heard or acted upon to bring about a change in structures of oppression. Educators working from a critical pedagogy perspective often essentialize story-telling in the classroom, uncritically accepting and encouraging the acceptance of stories. Razack agrees with Zuniga and Ellsworth that “we do shy away from critical reflecting on the practices of those on the ‘good’ side” (p. 50). This unquestioning acceptance leaves the (often
significant) positional authority of the critical educator unaltered, glosses over differences within and among the lived experiences and political stances of oppressed groups and stymies further attempts to move past these differences by questioning and critiquing the underlying assumptions, comparing the various experiences and stances, and navigating through difference to come up with possibilities for change. In part, this ironically uncritical approach to critical pedagogy stems from the ways in which popular education and critical pedagogy have been unquestioning adopted and adapted from their origins in the South to various North American contexts.

2.5 Chapter Conclusions

Contemporary theories of adult literacy education draw on liberal and emancipatory traditions in adult education. While both of these traditions emphasize learning in terms of its value to the individual learner, and see learning as a social event occurring within and influenced by a specific set of historical circumstances, these traditions differ in terms of their understanding of the notion of power. In general, liberal approaches draw on the tradition of Enlightenment, and assume that with equal access to education, all people will have equal opportunity to advance and contribute to a democratic society and a functioning, developing economy. However, emancipatory perspectives on literacy education assume a socially-structured understanding of power, and a related understanding that education is not neutral, but serves to advance or resist these structured hierarchies. Emancipatory perspectives, as put forward by theorists such as Mezirow, Freire and hooks, rely on a transformation in the individual learner’s internalized perception of him or herself in relation to power, and believe that social change will be the ultimate result of such transformations. There are differences and nuances within the emancipatory tradition, as some writers, such as Mezirow, emphasize the role of adult learning in bringing about these individual paradigm shifts, while others, notably popular education approaches in the Freirean tradition, view education and educators as having a role in engaging learners in collective social action aimed at upsetting socially-structured power imbalances.
The remainder of this paper will build on this literature review. In the next chapter, I will outline recent developments in the field of workplace literacy policy, and show that literacy is increasingly viewed through a functionalist, techno-rationalist lens that is profoundly at odds with both the liberal and emancipatory traditions in adult literacy education. Indeed, it has been argued that the new perspectives on literacy, which link learning to the needs of the global economy, is profoundly anti-educational in that it results in a reductive, instrumental, and often exploitative approach to literacy learning. In subsequent chapters, I will examine worker-centred literacy as an alternative, oppositional approach to literacy learning, one that fundamentally challenges the functionalist, technicist perspectives of the emerging dominant discourse, and continues to draw on emancipatory traditions. However, I will also examine tensions in the theory and practice of worker-centred literacy, and show ways in which labour-based approaches, while purporting to take an emancipatory approach, are often simply liberal or even reproductive of the dominant productivity-oriented regime. In analyzing and critiquing (as opposed to criticizing) worker-centred literacy in these ways, I will be attempting to recognize that the oppositional voices of labour-based literacy advocates are, as Ellsworth, as cited in Razack (1999), suggests “valid – but not without response” (as cited, p. 47).
CHAPTER THREE: THE POLICY CONTEXT OF WORKPLACE LITERACY

3.1 Introduction

Many writers have identified a growing outcry around supposed gaps in the literacy skills of North American workers and cite lack of worker skills as responsible for economic losses and inability to compete in the global marketplace. Hull (1991) identifies a unique “public discourse” surrounding workplace literacy that, she argues, “is constructed to be... powerfully alarming” (Hull 1991, p. 2). Similarly, Gowen (1992) calls this discourse a “war on illiteracy” marked by “the appearance of a wide range of dire predictions and sobering commission reports” that create “alarm over the literacy skills of current and future workers” and the impact literacy skills gaps will have on the prosperity of individuals and on the economic well-being of the nation (pp. 6-7). Holland, Frank and Cooke (2003) argue, “There is now a widespread body of literature from industrialised nations to support the view that significant basic skills deficits exist in these countries, and that education and training will increase economic productivity” (p. 31). Hull (1997) highlights examples from government texts and other articles that also report on worker deficiencies and illiteracy. Castleton’s (1999) work further illustrates this point, showing that institutional texts portray workers as having inadequate literacy skills, and that key stakeholders, including government, labour, workplace literacy practitioners and employer groups, all conform in support of these views. Elsewhere, Folinsbee and Hunter (2002) point out that Castleton also argues that the dominant discourse of workplace literacy is “virtuous” in that it “cites workers, through their lack of literacy skills, as morally responsible for a country’s inability to compete” (Folinsbee and Hunter, 2002, p. 10; italics mine). As a result, remedying this situation is the aim of the majority of funded literacy programming across the industrialized world.

Graff (as cited in Holland, Frank and Cooke, 2003) maintains that, historically, literacy crises are not new, but surface at specific “times in history, particularly during times of large scale upheaval and rapid change” (as cited, p. 16). Gowen (1992) also argues that the perception of literacy crisis “also deflects public attention from a complexity of social and economic problems that the nation is not addressing” and encourages us to look for
the real sources in this changing attitudes towards workplace literacy (p. 8). Foucault’s (1979) discourse-oriented work encourages us to view the emergence of a need, such as the new, critical need to increase worker literacy skills, as “a political instrument, meticulously prepared, calculated, and used” (p.26). What, then, is driving this new emphasis in policy talk on workplace literacy and learning, and whose interests does this needs discourse serve?

This chapter will argue that an economic imperative is driving the emerging policy interest in workplace literacy because the skills of Canadian workers are increasingly seen as central to future economic competitiveness and success (Blunt, 2001; Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996; Holland, Frank and Cooke, 2003). Within an overarching context of global economic, workplace and labour market change, the debate over “definitions and understandings of literacy, its social value and applications, and, particularly, workplace literacy policy and practices” is shifting away from past perspectives, which emphasized literacy as a tool for citizenship, social inclusion and access to employment, and towards perspectives that privilege the economic function of literacy and its value as a means of human capital development (Blunt, ibid.).

The perspectives represented in the dominant discourse on workplace literacy are not neutral, but represent particular economic and political standpoints and serve their interests (Blunt, 2001, p. 93). Specifically, the productivity discourse constructs literacy in ways that are clearly aligned with market interests (Darville, 1999). As Gowan (1992) points out, “A solution is generally offered to a problem based on how the problem is defined…. [T]he public discourse about workplace literacy defines the problem in a particular way,” and thus gives rise to particular solutions (p. 15). In focusing on worker skills and literacy gaps on the economy, and on the development of core competencies associated with increased competitiveness, the discourse describes and inscribes the worker as the source of economic problems associated with low literacy. In response, the discourse prescribes instrumental, techno-rationalist and dehumanizing learning solutions aimed at promoting literacy for narrow, job-specific purposes.
Although it is still relatively new, the economic imperative for literacy has quickly become established as the dominant paradigm for literacy policy and program development in Canada, defining contemporary workplace literacy needs in terms of productivity and competitiveness. However, other residual and emergent oppositional aspects of the discourse continue to define the problem of literacy in terms of citizenship and equality, as opposed to productivity, and thus to pave the way for alternative policy and programming solutions (Gowen, 1992, p. 15). To put it another way, policy ‘talk’ about contemporary Canadian workplace literacy ‘needs’ is a political discourse that functions as a medium for making and contesting various political claims (Fraser, 1989, p. 161). As literacy at and for work is sought to a hitherto unprecedented degree, stakeholders representing various economic and social interests struggle to establish or deny the legitimacy of this need, to define and interpret this need and to secure or withhold resources aimed at satisfying it (Blunt, ibid., p. 94; Fraser, ibid., p. 164).

This chapter will explore the contested terrain of contemporary Canadian workplace literacy policy discourse. I will show that while productivity-oriented perspectives are increasingly dominant, residual elements of perspectives on literacy that emphasize citizenship, equality and social inclusion continue to ‘leak through’ into the public policy discourse. These openings are important since they represent opportunities for labour activists to push forward their emergent, oppositional discourse of worker-centred literacy, which will be the subject of subsequent chapters. In this chapter, I will also tease out the competing claims made about the ‘problem’ of workplace literacy and its ‘solution’ in order to expose the political standpoints represented by the dominant discourse, and their epistemological implications for workplace learning and literacy programs.

3.2 The Economic Imperative for Workplace Literacy

Historically, workplace literacy in Canada has been regarded as a tool for creating active citizens, access to the job market and social inclusion. When the Canadian Reading Camp Association and, later, Frontier College, were established at the turn of the last century, their programs engaged in democratic nation-building, and focused on offering
the masses of mostly immigrant, labouring men “the how-tos of becoming a naturalized Canadian” (Morrison, 1999, p. 36). Later, as literacy began to emerge as a formal public policy concern in Canada in the 1960’s, it was still “widely regarded as a basic human right, a means for the marginalized to achieve full participation in society and the labour market” (Blunt, 2001, p. 96). However, in recent years, literacy efforts in all industrialized countries have moved from their origins as projects aimed at the emancipation and enfranchisement of marginalized groups, including the working class, or, especially in Canada, as exercises in nation-building (Holland et al., 2003, p. 15). Literacy has now become a central effort aimed at improving a nation’s economic productivity. In Canada today, public funds for workplace literacy are almost exclusively focused on supporting business competitiveness (Blunt, p. 97).

Most authors agree that the change in the focus and locus of literacy has been driven by profound economic transformations in the late 20th century, which have engendered an intense new emphasis on literacy, learning and skills for work (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996; Holland, Frank and Cooke, 2003). Blunt (2001) points out that workplace literacy has only recently moved from a relatively marginal concern addressed through community-based programming to become a central focus for government literacy policy and practice (p. 89). This change follows shifts in social and economic policy since the 1970s that have sought to ensure that businesses have skilled labour to compete in the new global economy (Blunt, 2001, p. 89). Darville (as cited in Holland, et al. ibid.) argues that the “economic push for literacy” emerged in the 1960s, and was then directed mostly at developing countries (as cited, p. 20). This direction gained strength in developed countries the 1980s, and International Literacy Year (1990) “literacy became firmly established as the path to economic growth” (Holland et al., ibid.).

The general arguments about contemporary economic change in industrialized nations are three-fold. First, and most significantly, the growing globalization of production and trade is making local economies more dependent on international investments and markets. Globalization has led to a saturation of markets with mass-produced goods, mostly from Asian countries with vast, cheap labour pools (Holland et al., p. 27). The
resulting crisis in competitiveness in the 1970s saw “world recessions and dumping of products, the beginnings of large scale cuts in the workforce and of lengthy workers’ strikes” (ibid.). Western industrialized nations have responded by diversifying production. Mass production has been replaced with a focus on high quality products for niche markets, and on the creation of new markets (ibid.). Labour adjustment has also resulted, as Western countries have rationalized and downsized their labour forces, or moved production offshore entirely (pp. 27-28). In this context, industries and national governments are looking to equip their workers to international standards, and to create a more flexible workforce able to adjust to rapid changes in the deregulated, global economy (Jackson and Jordan, 2000, p. 3). They are also looking to build a ‘high-skills’ labour force, one that will be able to keep up with the demands of high-quality, specialized production.

The second development concerns new forms of work organization. Restructured work patterns and relationships are said to have resulted in an emphasis on coordination and ideas-management, as opposed to the old-style command and control management of Fordist industrial design. The old, command-style, hierarchical forms of work organization that successfully created the material wealth of the industrialized world no longer work. New models of work organization are being called for and are contributing to the rise of the learning organization, the virtual business economy, contingent businesses and global interests (Bierema, 2000, p. 280). Some have argued that the impetus for this new direction in workplace learning came from the Total Quality Management movement of the 1970’s, with its emphasis on “Japanese production practices” and the focus on worker identification with the needs of management (Holland et al, 2003, p. 21). In an effort to adapt to the new, global pressures of the marketplace, businesses in many Western, industrial economies started to adopt and adapt these new practices. These new work patterns supposedly require greater ability on the part of workers to participate in knowledge transformation and conversion, and on their communication, critical thinking and teamwork skills (Tomassini, 2000; Forrester, 2000; Livingstone, 1992).
Thirdly, and as a related point, the introduction of new electronic technologies and computerization into work practices is said to be leading the need for multi-skilled workers with higher literacy, numeracy and computer literacy skills (Jackson and Jordan, 2000). Finally, many current policy documents cite an aging workforce as a matter of concern, because it means that future skill requirements will need to be met by workers who are already employed. Gowan (1992) argues that the aging workforce in industrial economies, together with changes in the social structure of the family, have lead to an introduction into the labour pool of ‘non-standard’ workers (women, immigrants, people of colour), and that businesses and employers have expressed alarm over what they judge or expect to be a lower level of skill among these groups (pp. 10-11).

Thus, the combined effects of changing demographics, new technologies, new work structures and, overall, globalization, are changing the nature of the capitalist economy. Lankshear (2003) outlines the features of the ‘new capitalism,’ which include specialization, innovation, flexibility, and an emphasis on information and knowledge on the production floor. It also encompasses flatter hierarchies, the ability to play on a world stage, and the integration and use of technology. The new capitalism is equally characterized by an emphasis on the development of high quality goods, on knowledge and flexible work and learning, and on the push to produce more and more in a leaner (and meaner) environment. This new paradigm promises empowerment, meaningful work and greater prosperity for workers, and warns that unless we keep up with the increased training needs of the knowledge society, we’ll fall behind, and decreased corporate competitiveness coupled with increased individual vulnerability to unemployment will be the result. The economy and society as a whole are therefore at stake (pp. 1-10).

In this new environment, knowledge has become the new commodity. Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) describe the characteristics of the new capitalism, or what they term the New Work Order:

The business world, as part and parcel of massive global economic, technological, and social change, now sees ‘knowledge’ as its primary value. Contemporary, globally competitive businesses don’t any longer really compete on the basis of
their products and services per se. They compete, rather, on the basis of how much learning and knowledge they can use as leverage in order to expeditiously invent, produce, distribute and market their goods and services, as well as to innovatively vary and customize them (p. 10).

Likewise, Bierema (2000) argues that in today’s global economy, “knowledge is displacing capital as the scare resource in production and the hierarchical model of business enterprise, so successful at creating material wealth in the industrialized world, no longer works” (p. 280). In this context, the skills and knowledge of workers have assumed an expanded and particular importance. The new agenda for workplace learning is aimed at producing ‘knowledge workers’ who can respond to the heightened, multi-dimensional and technological demands of the new workplace (as cited, p. 29). Drouin (as cited in Holland, Frank and Cooke, 2003) argues, “The real post industrial revolution is not a service revolution, but a cerebral one, in which value is produced less by skilled hands than by skilled minds” (p. 29).

However, many authors are critical of the influence of corporations in the new global economy and in society as a whole. In The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labour Force and the Dawn of the Pat-Market Era, Rifkin (1995) argues that in the new capitalism, “corporations have taken the place of kings” (as cited in Bierema, 2000, p. 278). Bierema explains that under the new rules of the global economy, “corporations have emerged as the planet’s dominant governance institution reaching into all corners of the world” and “exceeding most governments in size and power” (p. 278). Corporations increasingly exceed national economies in terms of size and Gross Domestic Product as well, since of the world’s one hundred largest economies, fifty-one are corporations (Bierema, p. 281). Through new legal structures, including international trade agreements, corporations have come to enjoy more legal rights than citizens, and “the human is getting lost in the global rush to dominate commerce,” a characteristic of modern economies which some authors have described as “psychopathic,” in reference to the emphasis of short-term corporate gain over long-term human and planetary survival (Bierema, p. 278; see also Bakan, 2004).
Following on these critiques, the emerging critical literature on workplace learning and literacy in the new global capitalism, or new work order, questions whose knowledge matters in the new knowledge economy. In response, many authors identify an agenda that is set in the interests of business, and functions as a way of organizing and disciplining labour to become more flexible and adaptive to the emerging needs of the global market (Bierema, 2000; Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996; Holland, Frank and Cooke, 2003; Jackson & Jordan, 2000). These authors argue that to serve corporate interests, corporate human resource development, of which, as I will show, workplace literacy is a sub-set, "seeks to harness intellectual capital, align training with strategy, and attain optimal performance of employees" (Bierema, p. 278). The result, critics argue, has been the emergence of a workplace education and training agenda that is increasingly linked to productivity and profits by both government policy and industrial interests (Holland et al., p. 12).

These goals are reflected in the emergence of the knowledge society and lifelong learning as dominant policy frameworks. This ‘new’ policy framework, essentially drawn from Human Capital theory, equates knowledge and skill acquisition with economic competitiveness, productivity and survival. The policy framework of the knowledge society includes a new ‘consensus’ on labour supply solutions to economic planning, and on how labour should be organized to serve the needs of capital in the emerging global economy (Jackson & Jordan, 2000). However, this consensus is skewed in favour of global business interests. To illustrate, Jackson and Jordon (2000) provide a critical examination of the training policy framework across the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) over the last decade. They examine whose interests these policies serve, and assert that, despite apparent consensus among stakeholders, the policies actually favour business. They state that the resulting training policies put more control in the hands of business and less in the hands of unions and individuals. Workplace learning, then, is just one more casualty of economic globalization, which, as Bierema (2000) maintains, places the control for resources - including human resources - into the hands of transnational corporations and financial
markets that are far from public scrutiny and local control, and divorced from community and individual interests (p. 278).

### 3.3 Competing Perspectives on Literacy

The contested public discourse of workplace literacy reflects competing paradigms of literacy and learning. Blunt (2001) identifies two main perspectives on workplace literacy: emancipatory and technical-rational (pp. 89-90). Holland, Frank and Cooke (2003) outline three perspectives: functional, liberal and radical/critical, of which they identify the latter as the “proper” approach (p. 12). There is a lot of overlap between these two sets of perspectives. Blunt argues that the emancipatory perspective “views literacy as essential to social development, the maintenance of democratic institutions and the achievement of social equity and justice” (p. 89). Similarly, Holland et al. define the radical/critical as “literacy for active citizenship” which “necessarily has a political dimension” and is “embedded in social and cultural practices rather than being simply a technology. To be literate is to continually ‘read’ one’s world (understand social, cultural, political aspects), to write and rewrite it, and thereby to transform one’s relationship to it” (ibid.). The liberal perspective they outline also takes the context of learning into account, and sees literacy as “broader than a set of necessary skills to perform a given task” (ibid.). However, this perspective overlooks the socially constructed nature of power inequities by assuming that the divergent interests of employers and unions/workers are ultimately reconcilable (ibid.). For both Blunt and Holland et al., the technical-rational and functional perspectives view literacy as “the means by which organizations and countries can improve their competitive edge” while “poor literacy skills... are often blamed for a country’s lack of global competitiveness (ibid.). In other words, functional, technical-rational perspectives view workplace literacy as a “component of human capital” and an “essential skill required of the labour force” (Blunt, p. 90).

I will agree with these authors in arguing that of these different perspectives, it is the functional, technical-rational perspectives that increasingly dominate the public discourse, while the liberal, radical/critical and emancipatory approaches are residual or
emergent and oppositional. In today’s policy discourse, literacy is increasingly defined as a discreet set of measurable, technical skills in which people can be said to be competent or not (Holland et al., 2003, p. 89). These skills are typically narrowly focused on work applications. “Job tasks and workers are assessed in a ‘literacy audit’, and providers aim to fill the ‘skills gaps’” (ibid.). Blunt (2001) shows that the techno-rational view leads to a functional research paradigm based on quantifiable variables that enable researchers to categorize population groups and generate numbers and statistics that appeal to policy makers and program evaluators (pp. 90-92). These perspectives diverge from constructivist perspectives of literacy that are popular with literacy educators and program planners, who tend to see literacy as a socio-political construct and value learners experiences of meaning-making and education as a social process (Blunt, ibid., pp. 91-92; Fingeret, et al., 1994; Folinsbee and Hunter, 2002). Blunt points out that the emancipatory and techno-rational perspectives on literacy are mutually exclusive, and their polarity is perpetuated by the fact that research in the field continues to operate out of either constructivist or functional paradigms. In turn, the results of each research stream sustain the paradigms out of which it was conducted (p. 92).

Functionalist, productivity-oriented, techno-rationalist perspectives on workplace literacy fly in the face of historical theory and practice of adult education, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, have centred on liberal and/or emancipatory perspectives and have tended to operate out of constructivist paradigm that value the experiences of the individual and social learner. In other words, the new goals of adult literacy education as determined by state, business and industry do not reflect the historical interests of the field (Deshler, 1991). There is a tension between the interests of the business community, which sees adult education as a way to increase worker efficiency and industrial profitability, and traditional, community-based adult education perspectives viewing literacy as a vehicle for creating social change (Collins, 1995). Indeed, it is possible to argue that functional, techno-rationalist definitions of literacy are anti-educational. To put it another way, the difference between these two perspectives is profound and hinges on whether workplace literacy aims to “domesticate” workers by bringing their learning and its applications into line with the needs of the new, global
market, or to “emancipate” workers by giving them the skills and knowledge to understand this new economic environment, and to advance within it or resist it as necessary (Lankshear, as cited in Blunt, ibid., p. 95).

3.4 Workplace Literacy in the Knowledge Society
In the contemporary Canadian policy ‘talk’ about workplace literacy, the new, functionalist, techno-rationalist productivity orientation has come to dominate over historical threads that emphasized literacy as a tool for creating citizenship, democracy and social inclusion. The next section of this chapter will be a close reading of several select Canadian policy documents to determine the various, conflicting perspectives that these documents represent. In particular, I will show that the productivity-orientation, with its focus on worker skills deficits, dominates contemporary Canadian policy discussions about workplace literacy. Narratives of citizenship are becoming increasingly residual in the discourse of literacy, while narratives of productivity and accountability are gaining eminence. However, I will also show how historical and emergent alternative perspectives that focus on workplace literacy for equality, inclusion and citizenship continue to ‘leak through’ into policy talk. In subsequent sections of this chapter, I will take a closer look at the impact of this shifting policy agenda on the content and process of workplace learning and literacy.

3.4.1 Defining Literacy: The IALS and the Rise of Functionalist Interpretations
Recent surveys and studies, the most widely known of which is International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) have itemized and quantified Canada’s literacy ‘gaps’. As well as defining the discussion in economic terms, these studies define literacy in terms of a functional, techno-rational paradigm, one that posits literacy as a quantifiable, measurable set of skills and that defines it in ways that are specifically amenable to rational policy interventions (Blunt, 2001, p. 92).

Sponsored by the National Literacy Secretariat and Human Resources Development Canada, the IALS was the first multi-country assessment of adult literacy. It was conducted in eight industrialized countries, including Canada, and it compared literacy
performance across a range of cultures and languages. The IALS results were first published in December 1995. The IALS survey dispelled the old notion that individuals are either literate or illiterate and introduced a new concept of literacy as a continuum of skills ranging from quite limited to very high. Statistics Canada’s Backgrounder on the International Adult Literacy Survey (1996) explains that the IALS built on this new view of literacy, defining it as:

> the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community, to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.

Reading the Future: A portrait of literacy in Canada (Statistics Canada, 1997) provides the IALS results on the literacy skills of Canadians using three skill scales: prose, document, and quantitative skills. Results were graphed along a continuum of skills from one (lowest) to five (highest). Level two identifies people who may have adapted their lower literacy skills to everyday life, but would have difficulty learning new job skills requiring a higher level of literacy, and level three is considered as “the minimum desirable threshold.” The IALS found that 22% of Canadians were at level one, 26% at level two, 30% at level three, 16% at level 4 and 4% at level 5. In other words, in 1994 almost half (48%) of the adult population in Canada was found to lack the literacy skills necessary to participate fully and successfully in our socio-economic system.

The report provides new information by which to judge Canadian policy on literacy, education and social and economic development. In “opening a window on the life of Canadians at home, in the community, and in the workplace,” Reading the Future also proposes to give Canadians “a glimpse of their possible future.” ABCanada, a private corporation dedicated to raising the profile of literacy among Canada’s business community, give as sense of how these statistics were interpreted by industry. Their website explains that Reading the Future “bluntly told Canada that its future competitiveness hinged on the degree to which we can raise literacy and learning levels in our society, and that one of our most vulnerable areas is the workplace” (http://www.abc-canada.org/literacy_facts/).
A second Canadian IALS report, *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society* (1997), frames the ‘problem’ of literacy more clearly in terms of the requirements of the knowledge society: “While most people can read, the real question is whether their reading and writing skills meet the challenge of living and working in today’s information-rich and knowledge intensive society and economy.”

Current critical literature questions the political underpinnings of the IALS surveys.¹ For example, Hamilton (1997) argues that the psychometric tradition of the IALS creates a vision of what literacy should be, as defined by the needs of government and industry, and not of how people actually use literacy or want to use it in relation to their lives experience. She suggests that the IALS is undemocratic and says, “It is important that we reveal the institutional underpinnings of and aspirations for the IALS, rather than treating the findings from surveys like this as indisputable facts about contemporary life” (p. 15). Further, Darville (1999) explains that the IALS is aligned with managerial interests in that it promotes only the ability to use texts in performing functional tasks in a way that management intends, rather than problematizing the work and workplace relations that the texts re/present. The IALS survey fits people into institutions and does not take a holistic view of power differentials within institutions or human experiences beyond institutions.

In many ways, then, the IALS signals the move of literacy from its initial underpinnings as a marginal, community-based activity concerned with equality and citizenship, to a more central policy concern. The survey functions to quantify literacy needs in accordance with the needs of the state and industry. In so doing, the IALS also set the tone for today’s ‘culture of accountability,’ in which literacy is increasing viewed as a discreet set of skills that are open to quantitative and fiscal measurement. Finally, the surveys emphasize the worker/literacy learner as the problem unit, the element that needs to be ‘fixed’ in order to assure Canada’s future competitiveness. As Gowen (1992) argues, today’s “Other” is “an undereducated workforce” (p. 7). Following on and

flowing out of these initial studies and definitions of literacy, the resulting policy
discourse emphasizes a functionalist, techno-rationalist productivity orientation;
however, alternative perspectives that emphasize literacy as a social activity aimed at
building democracy and citizenship are still residually evident in the policy discourse.

3.4.2 Describing Literacy: Contemporary Canadian Workplace Literacy Policy
In response to the apparently growing need for worker literacy, and then increasingly
bolstered by the IALS data, the federal government committed itself to creating literacy
opportunities that would benefit the Canadian economy. In the October 1986 Speech
from the Throne, “to develop measures to ensure that Canadians have access to the
literacy skills that are the prerequisites for participation in an advanced economy” (House
of Commons, Debates, Speech from the Throne, 1 October 1986, p. 14). Thus, literacy
first emerged in Canada as an area of industrial and national concern when “a highly
literate workforce” became seen as “one of the essential ingredients for successful
production and global competition” (Folinsbee and Hunter, 2002, p. 6).

The National Literacy Secretariat (NLS), Canada’s national literacy development agency,
was created the following year, in 1987. One of my interviewees illustrates how the
agenda NLS has shifted away from its initial valuing of narratives of citizenship and
inclusion and towards productivity narratives. Tamara refers back to its origins when the
NLS was housed in the Department of the Secretary of State:

The neat thing about old Sec State was that there was always a citizenship angle
in the biggest sense of the word. Because Secretary of State had the ‘becoming
Canadian’ kind of...programs... [These programs] were also about citizenship,
they were about participation... [about] recognizing that there were groups
within Canadian society that were not functioning fully as citizens because of
historical disadvantage or whatever. So there was sort of a hook to hang this on:
in the same way as those other programs were linked to citizenship, so was
literacy, which I think was an incredible asset.

Tamara goes on to say that we began to lose “the citizenship and participation angle”
when the NLS was re-housed into Human Resources Development Canada:

lost it in terms of the government structure when Secretary of State was killed and
HRDC was created. We don’t have that hook anymore for the NLS. There [are] still some of those historic threads that are there in good part because a few
people... are still there. But I think... that the NLS being in HRDC is a link to essential skills and knowledge economy and all of those things have become very, very powerful forces and the citizenship force is a much-diminished force.

Tamara concludes that today, the idea of literacy as a right “is more radical because the productivity and skills deficits and all of that stuff have come more to the fore.” The renaming of HRDC is a cause for concern, since in the name of new department, Human Resources and Skills Development, humans and their skills appear to be given equal weight. The result, according to another literacy educator, has been “the increased assimilation of the National Literacy Secretariat into the labour market side of HRDC” (L. Weinstein, personal email, November 20, 2004).

Most recent policy documents speak to this appropriation of literacy by labour market concerns, while occasionally, the residual citizenship and social inclusion narratives continue to leak into the dominant discourse. Part of Canada’s Innovation Strategy, *Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians* (Human Resources Development Canada, 2002), is perhaps the most significant literacy and learning policy document of recent years. *Knowledge Matters* articulates the federal government’s stance on literacy and learning in the knowledge economy, and lays out directions for the country’s economic and social development over the next ten years. The paper begins with a quote from then-Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, warmly emphasizing inclusiveness as a key characteristic of Canada’s move to the new economy: “We must invest not only in technology and innovation but also, in the Canadian way, to create an environment of inclusion, in which all Canadians can take advantage of their talents, their skills and their ideas,” and it later re-emphasizes that the nation’s success “is founded on strong values of sharing, equality, openness, and inclusion” (p. 3, p. 5).

However, despite framing the problem of literacy in social terms, the paper goes on to outline and emphasize the underlying economic motives that are driving the direction of Canada’s Innovation Strategy. First, “the knowledge-based economy means an ever-increasing demand for a well-educated and skilled workforce in all parts of the economy and in all parts of the country” (p. 7). Charts indicate that the greatest employment
growth is occurring in jobs that require a post-secondary diploma or degree, and growth in jobs requiring only high school education or less is plummeting. Second, “there is a looming demographic crunch that will exacerbate these skills shortages” (p. 8). The paper cites a statistic from the Conference Board of Canada, a right-wing think-tank, which forecasts a shortfall “of nearly one million workers within twenty years” (ibid.). Third, “our learning system must be strengthened if we are to meet the skills and labour force demands of the next decade” (ibid.).

Thus, despite the phrases about inclusion and equality, it is clear from the overall document that the emphasis in Canada’s Innovation Strategy is not on creating a warmer, more inclusive and more egalitarian country, but on meeting the urgent needs of the new economy. This focus is also reflected in the paper’s discussion on literacy, which envisions a learning agenda for schools aimed at giving all new graduates “the literacy skills necessary to participate in the knowledge-based economy”. It also emphasizes the need to “provide ongoing opportunities for workers to improve and upgrade their skills and acquire new ones to meet the changing skills demands of the new, knowledge-based economy” (p. 9, p. 38).

Other recent Canadian policy documents focus on the need to increase worker literacy skills in order to keep up with the demands of the new capitalism. For example, in her Speech from the Throne on February 10, 2004, the Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia made strong comments about the need for literacy skills building:

It is estimated that 40 per cent of adult British Columbians have low literacy skills. They have difficulty in reading, writing and basic numeracy skills that place them at a severe disadvantage in their everyday lives. Many adults cannot read at all. They cannot fill out job applications, read a map, use an ATM machine or balance a chequebook (pp. 19-20).

Beyond filling out a job application or getting money from the bank, the economic implications of this literacy skills gap are clear: “Low literacy is directly tied to low income and unemployment” (ibid.). Similarly, in his Reply to the Speech from the Throne on February 3, 2004, Prime Minister Paul Martin also called for a “Canada where universal literacy and lifelong learning are part of the national fabric” and outlined his
intention “to develop a new Workplace Skills Strategy, boosting literacy and other essential job skills for apprentices and workers.” Literacy has thus become an ‘essential job skill.’

According to Adult Literacy ‘Lessons Learned’ Project Technical Report, a summary sponsored by Human Resources Development Canada, articles and studies by the National Literacy Secretariat, the Hudson Institute and the Ontario Ministry of Skills Development all repeat the claim that the economy is changing, and countries with the best educated and best trained work force will prosper in the new global economy, while others will not be able to compete (Barker, 1999, p. 21). These articles conclude that the growth in high-skill jobs requires workers with higher levels of literacy, and the existing skill base of Canadian workers is insufficient to meet the demands of the new economy. To be more competitive, Canadian companies are growing, becoming more efficient by retooling and modernizing. If workers are not prepared for these changes it will cost companies both directly and indirectly. Further, as the workforce ages and new workers do not replace those that are nearing retirement, industry will increasingly come to reply on the skills of existing workers and their abilities to train and re-train in order to keep up with change. It has therefore become essential to ensure that workers and would-be workers have the initial education and literacy levels to pursue education, training and retraining throughout life (ibid.).

Other studies and articles focus more graphically on the supposed economic consequences of illiteracy from the perspective of Canadian business. In Lessons Learned in Adult Literacy: Policies, Programs and Practices, HRDC (2001) reports speculation that “literacy-related problems cost business and industry in terms of lost productivity, health and safety problems, training and retraining” and that as a result, the “majority of employers – 70% - feel that they have a significant literacy problem in some part of their organization” (p. 4). To cite another example, in 1991, the National Literacy Secretariat wrote an article for the Canadian Business Review in which they stated “lack of literacy and numeracy skills poses difficulties with strategic human resource, managements and operational objectives and goals. In a broader sense, the extent of
these problems and the number of industries and sectors affected are cause for concern as organizations strive to improve competitiveness."

To further bolster their point, in the same article, the National Literacy Secretariat (1991) cites the 1988 statistic from the Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy estimating the direct cost to business of illiteracy at around $4 billion or more annually, mostly due to lost productivity. They also refer to a 1990 survey, funded by the National Literacy Secretariat and carried out by the Conference Board of Canada that found “widespread” concern about illiteracy among managers in establishments with more than fifty employees. Their survey suggested that there are “well over one million workers in Canada who are functionally illiterate” and this “lack of literacy and numeracy skills poses difficulties with strategic human resource, managements and operational objectives and goals.” They suggest that “the extent of these problems and the number of industries and sectors affected are cause for concern as organizations strive to improve competitiveness” and conclude that “[b]usiness, government, educational institutions, and all who are interested in Canada’s future, must recognize that improving literacy skills is critical to our livelihood, our standard of living and our economic well-being.” The article carries on to further identify workers as the site and source of the literacy problem by referencing a survey for ABCanada, a private-sector foundation promoting literacy, that found that while 46 per cent of Canadians consider “illiteracy” to be primarily a “social problem,” only 10 per cent view it as “an economic problem.”

The overall direction for workplace learning and skills development in Canada emphasizes productivity goals and a functionalist, techno-rational paradigm. For example, the 2004 federal Speech from the Throne emphasized a commitment to develop a Workplace Skills Strategy, stemming from the findings of the Innovation Agenda. The Human Resources and Skills Development website announces the Workplace Skills Strategy as “a coherent framework that will guide the development of policies and programs that recognize the importance of developing human capital in, and for, Canadian workplaces”
The goal of the Strategy is to ensure that Canada “has the skilled workers it needs for the future” (ibid.).

In a related development, a new Sector Council Program, announced on March 16, 2004 by the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, is aimed at “[p]romoting innovative workplaces and supporting workers so they can adapt and respond to changing skills demands is key to ensuring the success of our economy in the 21st century” (Biotechnology Human Resource Council, 2004, p. 1). Through this initiative, the federal government proposes to improve the skills of Canadians, since the nation’s “successful economic and employment growth requires the creation of an inclusive, adaptable and mobile workforce. More than ever before – with an aging workforce and new emerging global competitors – Canada must focus on maximizing the skills of all its people” (ibid.). One of the priority areas is the promotion of “workplace skills development to help existing workers increase their earning potential and ensure that they and their employers can more effectively adapt to technological and other market-driven realities” (ibid.). The descriptions of both the Sector Council Program and the Workplace Skills Strategy initiatives clearly focuses on productivity-oriented goals, positioning the labour market and workers as the site of the problem and the solution to Canada’s supposed economic woes.

However, the discourse also carries a tension between these new, productivity-oriented goals for workplace literacy, and residual social inclusion and citizenship perspectives. Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC, now re-named Human Resources and Skills Development Canada) recently completed its Lessons Learned (2002) project, which reviews and evaluates ten-year’s worth of literacy interventions in order to determine ‘what works’ in adult literacy policies and programs. Lessons Learned frames adult literacy as a public policy issue within the dual contexts of “citizenship, human resources development, and lifelong learning,” and an “essential skill for work and participation in the economy” (p. 1). This text appears to favour the former, as it states that literacy is primarily “fundamental to citizenship in a democracy – to informed
decision making, to personal empowerment, and to active and positive participation in the local and global social community” (p. 3).

Similarly, *Valuing Literacy in Canada*, a joint initiative of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council with the National Literacy Secretariat of HRDC, states that “Literacy is vitally important in a knowledge-based economy” and it also “allows individuals to participate in their communities, promoting both personal and social well-being” (SSHRC, 2002, p. 1). However, the research framework for *Valuing Literacy in Canada* also emphasizes the need to define successful literacy programming, and to create structures of accountability in order to measure and value, in fiscal and economic terms, the outcomes of literacy programs, since “[l]iteracy professionals and policymakers are under increasing pressure to demonstrate the effectiveness of adult literacy programming and to justify expenditures in literacy and essential skills programs (SSHRC, 2002, p. 2). Here, it seems that the citizenship and participation angle is required to submit to the accountability measures of a functionalist, techno-rational paradigm.

Another example of the persistence of social and citizenship narratives of literacy is found in the closing remarks of the then-Minister of Human Resources to Best Practices Workshop on Literacy in Toronto on October 4, 2002. This event was organized and hosted by the Conference Board of Canada, a right-wing employer think-tank on economic development. Initially, the Minister’s speech rests on some of the same assumptions about the knowledge economy that inform Canada’s Skills and Learning Agenda. She asserts, “Modern Canada is really about people. It is not natural resources anymore... it’s not brawn anymore it’s brain,” but adding, “and everybody has got to be included” (Honourable Jane Steward, Minister of Human Resources Development Canada, 2002, 9. 2). As in *Knowledge Matters*, the Minister conflates social inclusion and labour market development in terms of “economic and social policy needing to support each other” (ibid.). However, at times in the Minister’s speech, the social inclusion aspect appears to be given more weight than the productivity arguments. Of literacy, the Minister says, “Sure it’s about labour market development but when we’re
talking about literacy, we’re talking about so much more. We’re really talking about social inclusion right?” (p. 1).

The tension between productivity-oriented and social inclusion perspectives on literacy continues throughout the Minister’s speech. When Stewart first calls for accountability measures to be attached national strategy in literacy and basic education, it is clear she means tracking financial return on investment “so that if money is invested we can follow the money” and we will be able "to provide the outcomes, provide transparent information on how the money is being invested.” Minister Steward then appears to backtrack from this accountability agenda, saying that the approach should “encourage everybody to be the best they can be, without being prescriptive but knowing that what we are prescribing is that we want to get rid of the fact that we have eight million Canadians who don’t have the literacy skills to participate, whatever those broad national goals would be.” There is, thus, a ‘split personality’ in the Minister’s closing speech, in that she seems to endorse productivity-oriented messages about literacy, and then contradicts herself to recognize and validate citizenship and social inclusion perspectives in their own right.

*Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response*, the Report of the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (House of Commons, 2003), is perhaps the most optimistic literacy policy document of the day, in that it clearly broadens the focus of the debate to include not only economic outcomes, but also a wide variety of social and democratic goals. Thus, the Report reminds Canadians that “literacy skills have a fundamental influence on all aspects of our lives, including, for example, our families, our health, our democracy, our work and our communities” and that “literacy enables all citizens to fully realize their personal potential and their potential as citizens in our community” (p. 1). In response, the Report calls for “additional public and private sector investments in this critical area of human capital” in order to improve “the economic and social welfare of many thousands of willing participants who lack the necessary basic skills to participate more fully in Canadian society” (p. 2). The Report’s specific discussion of workplace literacy
is couched in terms of the knowledge society: “As jobs change, so do the skills required to do them. As the relative importance of knowledge-intensive sectors continues to grow, the relative demand for more highly educated and skilled workers will rise” (p. 63). In this context, “the importance of continuous skill acquisition or lifelong learning continue to grow, so will the need to ensure that workers acquire and maintain the necessary literacy skills on which to build” (p. 65). However, the Report clearly does not frame the literacy issue solely as a labour market issue, citing, for example, the National Literacy Project Coordinator for the Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers Union of Canada: “We need to raise that curve, start to keep pace, and make sure people have the skills they need, not only for the workplace, but for all elements within the workplace. It’s a democracy issue, it’s an access issue” (p. 3).

Drawing on the work of Fraser (1989), it can thus be argued that all this ‘talk’ about workplace literacy and skills deficits has become “a medium for the making and contesting of various political claims,” and that, while the productivity-orientation is clearly gaining dominance, this moment policy formation also presents opportunities for alternative, oppositional perspectives to emerge (p. 161). The persistence of residual narratives of citizenship and equality should give some hope to workplace literacy educators and labour activists who favour liberal or emancipatory perspectives on literacy education as “essential to social development, the maintenance of democratic institutions and the achievement of social equity and justice” (Blunt, 2001, p. 89). Indeed, it can be said that it is the fundamental task and responsibility of literacy educators and labour activists to continue to carve out ways of inserting their interpretations of literacy into the dominant discourse and thus to make sure that the discourse values learners as humans - and not just as human resources. In this regard, it is interesting to note that many of the activists and lobbyists who were present at the 2002 Best Practices Workshop on Literacy attribute the ‘split personality’ of the Minister’s closing remarks to the fact that they organized to push back on the productivity-orientation of the workshop and to make sure that the Minister heard their alternative perspectives (P. Hodgson, personal communication, Oct. 9, 2002). The move towards the development of a national strategy on literacy and basic education, which has thus far culminated in the 2003 Pan-Canadian
Response paper, is a direct result of their efforts at what Yeatman (1998) calls policy activism, or “activism which is oriented to intervention within policy” (p. 1).

The remainder of Chapter Three will examine precisely what kinds of workplace literacy and learning programs result from the dominant, productivity-oriented framework. To quote a Program Manager from the National Literacy Secretariat, my discussion will ask, “What happens to literacy when literacy issues come to the fore as a result of other, non-learning issues?” (Hayes, 2003, p. 5). Chapters Four and Five will examine the philosophy and practice of worker-centred literacy as an ambiguously oppositional discourse to the dominant productivity orientation.

3.5 Critiques of the Knowledge Society: The New Work Order

The discourse of workplace literacy is situated within the larger arena of workplace learning and training. Many authors have identified a contemporary ‘neo-Liberal training orthodoxy’ that posits the need for working people to develop their learning skills in order to keep up with economic change and ensure economic prosperity for themselves, the company they work for, and society as a whole (Gee et al., 1996; Gowan, 1992; Holland et al., 2003; Jackson & Jordan, 2000). Following the lead of these critical theorists, I will investigate the emerging discourse of workplace literacy in relation to, and as a subset of, the neo-Liberal skills training discourse, which emphasizes the driving need for working people to develop their learning skills in order to keep up with economic change and to ensure economic prosperity for themselves and for society as a whole. This discourse “is built on the presumption of mutual benefit” and yet, “the resulting reforms have had a remarkably unilateral effect: they move control over and benefits from skill training away from individuals and unions and into the hands of private capital” (Jackson & Jordan, p. 2). The encroachment of capitalism into the sphere of workplace learning can be discussed in terms of performativity and subjectivity. These areas will be discussed briefly below, and then their epistemological impact on learning will be considered.

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Bierema (2000) references Lyotard's (1984) notion of 'performativity' to describe the postmodern shift away from concepts of knowledge concerned with the enhancement of human life and towards knowledge singularly concerned with achieving optimal performance (p. 282). In this new, functionalist, techno-rationalist view, work and learning are viewed as machine systems rather than living ones and the lifeworld is traded in for the money world (ibid.). Within the new paradigm, a new set of values is emerging that places people before profits and that values learning only in relation to its ability to affect the corporate bottom line through the attainment of greater and greater production efficiency. As Bierema (ibid.) states:

> Attaining efficiency has become the single legitimizing measure of value and human worth, and the pursuit of performativity has marginalized efforts to enhance the life of the spirit and emancipate humanity. Instead the focus is on generating and using scientific knowledge for profit... (p. 284).

The result is an agenda for literacy and learning that seeks to harness intellectual capital by aligning training to corporate interests and strategies, to attain maximum efficiency from employees, and to justify expenditure on training in terms of a demonstrable, measurable return on investment.

In turn, this emphasis on performativity has strong implications for the role of employee subjectivity in work and learning. Gee et al. (1996) and Holland et al. (2003) describe the new work order as a situation in which workers are asked to invest, often to their detriment, their hearts, minds and bodies into their work. The new work order emphasizes information management and knowledge as its drivers, and aims to create 'knowledge workers' in support of this new competitive edge. The resulting production framework posits "the worker's mind, as well as her/his body are now essential to the production process" (Holland et al., p. 18). These attitudes shape practice in workplace learning. The enhanced focus on profit-making "requires workers to 'buy into' company goals and develop and sell their knowledge in an entrepreneurial fashion" (Holland et al., 2003, p. 27).
Approaches to workplace learning, in consequence, are aimed at engendering commitment to corporate goals and emphasize the creation of a social identity that is aligned with corporations. The result is a new emphasis on “employee subjectivity” as a key area of new management and training practices (Forrester, 2002, p. 141). Gee (1994) references the work of Gramsci (1971) in pointing out that the goal of workplace learning in the new capitalism is to replace the need for overt control of the working class with more covert methods that encourage the internalization of a set of beliefs that represent not the interests of the workers, but those of the elites. In this context “workplace learning is often seen as an essential part in the capture of this subjectivity for achieving corporate objectives... At the centre of new forms of wealth creation is the ability of workplace and corporate strategies to exploit the skills, knowledge and insights of employees” (Forrester, 2002, p. 141). In like vein, Bierema (2000) acknowledges that under this new globalization many corporations utilize workplace learning as a strategy to harness intellectual capital, and align people with their business interests. Holland et al. (2003) point out that, in its focus on employee subjectivity, the new capitalism is “socially constructive,” creating rather than simply reflecting a new reality (p. 19). In this sense, then, workplace learning is not about benefits or growth for workers; it is about extending the reach of capitalism into the hearts and minds of workers.

As mentioned, some have argued that the impetus for this new direction in workplace learning came from the Total Quality Management movement of the 1970’s, with its emphasis on “Japanese production practices” and the focus on worker identification with the needs of management (Holland et al., 2003, p. 21). In an effort to adapt to the new, global pressures of the marketplace, businesses in many Western, industrial economies started to adopt these practices, which focus on team work, flatter workplace hierarchies and, in principle at least, more democratic workplace where every worker’s input is sought and valued. However, some researchers have argued that this model of work does not deliver on its promise of a more democratic workplace, but, rather, employee attitudes and behaviour in the social realm of work to ensure worker compliance (Graham, 1995). For example, this new emphasis on employee subjectivity can be seen in the rising focus on ‘soft skills’ training for work. These skills include communication,
problem-solving and team work, and function to position the culture of the workplace as a resource to be managed and mined just like any other (Jackson & Jordan, 2000, p. 9).

‘Teamwork’, whether it involves a rotation of tasks among groups or structured competition between various groups in the workplace, increases organizational efficiency because teams absorb the work of any absent member and compete with each other for bonuses. Teamwork also has a surreptitious disciplining effect, as teams put pressure on absent or underperforming members (p. 10). Both examples highlight ways that the new workplace learning agenda is aimed at giving workers the skills not to participate in a democratic workplace, but to increase profits for the corporation (Holland et al., p. 29).

Other writers link the interest in employee subjectivity to the field of Human Resource Development, which emphasizes motivation, empowerment and adaptability, and is usually seen as legitimizing the privileged place of knowledge in the new workplace (Bierema, 2000; Forrester, 2002). However, Deshler (1991) describes the Human Resource Development as a capitalist term, which makes humans objects to be used in the interest of business. Fenwick (as cited in Folinsbee & Hunter, 2002) also argues that the Human Resource Development framework is “limited and reductionist and fails to acknowledge workplace power dynamics and social systems” (as cited, p. 27). In a related notion, critics argue that efforts to create learning organizations, or to otherwise implement the new management style result, are actually “co-opting the language of education”. These efforts promise control over work and learning; collaboration; critical thinking and empowerment, but actually offer these only within the context of existing structured power relations (Holland et al., 2003, p. 21). In the same vein, Blackmore (1997) and Yeatman (as cited in Blackmore, ibid.) have pointed out that the new skills discourse co-opts social (and feminized) skills for their instrumental and productive value (Blackmore, p. 235).

These are the facets of the new work order that relate to the construction of employee performativity and subjectivity. This encroachment of capitalism into the sphere of workplace learning has clear epistemological implications. As Gowan (1992) points out, the new training discourse arguably represents a particular set of theories about making
displaying and measuring knowledge, and results in particular applications of these theories to workplace learning programs (p. 18). In many ways, this discourse is simply a recycling of Human Capital theory, which is often attributed to Theodore Shultz (1963). Although it has been much contested, Human Capital theory continues to offer a simplistic (and unproven) but powerful equation of personal and industrial investment in education to improved economic benefits for the individual and society (Jackson & Jordan, 2003, p. 3; Marginson, 1997, p. 94). In essence, Human Capital theory represents a rejection of Keynesian economics and a reversion to classical economics theory, with its emphasis on educational production functions, and input-output industrial model of education, and cost effectiveness as a way to measure educational output and reduce the wastage of human capital (Blackmore, 1997, p. 231).

The result is an emerging instrumental, positivist and skill-based view of education that harnesses learning to national economic priorities and calls for training systems that are responsive to the needs of industry (Blackmore, 1997, p. 232; Jackson & Jordan, 2000, p. 5). In contrast to writers who argue that ‘skill’ is a socially constructed concept, the training discourse posits ‘skill’ as a “fixed and measurable attribute defined by the technical needs of the workplace,” and one which is “measurable, standardisable, regulatable and ultimately tradable in a market” (Blackmore, p. 233; Jackson & Jordan, p. 6). Knowledge, skills and capacities are thus re-configured as discrete, isolatable, translatable and marketable commodities. Blackmore points out that national governments in several industrialized countries are now engaged in the task of breaking skills further into key competencies in order to better standardize, control and account for them (p. 232). As a result, “[w]here skills development was once seen as a chance for individuals to gain bargaining power in the labour market, in the last decade it has become a means for employers to gain workers whose knowledge and skill is already tightly harnessed to the ‘bottom line’” (Jackson & Jordan, p. 1).

As well as gearing education more closely to the needs of industry, there are other profound educational consequences to the skills-based approach to education and training. Essentially, this approach ‘dumbs down’ education. As Blackmore (1997)
points out, “the language of skills conlates the acquisition of menial, trivial and routinized tasks by subdividing and labelling, thereby converting ‘tasks’ into ‘skills’. In so doing, such tasks become ‘meaningful and productive work’” (p. 234). Thus, the skills discourse reflects the vocationalist notion that “[l]earning is work and work is learning” (p. 232). This approach also moves adult learning away from the traditional humanist and liberal approaches, which emphasized a learner-centred curriculum, to approaches based on mechanized and standardized curricula (p. 235). Indeed, the skills discourse fundamentally repositions the subjectivity of the learner in relation to the task, as serves to “objectify and reposition skills so they can be treated less as an attribute of individuals and more as a property of the work process” (Jackson & Jordan, 1997, p. 6).

The move towards skills-based training has also resulted in pressures to make the education system more responsive to the needs of industry. Several authors comment on the fact that the new focus on skills for the knowledge society has been coupled with attacks on schools for failing to adequately prepare workers to meet the changing demands of industry, and calls for an expansion in the private provision on education and training (Holland et al., 2003; Gowen, 1992; Jackson & Jordan, 2000). For example, in Knowledge Matters, although Human Resources Development Canada (2001) does not outright attack the public sector, the government calls for a “broad based, accessible and comprehensive adult learning system” which draws on “Canada’s formal post-secondary education resources – universities, colleges, technical institutes, private training institutions and apprenticeship programs – and also on the efforts of employers and unions” (p. 38). Some writers have argued that the discourse thus provides an argument for replacing the public education system with a ‘training industry’ consisting of “multiple providers in the public, private and community sectors” and with a focus on “employers rather than individuals as a principle client of the system” (Blackmore, 1997, p. 235; Jackson & Jordan, p. 5).

From a political economy perspective, these arguments for a more productivity-oriented approach to workplace literacy rationalize government expenditures of education money on training programs aimed at skills acquisition. In the context of the training discourse,
such expenditures supposedly benefit the whole community, but actually they chiefly benefits corporations (Blackmore, 1997, p. 235). Further, as Griffin Cohen (1999-2000) and others have pointed out, this is a significant change, as it makes learning for work subject to the strictures of emerging multinational trade agreements such as the General Agreement on Trade in Services, which specifically envisions free trade in education and training services (ibid., Jackson & Jordan, 2000). Holland et al. summarize Aronowitz and Giroux’s point that the new “instrumental rationality” in the provision of education arguably “signifies the triumph of the school-business partnership approach to learning motivation” (as cited, p. 22).

Thus, while skills and learning may, in the tradition of the Enlightenment, strengthen the position of the individual in the world of work, “the opportunity increasingly on offer is to ‘acquire skills’ that will give access to the workplace on terms that actually reduce individual power relative to the interests of the employer” (Jackson & Jordan, 2000, p. 11). The effect of both actions is to harness workplace learning to the needs of the global market. The result is two-fold: learning is both expanded into the realm of employee subjectivity, and reduced to a basic, functional set of skills.

Thus, critics of the knowledge society take a pessimistic view of the economic impacts of post-Fordism and globalization on work and learning opportunities for working people. Reversing the dominant optic, which focuses on the ‘problem’ of skills deficits as the cause of economic woes, these authors identify that “the so-called literacy crisis... is actually a crisis for industry in a shrinking global marketplace” (Holland et al., p. 30). What has changed, Gowen (1992) argues, “is not educational attainment, but the demands of the workplace” (p. 12). Yet, “in putting the onus on the individual and the schools for producing deficient workers, the public discourse carefully avoids the notion that perhaps the workplace itself and how workers are positioned in the workplace need to be restructured” (p. 12). Critics have pointed out that this ‘new’ formula for economic development simply regurgitates the familiar ‘trickle-down’ claim that economic growth and prosperity for business will, in turn, translate into well-being for individuals and communities, thus reinventing the productivity of organizations as a common good
(Jackson & Jordan, 2000, pp. 1; 4). Nevertheless, the ‘need’ for increased worker literacy training has become commonly and, for the most part, unquestionably accepted across Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries (Jackson & Jordan, 2000, p. 4).

3.6 Implications for Workplace Literacy

Definitions of workplace literacy within the dominant regime have also both expanded to encompass a broader range of activities and the area of employee subjectivity, and, simultaneously shrunk to a focus on narrow, work-related skills. While the definition of literacy may have expanded to include many ‘literacies’, most workplace literacy programs offer only functional literacy programs that focus on work-related competencies. The dominant discourse describes literacy in ways that blame poor worker literacy skills for the inability of businesses to compete in the global marketplace and prescribes, as a remedy, an approach to literacy education that is narrowly constructed as a functional employment skill (Folinsbee & Hunter, 2002, p. 11). Such programs are evaluated according to pre-determined core competencies and by accounting for the return to the employer on the investment. Learning is thus reduced to discreet, objective tasks or competencies, to which a price tag is attached.

Holland et al. (2003) state that the new work order has produced an expanded definition of literacy so that “while still passive and functional,” literacy has also come “to include not only reading and writing, but also ‘learning to learn’, listening, creative thinking and problem solving, motivation, interpersonal skills, organizational effectiveness and other ‘skills’ which allow workers to be ‘self-managing’” (p. 29). However, these interpersonal, organizational and managing skills are valued only from within currently structured power relations in the workplace, and literacy, in these terms, “becomes a tool for creating company committed workers” (p. 30). These dominant definitions view literacy as a discreet, objective and universal set of skills, and do not place literacy within “the everyday social and power relations of the workplace” and ignore other research that argues that “print is interpreted, produced, and learned meaningfully only in the contexts of its use” (Folinsbee & Hunter, 2002, p. 7).
Lankshear (2003) agrees that the new capitalism has led to both an expansion of the concept of literacy and commodification. He outlines four new literacies: the lingering basics, the new basics, elite literacies and foreign language literacy (pp. 2-5). Lingering basics refer to basic language and math skills that individuals need for everyday life, and the new basics reflects the emerging interest in applied language, critical thinking and problem-solving. Elite literacies refers to higher order scientific, technological and symbolic literacies, and foreign language literacy refers to the ability to communicate with new partners in their own language. Lankshear argues that, while the definition of literacy has thus expanded, these literacies nevertheless come under the influence of the “current ‘competency-based everything’ regime” (p. 8). Under the production and consumption pressures of the global market, literacies are subject to powerful forces of standardization and homogenization, and seen as skills that can be broken down and commodified to support required performance outcomes.

Other writers claim that the International Adult Literacy Survey has contributed to a techno-rationalist perspective on literacy. Darville (1999) argues that the IALS only promotes the ability to use texts in performing functional tasks in a way that management intends rather than making problematic the relations or work that the texts constitute. He concludes that the IALS is fundamentally aligned with managerial interests. He also shows the contradiction between the survey’s egalitarian, holistic definition and the survey, itself, which only wants to know how people fit into institutions. Blunt (2001) concludes that there is little to gain from looking at statistics in isolation from their context, as under-education in Canada is more a social problem than an economic one.

Examples from Canadian public discourse support the view that the dominant discourse on workplace literacy influenced by the current competency-based regime, and presents an instrumental, positivist and techno-rationalist view of literacy that ignores social and power dynamics and harnesses learning to national economic priorities. For example, Human Resources Development Canada is currently engaged in an Essential Skills Research Project that focuses on nine Essential Skills: reading text, document use,
numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, thinking skills, computer use and continuous learning. As stated in the Government’s website, the impetus for this project comes from the growing body of international research that links “labour market success to a set of teachable, transferable and measurable skills” (http://srv600.hrdrdhrhc.gc.ca/esrp/english/general/research_e.pdf). The goals of the project are to seek a common language capable of describing skills across occupations and of measuring whether individuals have the required skills for certain jobs. Researchers interview a number of workers in each occupation, identify common tasks found in the data, and rate their complexity. They claim that the result is “an Essential Skills profile that illustrates how the nine Essential Skills are used in an occupation” (ibid.). The researchers also gather samples of “Authentic Workplace Materials” that provide real life examples of how workers use Essential Skills (ibid.). They plan to complete most of the 520 occupation groups of the National Occupational Classification by 2007.

Thus, like many national governments in industrialized countries, the Canadian government is now engaged in the task of breaking these skills down into key competencies (Blackmore, 1997, p. 232). Knowledge, skills and capacities are seen as discrete, isolate-able, translatable entities, which can then be quantified and harnessed to productivity. This initiative has been taken up by the Conference Board of Canada (http://www.conferenceboard.ca) in their Employability 2000+ project, which aims to articulate all the abilities that workers need to succeed in the workplace, including fundamental, personal management and teamwork skills.

HRDC's Essential Skills Research Project, although still underway, already has an impact on literacy programming in Canada, which can be detected in particular programs that adopt a competency-based, functional context approach to teach reading and writing, envisioning these as discrete sub-skills that are part of specific job tasks. This approach aims to teach people to read as though the skill could be contained in a workplace manual or memo, but not a Collective Agreement or, say, Shakespeare. K. Shultz (1997) says, that these definitions of literacy “rest on the assumption that literacy is a set of universal skills disassociated from the individual and made specific by the functional context in
which they applied” (p. 49).

Interestingly, Shultz points out that the term functional literacy has a history of use within a military context. Likewise, de Castell and Luke (as cited in Gowen, 1992) explain that functional literacy is generally referred to the ability “to understand instructions necessary for conducting necessary military functions and tasks” (as cited, p. 16). Functional literacy is an approach that was developed by the U.S. army, and has since gained currency as the acceptable framework for workplace literacy programs. Further, Gowan suggests that the popularity among employers and funders of the functional context approach may be because this is a model “well-suited to [military and] industrial modes of production [and] driven by the same set of industrial and behaviouristic assumptions about knowledge that separate skills into discreet categories and emphasize the linearity and hierarchy of tasks involved in production” (p. 17). Gowan concludes that functional context literacy is “exploitative, simplistic, and culturally insensitive – ‘a reflection of the narrowness of the military mind’” (p. 122, de Castell and Luke, as cited in Gowen, ibid.).

To give just one example, Human Resources Development Canada’s Essential Skills Profiles have been adopted into a workplace literacy curriculum by the Western Canada Workplace Essential Skills Training Network (WWestNet). WWestNet is a multi-sectoral network with representatives from business, government and labour committed to raising awareness of and being a catalyst for workplace literacy issues and activities. In a conference, *Taking the Next Steps Together: A Collaborative Approach to Workplace Essential Skills* (April 17-19, 2002), WWestNet offered a package for *Workplace Essential Skills Across the Technical Curriculum*. The *Curriculum* clearly frames the discussion in the context of skills shortages, and presents HRDC’s Essential Skills Profiles as the basis upon which workplace curriculum should be modeled. The *Curriculum* encourages providers to define essential skills at their workplace, to compare their findings to the government classifications, and to use authentic workplace material to teach skills specifically geared to the work context. Some specific examples of workplace essential skills are listed as:
• Reading and responding to an email
• Writing in a logbook
• Reading instructions in a manual
• Interpreting a blueprint
• Making a call to a supplier
• Reading a collective agreement
• Converting metric measurements to Imperial
• Scheduling daily activities
• Measuring angles
• Interpreting WHMS symbols
• Completing an expense claim
• Calculating square footages
• Doing a cost estimate for a job

WWestNet and the other Canadian projects that build on HRDC’s Essential Skills Profiles are examples of a functional competency approaches to literacy learning.

These approaches ignore significant ethnographic research that positively recognize workers’ ways of getting work done and point out “the fallacy of viewing skills as a toolbox that workers can take into any workplace” (Darrah, 1997; Gowen, 1996, 1992; Folinsbee & Hunter, 2002, pp. 11-. 12). These and other researchers (see e.g. Holland, Frank et al., 2003) have shown that workers are often insulted by or suspicious of literacy programs developed by management without their input, and find that the content of the programs, although ostensibly geared towards the “everyday/everynight” reality of their working lives, does not accurately reflect their actual work process and the ways in which they construct meaning and relate information about their work (Smith, 1999). As a result, workers often resist or subvert these programs. Program facilitators too often miss out on this entire event, and conclude that workers are simply resistant - too lazy or too stupid to understand.

It is difficult to argue against the productivity-orientation that dominates workplace literacy provision in Canada and elsewhere in the industrialized world. The dominant discourse of workplace literacy has assumed and co-opted many of the fundamental tenets of more traditional, liberal approaches to literacy programming. For example, the Workplace Education Development project, another multipartite Canada-wide research
project with National Literacy Secretariat funding, offers a view of literacy education that is entirely competency-based and workplace-oriented. Like WWestNet, the WED project builds literacy development around HRDC's Essential Skills Profiles. However, the *WED Practitioner's Guide* (Whincup, 2001) uses language from a more traditional, liberal approach to adult literacy, and justifies its workplace orientation in terms of "helping workers gain accreditation and skills they can use in life," "contextualizing the learning of skills," "facilitating skillfully and empathetically" (p. 1; p. 3). Thus, as many of the critics of the new skills and learning agenda have pointed out, this approach to learning offers empowerment and personal development, but disguises the fact that these are attainable only within the context of existing structured power relationships around work and learning.

Part of the purpose for quantifying and standardizing literacy skills is so that their impact can be measured in productivity terms. To cite a Canadian example, Human Resources Development Canada recently funded research focusing on Return on Training Investment (ROTI) as a tool for evaluating the effectiveness of literacy programs. According to Barker, one of Canada's leading experts in the field of adult education program evaluation, and author of *Return on training investment: An environmental scan*, this approach offers an "accounting-based method of comparing the costs and benefits of training by converting all costs and benefits to financial measures" (Futured, 2001). Every learning outcome has to be given a price tag. ROTI answers the question, "For every dollar invested in training, how many dollars does the investor get back?" Barker acknowledges that while ROTI is commonly employed by employers and business groups, "there is a limited amount of literature from the point of view of individuals, the trainers, or society" (p. 4).

Barker's (Futured, 2001) work raises the question of whether a learning program can, in fact, ever be effectively evaluated when viewed exclusively through such a reductive and monetary lens, or whether the imposition of this particular set of outcome criteria would simply end up fundamentally distorting the original intent. In a related study, Ng (1990) showed how a community employment program was fundamentally altered by the
reporting requirements of a new funding arrangement, and, specifically, that in order to produce a required paper trail, the organization ended up dis-organizing itself away from its previously collective, grassroots and advocacy-oriented principles. It seems likely that the same issue would arise if a ROTI-style accountability structure were imposed on a workplace literacy program. Indeed, Barker states that just such a reorientation towards new guiding principles of competencies for competitiveness might, in fact, be one of the main reasons for conducting a ROTI-style evaluation: “Course objectives and content will become more lean [sic], relevant and behavioural with a focus on monetary results rather than the acquisition of information” (p. 5).

Lankshear (2003) argues that these developments have led to a strengthening and deepening of literacy’s socially reproductive function in ways that should concern supporters of democratic approaches to education, since “crucial issues of equality, social justice, [and] inclusivity are at stake” (p. 8). Literacies are configured not in the context of socially constructed relations, including relations of power, but as measured capacities of the individual learner. This notion of “possessive individualism” assumes a society that is composed of free and equal individuals, each proprietor of their own capabilities (ibid.). Describing literacy skill as a private issue makes it possible for the dominant discourse to place the blame at the foot of individual workers if the public skills needs are not met. In fact, Lankshear argues, literacy and skills are socially constructed and reproductive of existing power inequities: “where individuals end up in the new word order is likely related in material ways to their prospects within the new work order” (p. 8). Finally, the current literacy agenda incorporates critical thinking, but only as it “relates to the demands of the economy and labour formation” (ibid.). The emphasis of the critique is on “finding new and better ways of meeting institutional targets (of quality, productivity, innovation, improvement),” but the targets themselves remain “beyond question” (ibid.) Quoting Delgado-Gaitan, Lankshear concludes that these new literacies contain notions of empowerment construed as “the act of showing people how to work within a system from the perspective of people in power” (as cited, p. 9).
3.7 Whose Knowledge Matters?

The "literacy myth" suggests that workers who are "more print literate" will be "more productive" and that becoming more literate will "improve workers' self-esteem and enable workers to adapt more easily to new technologies" thereby positively impacting overall company productivity (Gowen, 1994, p. 41). This 'truth' is central to the dominant discourse of workplace literacy that cites worker skill-deficits as the cause of corporate struggles in the global marketplace. However, as Foucault (1972) argues, the effects of truth are produced within discourses that are in themselves neither true nor false (p. 118). This raises the question of whether the new economy really does demand a higher level of literacy skills from all workers. Are worker literacy skills really a growing factor in corporate competitiveness? The answer seems to be that literacy skills are important for some segments of workers, but not for all. The new knowledge society does not seem to place equal value on everyone's knowledge. Fraser (1989) proposes a "framework for inquiry" for understanding the way that power functions within discourses, such as the dominant discourse of workplace literacy (p. 145). One aspect of her framework is a structural analysis, which is what I will turn to now.

Some authors have carried out ethnographic research that shows how management-driven, top-down workplace literacy programs, sometimes implemented as part of an attempted shift towards a more high performance workplace, actually destroy workers' competent communities of practice, ignore the informal, sophisticated and relational ways of knowing that form an integral part of the labour process and teach 'against the grain' of workers 'everyday knowledge' (Gowen, 1994; Gowen 1992; Holland, 2003; Hull, 2000; Hull 1999; Jackson, 2003). As Gowen (1994) argues, a "seldom discussed component is that management has difficulty recognizing and tapping the knowledge that workers already possess – a kind of managerial literacy problem" (p. 43). Programs that decontextualize literacy, configure literacy as a set of discreet skills instead of a practice that is embedded in relational and power dynamics, and strip away the social practices surrounding the way print and communication literacy is actually used at work, are consequently destined for failure. The studies show that such top-down approaches to workplace literacy miss out on any worker improvements and contributions to improved
quality and productivity that workers might have otherwise been able to make. Further, Livingstone (1997) argues cogently for the fact that, while both formal and informal learning within Canadian society has increased significantly in the past generation, workplaces have not adapted to permit the fuller use of people’s current education and continued learning capacities (p. 73). These studies build a strong argument in favour of workplaces that are actually flatter, actually more collaborative and democratic, and where worker input is actually valued as a contribution to corporate competitiveness. Yet, “in putting the onus on the individual and schools for producing deficient workers, the public discourse carefully avoids the notion that perhaps the workplace itself and how workers are positioned in the workplace need to be restructured” (Gowen, 1992, p. 12).

Critics have also argued that promise of jobs and advancement commensurate with education remains hollow, even in the context of the ‘new capitalism’. The crisis, they argue, is not the literacy skills of workers, but the restructuring of the global economy. Fraser (1989) states, “the ‘fiscal crisis of the state’ is a long-term, structural phenomenon of international proportions” (p. 144). Increasingly, more is expected of, and offered to, employees with high levels of formal training and skill, while the rest are threatened with under- or unemployment (see, for example, Green & Riddell, 2001, Literacy, Numeracy and Labour Market Outcomes in Canada). As Pierson (1998) argues, the “watchword of post-Fordism is flexibility” (p. 60; italics original). He explains:

The demands of batch production and ‘niche marketing’, taken together with the production possibilities afforded by the application of new technologies, favour a ‘demassification’ of the workforce. At its simplest, employment becomes polarized between a ‘core’ of well-paid, secure and qualified wage-earners with polyvalent skills and a ‘periphery’ of poorly paid, casualized and unskilled workers who may move in and out of a category of still more marginalized ‘welfare dependents’ (p. 60).

Similarly, Livingstone (1997) argues the real contemporary economic challenge is not the supposed skills deficit among workers, but a growing shortage of jobs and the growth in temporary or part-time work brought about, first, by the mechanization of the workplace and, more recently, by downsizing in response to global economic pressures (p. 76). As Forrester (1995) points out, “experiences of working life have been transformed over the
last two decades and are increasingly characterised by falling standards of living, temporary or long-term absence from employment and increasing insecurity” (p. 173). In related point, McQuaig (1998) points out that Canada has chosen to adopt a high unemployment rate as part of our strategy for controlling inflation, which begs the question: how does the reality of structured unemployment fit with the rhetoric around supposed skills shortages?

The notion of ‘skills’ is also impacted by industrial change. Braverman (cited in Blackmore, 1997) argues that technology has led to the “deskilling or dispossession of the mass of workers from ‘the realm of science, knowledge and skill’ since 1900” and also to a bifurcation of the labour market by “at the same time increasing the specialization and skill of a small segment of the workforce, the managers and technicians” (as cited, p. 227). Holland et al. (2003) point out, “Some writers argue that Braverman’s writings are no longer relevant because workplaces are no longer organized in the way he describes,” but others see that the changes and of which he warns “have simply accelerated” in the context of globalization (p. 18). Other writers emphasize the gendered and racialized aspects of the bifurcation in labour market development. For example, Blackmore (1997) points out that there is an “increasing polarization of labour between the majority of workers, most of them women, being concentrated in increasingly semi-skilled or unskilled labour and a minority of ‘highly skilled’ technicians, professionals and managers, usually male (p. 227). In the same vein, Sasson (1998) argues that the globalization agenda rests in an often-overlooked or hidden way on the availability of “a vast supply of low-wage workers,” which she describes as the new “serving class,” composed primarily of immigrants and women (p. 90).

Critics also point out that, despite the renewed focus on literacy and learning for work, little has changed in terms of the actual opportunities available for working people to learn at work, which might suggest that the status quo is operating just fine. For example, Studies such as Gowen’s (1994), The ‘literacy myth’ at work, suggest that, contrary to the myth, reading and writing in many worksites actually play “a very minimal role in acquiring and displaying the information needed for [entry-level] workers
to get their jobs done” (p. 38). Livingstone (1997) argues that, regardless of the emphasis on the restructuring of work in the global, technology-driven economy, there is little hard evidence that the level of skill needed to perform most work tasks has changed at all (p. 83). Jackson and Jordan (2000) point out that employers in the new global economy have not been making unequivocal demands for workers with higher levels of technical know-how,” particularly “in large, low-skilled segments of the service sector that are creating the largest numbers of jobs, but where much work is casualized and qualifications traditionally less regulated (p. 3).

The new economy may, in fact, depend on a growing class of peripheral, marginalized workers just as much as it does on a small class of highly skilled workers. It is, therefore, questionable whether it is ‘worth it’, in terms of a return on investment, for many employers to offer literacy upgrades for entry-level employees. When factored into the company’s finances, such programs simply add to the overall cost of labour, while corporations in the Western world are already struggling to compete with the massive, cheaper labour pool available in the worldwide market (Holland et al., 2003, p. 27). One of the clear effects of the new economy is that corporations increasingly contract work out to cheaper, often non-union workers, and also now routinely move production activities to “wherever labour is cheapest worldwide” (Reich, as cited in Holland et al., p. 28). There is “a growth in subcontracting, in ‘non-standard’ employment and in work within the ‘informal’ economy (with its attendant lack of rights)” (Pierson, 1998, pp. 15-16). In this context, providing training upgrades to existing workers may simply not always be the most efficient way of attaining production goals, as contracting out or sending the work offshore entirely become increasingly viable options.

This notion is supported by the fact that, despite all the rhetoric of the knowledge society, Canadian employers still consistently under-invest in workplace training and literacy. Jackson and Jordan (2000) argue, “in real life, employers have been reluctant in their support for emerging training policies, and instead have called for ever-greater ‘flexibilities’ in the system of provision” (p. 2). In keeping with these findings, in Knowledge Matters, Human Resources Development Canada (2002) cites reports
indicating that "[a]mong indicators of business performance, one of Canada's lowest scores is for skills training" (p. 40). Moreover, when employers do provide workplace training, it is usually aimed at the top tier of employees, those who already have considerable education, qualifications and remuneration, thus re-enforcing labour market bifurcation. Historically and now, "entry-level workers... who are most often defined as being most in need of literacy training... have received the least on-the-job training" (Gowen, 1994, p. 37). Holland et al. (2003) point to studies showing that workplace education and training have played a key role in the creation of the new capitalism, as companies have reduced the size of their workforce overall and simultaneously sought to upgrade and multiply the skills of their remaining workforce to fill the gaps (p. 19). They achieve these goals by consistently offering training to the most highly skilled employees, and not at all to those who, arguably, are most in need of skills upgrades.

There is also relatively little government support for workplace literacy. Despite the discussion of creating a more competitive (and a more inclusive and democratic) society, both levels of government in Canada also continue to pass the buck, with the federal government asserting that education is a provincial responsibility and most provincial governments clamouring for more federal investment in education and social infrastructure, while retreating from public-sector and affordable provision of basic education, including workplace literacy. In Knowledge Matters, Human Resources Development Canada (2002) commits (somehow) to reducing the numbers of Canadians with low literacy skills by 25% over the next decade, and, as part of this agenda, to (somehow) seeing that within five years, businesses increase by one-third their annual investment in training per employee – but specific actions are not outlined and have not been forthcoming (p. 46). Thus, the provision of workplace literacy programming in Canada has been long on talk and short on action. Raising adult literacy skills: The need for a pan-Canadian response, is damning on this point:

It is obvious to us that higher literacy skills enhance employers' profitability, which in turn raises the earnings of workers. In fact, a more highly skilled and literate workforce is one of the keys to improving productivity and the economic wellbeing of Canadians. The Committee is thus somewhat mystified as to why the incidence of workplace-based training is so low in this country when, given the abundance of workers with low literacy skills across the country, the opportunity for economic
gains is so great (p. 65).

The Report calls for increased public incentives for employers to invest in workplace literacy. Whether this call is heeded remains to be seen.

As mentioned, the Canadian Government is attempting some interventions aimed at increasing the opportunities for workers to learn at work, and I have previously mentioned the Workplace Skills Strategy and the Sector Council Program. Through the Workplace Skills Strategy, the Government of Canada proposes to invest $3.5 billion over this year and the next five years. Human Resources and Skills Development will be providing $37,336,642 to the Sector Council Program. However, as the Movement for Canadian Literacy (2005) points out, it is unclear - and unlikely - that this money will be targeted at literacy initiatives for entry-level workers: “Although advancing literacy in the workplace is supposed to be a cornerstone of the strategy, it’s unclear as to what precisely has been done on the literacy front to date” (p. 2). Since, as the Movement goes on to note, these initiatives concern apprenticeship training, it is likely that they will involve workers with more specialized skills, not entry-level workers. Moreover in these, as in almost all federally-sponsored workplace literacy and learning programs, governments are structurally constrained. As a Program Manager from the National Literacy Secretariat points out, governments must collaborate with employers in order to achieve “buy-in from business” for workplace literacy, so it seems obvious that business perspectives will increasingly dominant the workplace literacy agenda (Hayes, 2003, p. 7). The outcome – “what happens when literacy issues come to the fore as a result of other, non-learning issues” – seems to be that the goals of the literacy program, and the way that knowledge is configured within it, become closely geared to corporate needs (ibid.).

Thus, the dominant regime in workplace literacy continues to offer, at best, narrow and job-specific basic skills programs for most entry-level workers, and to offer higher level learning opportunities only to the most skilled members of the workforce. Further, lack of support for workplace literacy by government and industry compounds the effects of
global economic structural adjustment by increasing to the growing bifurcation in the labour pool, and re-enforce the skills and training divide. Most Canadian workers will be lucky to get offered workplace literacy programs that focus on the ‘lingering basics’ of reading and writing skills or even the ‘new basics’ of applied language, problem solving and critical thinking skills (Lankshear, 2003). Fewer and fewer will have any structured access to the emerging array of higher order, scientific and specialized ‘symbolic’ literacies and foreign language skills (ibid.).

Perhaps these comments on the structural, political-economic underpinnings of the knowledge society discourse point to some of the underlying reasons why, despite all the talk of ‘the literacy crisis’, and despite the fact that Canadians are, on the whole, reading and learning more than ever, little has actually changed for workers with low levels of literacy and numeracy. Recent findings show that there has been, over the course of the past ten years (1994-2004), virtually no change in the literacy proficiency of Canadians at IALS levels one and two:

Contrary to expectation, the report finds little improvement in literacy proficiency since 1994. The new survey shows almost nine million Canadians aged 16 to 65 (12 million if Canadians over 65 are included) score below the desirable threshold of prose literacy performance... This is significant because of the importance of literacy for economic development and social cohesion (Statistics Canada, 2005, pp. 7-8).

To sum up, in challenging the dominant claims, many critics argue that the new training orthodoxy is simply yet another way to organize and discipline labour in order to make it flexible and responsive to the needs of capital. In contrast to the dominant claims of increasing and shared prosperity, critics also point out that while the new economy offers some ‘high-skill, high-pay’ jobs in certain industries, it has also led – locally and internationally - to a process of high income gentrification, and a bifurcation in the labour market. Critics point out that, despite the rhetoric of the knowledge society and the learning organization, for the vast majority of workers, the new workplace is depressingly similar to the old one, and employers and governments alike continue to consistently under-support and under-fund meaningful workplace training for low-skill employees. The dominant discourse posits workplace literacy as an important factor contributing to
competitiveness in the global economy, even as it glosses over the negative effects of this economy on the most marginal workers. These authors reverse the ‘knowledge society’ paradigm by positioning the economy, not the worker, as the source of underproduction. As Gowen (1992) has argued, the perception of literacy crisis “deflects public attention from a complexity of social and economic problems that the nation is not addressing” (p. 8).

In light of these critiques, one can be left wondering whose knowledge really matters in the new knowledge society? The answer appears to be that the knowledge that matters are the skills and competencies that serve the interests of global capital. As long as contemporary workplace literacy programs offer workers only those skills deemed, in the eyes of their employers, to be “really useful knowledge,” they are no more advanced than the programs of Victorian predecessors, who aimed “to give the means of content to those who, for the most part, must remain in that station which requires great self-denial and great endurance” (Simon, as cited in Holland et al., 2003, p. 16). Indeed, the modern-day version is arguably less enlightened than this 19th century charity model, since it seeks to harness it its own ends even that which might otherwise be, at the very least, a source of content.

### 3.8 Chapter Conclusions

Recent developments in literacy and learning at work draw on human capital theory, which is largely influenced by the neo-classical theories of economist Milton Friedman - the same Friedman whose theories on the economic necessity of structural unemployment have been adopted by the Canadian government (Marginson, 1997, p. 98). Human capital theory “presumes a direct, linear and positive correlation between education and technology, education and individual productivity, education and national economic productivity” (Blackmore, 1997, p. 226). Human capital theory also introduces a fiscally-oriented culture of accountability into education theory, as the “so-called ‘social’ rate of return on educational investment is necessarily calculated exclusively on the basis of observable pecuniary values” (Blaug, 1976, p. 830). However, human capital theory raises many questions about education and labour training in particular, that are
unanswerable within its own frameworks. With reference to labour training, the theory ignores the reproductive and stratifying function of the education and workplace learning programs, where the more you earn, the more you can afford to learn. Blaug notes that human capital theory assumes that all workers are operating in an environment of free choice, unhampered by poverty or lack of job options, and that financial gain is the only motivator:

Nothing is said about the non-pecuniary attractions of alternative occupations, the costs of gaining adequate information, and the imperfections of the capital markets, which inhibit some individuals from financing their desirable occupational choices. Moreover, the model concentrates all its attention on the supply of human capital, while virtually ignoring the nature of demand in labour markets (p. 839).

The theory also ignores the social-stratification function of the educational system as a whole, in regards to which sociologists have shown that “family finance is highly inter-correlated with academic ability and achievement drive” (p. 841).

However, the logical structure of the dominant discourse on workplace literacy that sustains, and is sustained by, theoretical constructs such as human capital is “entirely penetrated by ideology” and exposed to “political manipulation” (Foucault, as cited in Marginson, 1997, p. 95). To illustrate, the dominant discourse posits literacy as a financial investment and an individual choice, frames the (supposed) low skill level of workers as the ‘problem’ behind (supposed) economic ills, and then offers certain, narrow productivity-oriented ‘solutions’ as the necessary cure. At the same time, the dominant workplace literacy discourse glosses over other explanations of current economic pressures, and carefully avoids the notion that capital, not labour, is in crisis. Thus, the ideological, structural and political economic aspects of the dominant discourse on workplace literacy are self-re-enforcing and reproductive, operating in tandem within the total social system (Althusser, 1971). Further, human capital theory functions as an internal normative and logical justification for the dominant discourse. As Foucault (as cited in Marginson, 1997) argues, the normative and logical structures of hegemonic discourse are also self-re-enforcing (p. 95). This effect is neither a random effect nor a “blind spot in the science,” but entirely exposed to political manipulation: “Friedman
knew what he was doing. The suppression of the ‘uneconomic’ other was a deliberate and necessary condition of the normative power” of economically-based theories (Marginson, p. 99). So, although Blaug (1976), like many others since, asked the question of “whether the human-capital research program is also capable of providing new normative criteria for public action,” such as workplace literacy, the human capital perspective has, nevertheless, emerged as a strong justifying thread within the dominant, productivity-oriented discourse (p. 830). As a result, despite the fact that there is no solid proof of the link between worker skills deficits and economic woes, or workplace learning and economic prosperity, the “objectified relations,” in Smith’s (1999) words, of productivity-oriented workplace literacy discourse “have emerged as increasingly independent and increasingly pervasive as organizers of people’s everyday/ everynight activities” such as their workplace literacy activities (p. 73). As Marginson puts it, “It was not necessary for the assumptions of human capital theory to be verifiable for it to function as a compelling metaphor linking education with economic life” (p. 94).

These arguments about the “economisation of educational government” recall the work of Karl Polanyi (as cited in Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005), who theorized that the modern market society is different from all previous societies because the economy has become “disembedded from the society” and, now, “drives” all aspects of the society, including its skills and learning agenda (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005, p. 1; see also Marginson, 1997, p. 106). While previous economic arrangements were ‘embedded’ in social relations, in capitalism the situations are reversed - social relations are now defined by economic relations. Thus, in the modern market society, “the economy is lifted up and operates according to laws of its own, and society becomes subordinate to the laws of economics” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, ibid.). However, Economic History Services (n.d) points out that another feature of Polanyi’s analysis is his argument that the self-regulating market could not survive - not because of the distributional consequences that play the major role in Marx’s explanation of the inevitable collapse of capitalism, but because the starkly utopian nature of the self-regulating market will give rise to counter movements, even among those enjoying increased material prosperity. Society is vital to humans as social animals, and so the
self-regulating market is ultimately inconsistent with a sustainable society. Any expansion of the market will, in short, elicit a counter-response from society.

In the sections that follow, I will explore the discourse of worker-centred literacy as a possible counter-response to the dominant, productivity-oriented discourse of workplace literacy. The next chapter will analyze my first-hand interviews with labour literacy activists in order to explicate key themes in their ‘talk’ about worker-centred literacy. I will show that their discourse defines literacy in ways that are oppositional to the dominant, productivity-oriented discourse. Whereas the dominant ‘talk’ about workplace literacy posits the worker as the source of economic problems and focuses on monetary imperatives and the corporate bottom line, the discourse of labour literacy activists takes workers’ perspectives into consideration and focuses on the personal and social meanings that literacy can have for working people. Further, the discourse of labour literacy activists posits literacy not as a tool for increasing corporate profits, but as a means of bringing about individual and collective social change.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE PHILOSOPHY OF WORKER-CENTRED LITERACY

4.1 Introduction
This chapter will begin my exploration of the emerging labour-based discourse of workplace literacy as “a medium for the making and contesting of various political claims” (Fraser, 1989, p. 161). This discourse will be examined as a ‘site of struggle’ among competing claims about the value and purpose of workplace literacy, as well as its practical application. I will posit labour ‘talk’, and in particular the talk of labour literacy activists, as occurring in “a complex and polyvalent nexus of compromise formations in which are sedimented the outcomes of past and future struggles as well as the conditions for present and future ones” (Fraser, p. 157). First, I will describe labour-based discourse as a site of struggle among emergent perspectives and frameworks that are sometimes allied with the dominant discourse, and sometimes oppositional to it. Then, I will refer to the data from my interviews with labour literacy activists to explore in greater detail the ambiguously oppositional discourse of worker-centred literacy.

All this ‘talk’ about workplace literacy created a ‘moment’ in policy formation, an opportunity for oppositional voices from labour to challenge narrow, productivity-oriented, competency-based models of workplace literacy, and to put forward alternative visions. As Forrester (2002) indicates, “To some extent, ironically, it was this emergence of the Human Resource Management perspective in the 1980s and 1990s that provided the legitimacy and the political space for trade union workplace learning initiatives that previously had been ideologically closed or blocked” (p. 141).

It has been argued that, for the most part, trade unions have been cautious around responding to the changes brought about by the new, global capitalism. Forrester (2002) writes, “the available evidence does suggest a certain caution and hesitancy by trade unions in responding to these changes” (p. 138). Citing Muckenberger, Stroh and Zoll (1995), he goes on to argue:

There is general agreement within the discussion among trade unions about the need for a fundamental reform with structure and programs of their organizations. Despite this agreement, however, trade union practice as such has not undergone
any obvious change. The trade unions have taken up a defensive position in an attempt to safeguard their achievements" (as cited in Forrester, ibid.).

This defensive position may also be reflected in unions’ relative lack of engagement with, and opposition to, the new learning agenda of global capital. Jackson and Jordan (2000) argue that, “Trade unions are often too absorbed in coping with the effects of restructuring that threaten their own survival to take a broad view of ‘learning’ as an opportunity to mobilize a democratic agenda” (p. 12).

However, Levine (2005) describes the emergence of a union-based approach to literacy since the 1980’s and 1990’s. According to Levine, union-based literacy emerged in the 1980’s as a natural extension of labour’s role in providing education and training to workers and fighting for public education. A variety of union-based literacy programs were developed. In the 1990s, the Canadian Labour Congress and several national unions undertook projects to raise awareness and resources to further their union-based literacy project. In 1996, with NLS funding, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) Workplace Literacy Project began a number of literacy-related initiatives and launched the CLC Literacy Working Group to share information, resources and strategies. However, in spite of many successes, when the political landscape changed, as it did, for example, in Ontario in 1995 and in B.C. in 2000, funding for union literacy evaporated, and has remained hard to come by to this day. Despite these ongoing struggles, unions have developed, through these experiences and experiments, capacity and expertise in union-based literacy. The resulting programs were not all identical. Some were negotiated to run in the workplace, others were provided through public education or union training centres, and their methodologies and program models were likewise diverse.

Levine (2005) identifies a “growing awareness of the need for programs to be worker-centred” (p. 14). However, some labour organizations have begun to adopt the dominant perspective on workplace learning. Some Canadian workplace literacy initiatives, in which labour organizations are active participants, emphasize the collaborative nature of the union-management partnership, and the improved labour relations that can result. To
name just few:

- Learning and Education Assisted by Peers (LEAP), a program in the BC pulp and paper industry that emerged out of the Joint Union Management Initiative, originally funded by Forestry Renewal BC (Evans et al., n.d.)

Further, several programs wholeheartedly adopt a competency-based approach to workplace literacy programming that, I have argued, is part of the competitiveness project. The Workplace Education Development (WED) and Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES, www.towes.com) projects are two salient examples. I have discussed WED in the previous chapter. Like WED, TOWES was developed in partnership with labour, employer and education organizations, with funding from Human Resources Development Canada’s (HRDC) National Literacy Secretariat (Murphy, 2002, p. 6). Also like WED, TOWES employs a functional context approach to literacy that “compares an individual’s skills against the requirements of specific occupations, identifying areas of competency and areas for further development” (ibid.). The aim of the program is to give “businesses in Canada an important tool to help them become more profitable and productive” (ibid.). Here, labour and capital meet on the battlefield of workplace literacy - and shake hands.

Of course, just because labour adopts the dominant rhetoric does not mean they believe it. It is perhaps more an indicator of the fact that there is no other way for them to get to the table. To offer a brief structural, political-economic analysis, this coalition of labour and capital over workplace literacy is, in part, due to the fact that most workplace literacy programs take place at the worksite, and the employer and, in many cases, the government are at the table, active in developing and evaluating the programs. I have discussed the fact that the federal government is under-funding workplace literacy programming, but is active in issuing (perhaps empty) promises that employer contributions in support of workplace literacy will increase (Human Resources Development Canada, 2002, p. 46). The National Literacy Secretariat insists that having
“employer associations provide leadership is critical to achieving buy-in from business” for workplace literacy programs that are otherwise generally unjustifiable on the corporate or national financial ledgers (Hayes, 2003, p. 7). However, because management is at the table, “responding to literacy needs in the workplace and of workers is not a direct application of traditional adult literacy practice” or, I offer by extension, of union practice (p. 5).

As Levine (2005) points out, “With funding for delivery uneven or unavailable... the step of implementing programs was often an insurmountable challenge” for unions to take on their own (p. 15). However, some unions have taken that step and have negotiated literacy program money as part of their Collective Agreement with the employer (notably Pulp and Paper Workers of Canada, Local 9 in Prince George), perhaps taking the lead in this from Bargaining for basic skills (Canadian Labour Congress, 2000b). Others have used their own union membership money to fund entire Training Centre where there members can participate in an array of programs, from basic skills upgrading through to college credit courses (in this, the United Food and Commercial Workers union is probably the best example in Canada. See Dowdell, 1999). These examples suggest that, in addition to external factors, there is some hesitancy within the trade union movement on the whole to fully endorse and fund literacy programs for their members.

There are also oppositional voices within labour that propose an alternative vision of workplace literacy, one that they refer to as worker-centred literacy. While agreeing with, or seeking to capitalize on, the need for increased investments in workplace training, many labour texts and spokespeople express misgivings about the competency-based model of learning underpinning current discourse. Speaking to the Conference Board of Canada’s National Summit on Literacy and Productivity, Jean Claude Parrot (2000), the then-Executive Vice President of the Canadian Labour Congress, is detailed and explicit in outlining the challenge of worker-centred literacy to the dominant paradigm:

I want to challenge the notion of literacy and productivity, the theme of this summit. I get pretty anxious when I hear the business sector talk about 'literacy
deficits’ and about how literacy training can boost productivity and improve the bottom line.

Too often, workplace literacy is framed as a remedy for the ills of the workplace, whether we’re talking about industrial accidents or low productivity, problems that we know are caused by a multitude of factors. We are concerned when workers get blamed for these ills. Too often, workplace literacy programs are defined in narrow terms, and the training offered is limited to the skills needed for the job the worker is currently performing (p. 1).

The Canadian Labour Congress (n.d.) is also clear in stating their belief that limited literacy is not a principle cause of low productivity, is not a major reason for poverty or unemployment, and does not account for Canadian industry’s difficulties in international competition (p. 8).

In opposition to the dominant discourse, worker-centred literacy presents a view of learning that draws on humanist and emancipatory traditions in adult education and posits literacy as a tool for creating individual and collective social change. Turk and Unda (1991) explain that the philosophy of worker-centred literacy “comes from labour’s dedication to the broader goals of social unionism:

• To help empower working men and women to take control of their lives both individually and collectively;
• To be better able to speak with their own voices;
• To be better able to make those voices heard;
• To question, critique, evaluate, and act as full citizens with a broad social vision in a democratic society” (p. 271)

As Judy Darcy (CUPE Literacy Project, 2001), the former National President of the Canadian Union of Public Employees puts it:

Good union-based workplace literacy programs help workers to learn about their rights as workers and they also help to build the union and strengthen our collective efforts as workers for social change. Good literacy programs also deal with the worker as a whole person to help them meet their needs as workers, as activists, as members in local unions, and as people in their communities. And it also helps people in their homes and family lives. Good literacy programs help to open the door to further education and training, and also help to provide access to job opportunities that many of our members would not otherwise have had (pp. 3-4).
Similarly, Jean Claude Parrot (2000) rejects the productivity-orientation of the dominant discourse in favour of a worker-centred approach:

At the same time, the labour movement believes that the workplace can be an important venue for learning because workers are familiar with its surroundings and have a social network there. It is convenient, especially if the classes take place at least partly on work time. Workers who have the chance to learn in their workplace usually find out that they have a lot in common with others in their classes. But that doesn’t mean that everything that goes on in the class has to come from the workplace... the learning will happen more effectively if the materials and content come from the range of activities and interests of the workers.

We believe that a successful workplace literacy program has to be a worker-centred one. That means addressing the needs of the whole person, because workers have many roles in life beyond the workplace. It means that we need the kind of program that empowers participants to have more control over their learning and over their lives and their jobs. While building on their literacy skills, they also should have the chance to learn about their individual and collective rights (p. 2).

Thus, Levine (2005) writes, there is “no standard model of what union-based literacy looked like” (p. 14). Nor is there a standard agreement about a union-based philosophy of literacy.

I will explore in detail what five key labour literacy activists say about their beliefs in the role and goals of worker-centred literacy in order to elucidate the philosophy and underlying principles of worker-centred literacy. In particular, I will show why and how worker-centred literacy envisions literacy as a tool for creating personal and social change. I hope this discussion may contribute to existing knowledge and understanding of the worker-centred approach to literacy.

However, I will also show that, even as it has transformational and revolutionary aims, the discourse of labour literacy activists sometimes reflects the dominant paradigm. This contrast comes through in moments when the interviewees speak of literacy learners as the ‘Other’, and speak of literacy as something that is ‘done to’ learners as opposed to ‘done with’ them, and imply that the literacy program catalyzes their otherwise dormant learning faculties. Dominant elements also guide part of their goals for a worker-centred
literacy project, in that they propose literacy as a tool for aiding in workers’ advancement within the status quo, even as they envision a broad social change agenda. In the activists’ talk about literacy, these dominant elements are secondary to their overall vision for a worker-centred approach, but they are nevertheless present. The result, I will argue, is an approach to workplace literacy that is “ambiguously non-hegemonic” insofar as it challenges the assumptions of the productivity-oriented dominant discourse, while still carrying traces of that very framework (Blau Du Plessis, 1987, p. 269).

In pointing out these limitations, I in no way wish to insult my interviewees or to denigrate worker-centred literacy. Indeed, I hope that my critique (not criticism) will contribute to a fuller, more subtle understanding of the dominant discourse of workplace literacy, of the subtle ways it enters into and is sustained by even oppositional voices, and of the ways that unionists can counteract that agenda.

To inform my analysis, I will draw on the work of Razack (1999), who suggests that “we do shy away from critical reflecting on the principles and practices of those on the ‘good’ side” (p. 50). This unquestioning acceptance leaves the (often significant) positional authority of the critical educator unaltered, glosses over differences within and among the lived experiences and political stances of oppressed groups and stymies further attempts to move past these differences. However, there are ways, Razack suggests, citing Ellsworth, of recognizing that oppositional voices are “‘valid – but not without response’” (as cited, p. 47). This approach to “unlearning privilege” involves a critical self-examination on the part of all participants not only of what stories we choose to tell and how we ‘hear’ the stories of others, but also of what we ‘know’ and how we know it (Razack, p. 55; Spivak, as cited in Razack, p. 54). Again citing Spivak (1990b), Razack concludes that this approach encourages us to “trace the other in self” (as cited, p. 55). The result is a pedagogy capable not only of “untangling how we are constructed” but also, crucially, of successfully defining “what it is we want to change about the world and why” – and how (Razack, p. 46). Through my investigation of the ideological aspects of worker-centred literacy discourse, as represented in the ‘talk’ of these labour literacy activists, I hope to define “the limits of the possible” of and for the philosophy of worker-
centred literacy, and the role of this philosophy, and these activists, in transmitting and/or resisting dominant culture (Ball, 1990, p. 11).

4.2 In Their Words: Labour Literacy Activists

4.2.1 Labour Adjustment

None of the people I interviewed started out with a belief in literacy as a tool for creating personal and social change. At least one of my interviewees is clear that he did not come to literacy with any driving belief in the value of education at all. Jim:

When I got involved in JUMP, it wasn't because of this deep-seated belief in education; it was because of a chance to work promoting unionism and building community within the union movement throughout the province of British Columbia. So my motivation at that point was that. The education was sort of, 'yeah okay, that would be kind of neat for people to get the education.

For two of my interviewees, literacy was, in fact, quite the opposite of a change agent; it was a tool to assist in the implementation of structural adjustment programs impacting their industries. Sylvia’s first introduction to literacy came when she was on secondment from the Hospital Employees’ Union and working as a training officer for the BC Healthcare Labour Adjustment Agency (HLAA). Her job was to distribute funds to healthcare workers for upgrading and re-training. Similarly, Jim was working in Forestry Renewal BC’s Joint Union Management Program (JUMP) and his job was to get pulp mill employees to engage in training and upgrading opportunities.

In this sense, these two activists arrived at literacy simply because they were looking for the best way to help their union and their fellow members gain something through industrial transition, or at least to mitigate as much as possible the negative impact of this transition. Significantly, this positioning reflects the ambiguous position of workplace literacy as a whole, within the context of the structural adjustment requirements of the global economy. By engaging in discussions around workplace literacy, labour unions risk becoming a tool in the hands of capital, which is designing programs that will increase and perpetuate the marginalization and exploitation of working people.
4.2.2 External Shifts

Several of my interviewees describe a similar 'A-Ha!' moment, which came when they realized that certain groups of people were consistently not showing up or participating in existing forms of union or workplace training. Sylvia noticed that very few of her fellow union-members were accessing the HLAA funds:

So I could see – [because] essentially I had to put all of the reports together for the training funds and what we were approving – that there [were] very few Hospital Employees’ Union members accessing any of the money, so I told the union that, and then they finally decided to create a position of training officer. So I went back to the union [as a training officer] and... worked on the literacy project... because... we realized that [literacy] was probably a big reason why our members were not accessing the programs...

The light bulb that went off for Jim was when he realized the extent to which people, some people, were not getting involved. For Jim, literacy was about realizing who was excluded:

Well, [JUMP] was supposed to be all levels.... I didn’t think we needed this formal thing [for literacy], because JUMP would provide all of that. And so we went out there and we started to notice that there [were] a lot of inhibitions around getting involved in education. People... didn’t want to, people were busy. And there [were] a lot of reasons why people said they didn’t want to get involved. But you quickly became used to the fact that the inhibitions were more than [that]... So within six months... it really started to set in to me that people weren’t going to get involved in training opportunities, they weren’t going to do the type of things that I thought necessary, [and] that education would allow people to become empowered.

Tamara saw this gap reflected in the attitude of partner organizations. While working as a Regional Coordinator for the Ontario Federation of Labour’s Basic Education for Skills and Training program, she approached Queen’s University to ask for support for a workplace literacy program:

Queen’s absolutely refused to support the program. This bastion of higher learning! Because they already had a program of tuition replacement, right? If you wanted to take Philosophy 101, you could take it and there wouldn’t be charge. And so they had that covered off - without, of course, taking into account the people who were the groundskeepers and the maintenance workers and the cafeteria workers - and all of those people who would never avail themselves of that kind of program.
Further, Sylvia articulates a realization that workplace training programs do not automatically address inequalities in access to education; that, indeed, traditional workplace training may only reproduce and perpetuate that inequity:

*When you look at the average age in the public sector - I think of CUPE members and probably the HEU is no different – it is you know, mid to late 40s. They’re not really hiring very much in the public sector. And even though people are retiring, they’re not really filling those jobs. So that just means an aging group. So you know, that’s 30 years out of school, right? I mean, if I’ve been out of school for 20 years, we have some [?] like thirty years out of school. As if you’re going to go sign up for training, or – you know, you’ve never been offered training in the workplace. And it’s not like you’re a nurse or a technician and you’re constantly training. [For those people] it’s like, ‘Oh great, now I have an opportunity to do this. It interests me and it’s free.’ So of course you’re going to jump on it. But... when you’ve been out of school and have had very little opportunity for workplace training, you’re not going to jump on it. It’s going to be like, ‘Oh my god, do I have to do this? Is this the only way to keep my job or to find another job?’ It’s stressful; it’s not a welcome thing.*

Ultimately, these realizations are linked to more fundamental understandings of the way that educational opportunity and attainment is socially structured along class lines. They came to view literacy within the framework of systemic inequality that is produced and reproduced along class lines by socially structured access to education. Sylvia:

*When you look at... labour in terms of [the] working class, then the education system is not for them and it’s designed to serve the middle class and the rich, and it’s inflexible and does not understand where working class comes from and all of that, right...?*

Although Rob came to literacy as a professional, college-based educator, his motivation for becoming involved in workplace literacy came directly from his prior experiences as a construction worker, and his understanding that for many working people, pursuing education is simply not a realistic option:

*I think part of the attraction was that I always identified with, not so much being a union member, but being a working stiff myself and seeing all the needs that surrounded me with my work mates and how there was no place for them. They couldn’t access regular programming because of their shifts, and in construction you have to be so mobile.*

In part, then, worker-centred literacy simply aims to overcome external, socially structured barriers to education. This project recognizes that, while education may
theoretically be considered a ‘right’, in practice, access to education is differentially distributed along power lines, including those of class. Worker-centred literacy calls on the educational system to flex in order to provide for the integration and accommodation of formal schooling to the rhythms and patterns of working people’s lives” (Morrison, 1999, p. 36). As it has been since the early days of Frontier College, this is an argument “not simply for educational change, but for an education revolution” (ibid.). This systems approach is very different from the mainstream perspective, which, on the contrary, posits the individual learner as the source of perceived literacy and productivity issues, and as the target of educational interventions.

4.2.3 Internal Shifts

As well as focusing on external, systemic barriers to education, all of the interviewees shared an understanding of internalized oppression and the socially constructed nature of the self. Jim uses the example of his union’s National President, who told Jim that he “had not done any learning for 30 years.”

Jim: 
So to me that was case in point. If that is what the President thinks about himself, can you imagine the members that are on the floor, and society keeps telling them that they’re nothing, they’re nothing, they’re nothing? They believe it after a while.

They describe literacy as a tool not for imparting specific discreet skills, but rather for overcoming self-doubt, building learner confidence in learning, and increasing learners’ sense of agency in the world. In Jim’s words, literacy is “not about teaching them to read and write. It’s about very much [about] giving them the confidence in their own learning ability.” He says again: “It’s not about imparting specific skills to people... it’s more about imparting the confidence and... ability to learn.”

For Hugh, similarly, the goals of a literacy program centre on the personal, internal changes or paradigm shifts that literacy program can promote:

I think you see success in a literacy program in the confidence level of people. I think people begin to be more free [sic] with what’s on their mind and [with] expressing themselves, [and more] willing to take chances and make mistakes. Because I think the BEST program, at least, we encouraged people... it was okay to make mistakes, that you can’t learn unless you make mistakes, you know?...
And I think it was a great morale booster, the BEST program. I saw people almost like come out of themselves, become more confident.

Hugh speaks of the transformational effect he observes among program participants:

“For me the biggest highlight... is people coming and talking to me and not being shy around me.” He also references his own experiences as a tutor in the literacy program:

“I used to be the shyest person in this world. I was terrible.”

Once literacy is reframed in terms of lifelong learning, the artificial divide between the ‘skilled’ and the ‘unskilled’ disappears. Jim:

I never thought of it in terms of literacy... I’ve always thought of it in terms of helping people get comfortable learning again.... And it’s really how I promote it still, and how I see it. People have all different levels of skills. And it’s just a matter of having enough confidence to empower them to get it. Learning – it’s something we all have to do.

Ultimately, Jim says that literacy is not about the task but, rather, “about the process. It’s about the person getting the confidence, because learning really is a life-long endeavour.”

Thus, these interviewees seem to position one’s perceptions of oneself as a learner and of one’s learning ability as one aspect of identity that is socially constructed along lines of inequality and that carries the markers of class divisions. They describe literacy as a way to effect a change in one’s notions of ‘self’ and ‘agency’. These perspectives challenge the dominant competency-based framework that describes literacy as an array of skills that can be acquired like a new set of clothes, and that prescribes competencies and outcomes without any regard to the internal life of the learner. Gowan’s (1992) study of one workplace literacy program in a hospital in the American South highlights some of the pitfalls of competency-based programs in this regard. She shows how learners who feel that the curriculum does not speak to them simply passively resist or actively subvert it, and are often characterized as ‘poor learners’ as a result.
However, although my interviewees here take a critical and humanist stance in opposition to the dominant paradigm, they also make some unexamined statements that carry traces of that very paradigm. By framing literacy as a ‘return to learning,’ some of my interviewees imply that learning was not happening for the participants before the literacy program came along. This stance overlooks the numerous informal ways in which people learn at work and outside of it (Livingston, 1997). Further, in positioning the learner as a blank slate and a victim of oppression, this stance also risks ascribing to the educator or educational program the role of liberating and benevolent force. So, while these activists clearly describe lifelong learning as a journey we are all on, it remains unclear from these quotations whether my interviewees are working out of what Stinson O’Gorman (1997), citing Felix Cadena, calls a paternalistic model of education, in which the educator assumes a benevolent position of superiority, or a participatory model of intervention, which recognizes the educator as part of the group and collective learning functions to overcome dependency and existing social relations (as cited, p. 182). This point will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five, which concerns the practical applications of worker-centred literacy.

4.2.4 Shifts in Relations

To these activists, one of the key impacts of worker-centred literacy is a shift in relations at work. In part, this is a shift away from the individualism and isolation of workplace culture. Hugh speaks of the impact of worker-centred literacy on himself and his co-workers in terms of them becoming visible to each other, and the shift in social relations at work that can result:

Willie is a woman in food services. And I see her more often now than I did before... [A] couple times I said, ‘Hi Willie, how are you?’ And this is just within the last couple of years, and she went through BEST the very first year we had it. And she said, ‘You remember my name?’ I said, ‘Yes, of course I do!’ And it was just wonderful. And how she uses my name and says ‘Hi’ and ‘How are you?’ And just that alone is – it makes the hospital an incredibly pleasant place to work. You know, when people talk to one another and not afraid of each other. And to me that’s the ultimate measure in itself.... That community sense....

Hugh’s comments about the isolation and alienation of the current workplace are reminiscent of some feedback from a tutor after a recent training session for a workplace
literacy project. When asked what he had really gained from the training, one tutor-in-training wrote back: “I feel this is an opportunity to participate in building a personal communication in what I had thought until now was a hopelessly alienated space” (R. McDermitt, personal communication).

Alone among the people I interviewed, Hugh talks directly from his experience as a tutor in a workplace literacy program, and does not, as a result, refer to the learners and participants as the ‘other’. The other activists speak from a different position or location in describing their growing understandings of literacy as the process of seeing, for the first time, who was not showing up and of recognizing who was excluded. In a sense, these activists are talking about seeing those people who had always been invisible to them. Hugh speaks to this same notion, but from a different angle.

Jim echoes Hugh’s words, minus the experiential angle:

First it’s just a disposition in the work place. I mean, we’ve heard it so many times: ‘They just sat off in the lunch room and they wouldn’t talk to anyone, and now they’re always involved in all the conversations.’ That’s critical. Because now they’re becoming part of the community.

Traditional skills-based literacy programs miss the point entirely, because with their focus on specific, tangible skills outcomes, they cannot focus on these invisible outcomes. The problem with this approach is that it does not tell any stories. Speaking of a failed evaluation their program had after the first year, Hugh says:

But that first evaluation that the management person did, I mean it didn’t tell any stories. It didn’t give any information except really bad uh, bad publicity for the program, because the managers were saying, ‘Well what is this BEST program? We know that this person is off for two years, but we don’t know what that person is doing!’ And here they are evaluating that person and they don’t know what they’re looking for.

4.2.5 Equity and Inclusion

These activists bring this systems analysis to their own union organizations, and argue for ways to make them more equitable and inclusive. Sylvia:

Well, the way that I’m looking at literacy and how we are promoting it in CUPE is an issue of equity and access... [J]ust because you’ve been out of school for a
long time or you didn’t have the education to begin with, you shouldn’t be stuck and you shouldn’t be the first person out of the door without any options. So it’s very much about that from a labour perspective...

These insights caused some of them to re-examine how well inclusion and equity were working within their own unions. Tamara:

*Literacy in my mind is a metaphor for inclusion. It’s about recognizing inequalities in the world and it’s about making an attempt to make things a little better for people who have been left out or disenfranchised in many ways for lots of reasons. So I look at it in some ways similarly to the way I’d look at a ramp for wheelchairs: that it’s an access point, it’s a way to enter into being part of the community in ways that might not have been there before.*

Further, Tamara says, “So really it’s about inclusion and it’s about community... which I think has been sorely lacking generally in the labour movement, and I think we do that in our literacy classes...”

Along the same lines, Jim says:

*And so all of that time was really an opportunity to mature my philosophical views around where the needs were and were not. And what was really going on... Why were only 3% of our members actually participating in [our training programs]? Why even as we had JUMP – and it was wildly successful – but we never achieved more than 50% of people participating. So what about the other 50%? And JUMP by every other measurement – what we could measure against – was by far and away more successful than anything that’d been tried before! So but even with those measurements, even if you take the 50% - what happened to the other 50%? You know? And I can accept that some of those people are busy and doing other things. I can’t accept 50%.*

### 4.2.6 Control vs. Empathy

My interviewees are all self-defined committed trade unionists, and people who have chosen trade unionism in general, and worker-centred literacy in particular, as their preferred tools for creating a more just society. Yet, not one of them even mentioned a need to bring an explicit union focus to worker-centred literacy. They are clearly not intent on replacing one prescribed curriculum, such as the narrow skills-based focus of the dominant discourse, with another.
These programs take an empowerment approach to literacy learning in the sense that the program goals are not prescriptive, the approach used is not ‘banking’ education, and even the union organization cannot dictate the program outcomes. Sylvia:

So there’s sort of a collective service that we can provide, but there’s also that individual benefit that’s really important, you know, what our members as individuals can get out of it for themselves. And that - that is something that we can’t dictate. It’s really what they want to accomplish and what they take out of it and what they put into it themselves, right? And we’re not - there’s no pressure to put a certain amount in and to get something out. And that’s the part of the nature of the program that’s very hard to define and measure and promote.

This recalls the clear ethical boundary that Mezirow (1995) draws between education for emancipation - and propaganda (p. 127). In this, these programs represent a radical departure from the instrumental approach posited in and by the dominant discourse on workplace literacy, in which, to cite Freire (1968/1972):

One of the basic elements of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is prescription. Every prescription represents the imposition of one man’s choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the man prescribed into one that conforms with the prescriber’s consciousness (p. 31; italics original).

In opposition to the dominant discourse, these activists envision education as the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994).

This contrasts sharply with the ways in which other workplaces use functional literacy as a form of control, to ‘discipline and punish’ learners, and simply another way to extend workplace surveillance and discipline into the classroom (Foucault, 1975/1995). Hugh describes typical corporate culture as being about control:

They don’t know how to deal with people. It’s all about control. To keep people under control. That’s all they care about. It’s not about people becoming more socially aware, or empathetic. They don’t care about empathy. They just want work done. How you do that work, it doesn’t matter, as long as you get the work done. Social skills don’t matter. Only time is if there’s a problem, you know, people arguing and not getting along. But somebody always gets hurt, you know. Somebody always gets reprimanded or ... And that’s the only way they know how to deal with it. They don’t know how to sit down and have people communicate with each other.
In contrast, worker-centred literacy programs are about empathy, recognition of the other person, and love. Hugh:

*I think that’s what the BEST program is really about, is communicating with one another and being empathetic. Seeing the other person’s side of the story. Because there is a lot of history....*

Hugh tells a tale to illustrate his point:

*You know, one of my favourite books is To Kill a Mockingbird... Atticus Finch is my hero, and he says to Scout, ‘You can’t really ever know a person till you’ve walked around in their shoes!’ And at the end of the book... Boo Radley is in the corner, and Jan, her brother, has been injured, he’s got a broken arm. And she’s in the room with her dad, and they’re trying to figure out who killed the guy that attacked. Somebody killed him and they think it’s Jan. But then Scout sees Boo Radley behind the door. And she said, ‘It was him. He was there...’ The sheriff is there and they decide to let it go, but she walks him home. And she remembers what her dad had said, and she says, ‘I think I walked around in his shoes that day.’ Boo Radley was the scary character. Everybody thought he was a mental case and cruel. And he was just a human being and you just had to see his side of the story. And she managed to walk around in his shoes that day.*

Hugh’s words are reminiscent of Freire’s (1968/1973) notion that solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity; it is a radical posture.

Another way that Hugh speaks of this stance is as one validating someone else’s existence and identity, and of asserting one’s own humanity in a way that creates a space for the other person to do the same. Hugh:

*It’s about validation too. Validating that person’s experience and existence. Because I find that I have learned that [pause] ... I’m trying to think how to say this. I think each of us has the ability to give another person their humanity. And at the same time, assert our humanity or help that other person recognize our humanity... And one of the very easiest ways to do that – it’s a difficult thing to do initially, but it’s just to use a person’s name. It just – that in itself just breaks down barriers. Like getting someone to use your name and use that person’s name in conversation. I do all the time at work. I come in to work in the morning and I say hi to everyone using their names. And I find that everybody now uses my name. They don’t just say hi, they say, ‘Hi Hugh, how are you?’ Because I taught them – well, not ... I showed them how to be human and how ‘that’s the way I want you to treat me and that’s the way I treat you’.*

Again, Hugh’s words show the subtle difficulty of talking about liberation while claiming the role of liberator, or talking about a humanizing experience of education while
implying that the learner was ‘inhuman’ prior, a distinction that is also blurred in Freire’s (1968/1973) original work.

In a related quote, Jim mentions the role of love:

> Why did I get involved with JUMP and that whole initiative? The reason why I got involved with it is that earlier – is because I believe very strongly in social justice. But I believe in community. I love my immediate family. I love my extended family. And I’ve always loved the people that I’ve been around. Very much. And as I’ve got older, that expands and expands.

When writing about the necessity of fighting for freedom, Freire (1968/1973) says, “And this fight, because of the purpose given it by the oppressed, will actually constitute an act of love opposing the lovelessness which lies at the heart of the oppressors’ violence, lovelessness even when clothed in false generosity” (p. 29). True solidarity “risks an act of love” (p. 35).

### 4.2.7 Personal and Collective Transformation

Another way that these activists talk about literacy is as a means of creating community. This is a word that they repeat throughout the interviews. Tamara says “literacy is a metaphor for inclusion.... But it’s also about creating community.”

In part, perhaps, these labour literacy activists simply recognize what many top-down, management-oriented workplace literacy programs overlook, namely that workers communicate information and construct knowledge within what Gowen (1994) has called “informal communities of practice,” and that, to be successful, a workplace literacy program must encompass not only literacy skills, but also the social relations in which they are used and which give them meaning and purpose (p. 37). In this sense, programs based on worker-centered approach to literacy are likely to be much more successful than, say, programs based on a functional context approach.

However, for these labour literacy activists, building community is not simply about good literacy practice or social inclusion; it is about transformation, and as such, implies a learning process that not only empowers and includes people within the existing
structured relational and power dynamics, but also challenges those dynamics. For these interviewees, personal and collective empowerment are inextricably linked. Literacy builds community, and communities make social change possible.

Jim presents a polarity between “the philosophy of capitalism” and “the philosophy of community.” His democratic and radically inclusive vision of community is opposed to the neo-liberal agenda:

*And as the neo-liberal agenda takes – what they want to break down is community. Community flies in their face cause it makes multi-national corporations accountable. You know, as they start to marginalize groups and people.*

In Rob’s mind, literacy is linked to one’s capacity to act in community:

*My definition of it has changed dramatically from where I started. I initially thought it was just about reading and writing, but I've come to accept UNESCO’s definition, which is to contribute effectively to your society’s development. I think that is closer to what literacy means to me now and I think those words are really important because if you’re not literate you can’t supposedly - and I believe this to be true—that you can’t effect positive change in your community. That’s how I define literacy now... Again that definition includes development of the community. Well, that’s a huge aspect of most people’s lives.*

Here again, is that ambiguous stance, the subtle objectification of the learner when speaking about literacy as empowerment, also implies, perhaps paternalistically, that learners were incapable of acting prior to their participation in the program. This distinction is also blurred in the UNESCO definition Rob is quoting.

Sylvia echoes Barb Byers, “I don’t think that my view of literacy has evolved much from what was envisioned in the BEST program, in terms of ‘empowering people to speak with their own voices and make those voices heard.’” Tamara concludes, “But I guess for me what’s special about literacy is that it’s about both individual and collective transformation. And I think that we desperately need both.”

Worker-centred literacy posits individual and collective transformation as the route towards personal empowerment and equitable social change. Jim put it this way:
Any community is always based on — their success will be on how they treat the people that are most in need. So if you ignore the members in our community that have the least amount of confidence in learning, then you simply can’t build the community. So to me it’s just logical. You have to go there... And as we become more and more sophisticated about wanting to build communities, we’ll see that there is more and more need for that.

Ultimately, for these labour literacy activists, community-building strengthens democracy. Jim:

"Literacy is a key component of giving people the confidence to fully participate in a democracy... not just on a political level, on a provincial or municipal level, but a democracy within the workplace, a democracy within the household, a democracy within a club or organization, within a community. And what I mean by a democracy is very much people have an opportunity to speak their point of view and so when a decision is made by a collective, it’s made with all the information available, that it’s been fully exchanged. And until we get there, until people are comfortable, moving there and feeling confident in their abilities in expressing their views, we are missing out on too many views and so democracy won’t work as well as it should.

Jim provides a detailed account of the transformational impact of literacy, saying:

"One of the things I always ask people is whether or not they have the ability to look at every action a human makes as positive intention... It’s a little bit ‘out there’, but no matter what actions people [take], there is positive intention... If people can’t wrestle with that idea, it’s a good thermometer that in all likelihood that they don’t have a lot of self-confidence in themselves, because as soon as you say that that person’s ‘doing it to me’ then you have no control over that. It’s a good indication that there’s a lack of confidence in the person’s own ability to control things. You can’t control the actual activity, but you can control your reaction to it. Predominantly, we advocate that.

Jim links his notion of individual empowerment directly to a notion of community empowerment, by saying in the next breath:

"And that’s what happens in our community.... If you’re a victim, then there’s nothing you can do about it. And when you give that power away — and that’s why the word ‘empowerment’ really means something to me, is because only we can give that power away. Nobody can take it from us. So it’s the individual’s choice. Doesn’t mean that you can necessarily stop someone else’s behaviour. But you can really stop the way that you’re reacting."
Further outlining the links between personal empowerment and social change, Jim goes on to say:

_How do you change in a more global system...?_ The simple fact is there's no political regime – whether it's feudalism, or monarchy or capitalism or communism – none of that has been able to provide a gate for will of the majority of people. It simply hasn't. Historically, nothing has been able to provide [that gate] when the majority of the people take a different view... _[H]ow did feudalism fail? I'm sure I can convince you that it wasn't the powers giving up the power. It was the people taking the power.... _[I]t's the same with monarchy. Finally people said 'No! That's enough!' Every political regime – communism – finally people said no._

These words are strongly reminiscent of Freire's (1973/1968):

This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only the power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both.... Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress, it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity (p. 28).

Jim's words also carry traces of the very same structured power hierarchies he is passionately speaking against. If empowerment signifies 'coming to power', then the oppressor can never 'give power away'. To speak of power in that way implies a paternalistic model of liberation (Cadena, as cited in Stinson O’Gorman, 1996, p. 182). Although it may be “motivated by compassion,” such an approach cannot be truly liberatory, since it will “result in dependency rather than self-affirmation” (Stinson O’Gorman, ibid.).

### 4.3 Chapter Conclusions

The perspectives on literacy described by these labour literacy advocates span a spectrum from liberal to radical/critical. On the one hand, some of the goals for literacy identified by these activists are, pragmatically, “to help workers develop the skills necessary to survive within the current system and to advance within it” (Gowan, 1992, p. 22). This attitude draws on liberal traditions in adult education, especially the Enlightenment ideal in which all members of a society have access to education and, thereby, to the
fulfillment of their talents and potential. According to the definition provided by Holland et al. (2003), in this "liberal view," literacy:

is seen to be broader than a set of necessary skills to perform a given task. The context of learning is taken into account, and workers are not blames for their learning 'deficits'. Organisational communications systems, the attitudes of key personnel, and the level of democratic functioning in the workplace are all understood to impact on workers' literacies.... Workers are encouraged to make curriculum development contributions, and programmes are broadened to include special interests and literacy used in the community outside work (p. 12).

Also within the liberal view, "[m]anagement, union/worker and educational interests are seen to be reconcilable" (ibid.).

In Freire's (1968/1973) terms, this perspective may exemplify "an attitude of adhesion to the oppressor," which he defines as follows: "At this level [the oppressed's] a perception of themselves as opposite of the oppressor does not yet signify engagement in a struggle to overcome the contradiction; the one pole aspires not to liberation, but to identification with its opposite pole" (p. 30). From this perspective:

For [the oppressed], the new man is themselves become oppressors. Their vision of the new man is individualistic; because of their identification with the oppressor, they have no consciousness of themselves as persons or as members of an oppressed class. It is not to become free men that they was agrarian reform, but in order to acquire land and thus become landowners – or, more precisely, bosses over other workers (ibid.).

However, when considered from within a dominant system that prescribes limited and exploitative educational opportunities for workers, simply having occasion to work towards one's own goals may be in and of itself a radical and transformative event, even if the enlightenment ideal of advancement commensurate with education remains hollow. Indeed, becoming 'the oppressor' may not be the point here. Perhaps labour literacy activists simply believe, along with Alfred Fitzpatrick, the founder of Frontier College, that "education [is] the God-given right of every person, male or female, not the exclusive privilege of the favoured few" (Morrison, 1999, p. 35). This has been the case in a few alternative literacy programs. For example, Foster (1989) found that one of the common themes among teachers of poor Black children is the belief that they must teach
the children “that school does not necessarily lead to advancement” and that, instead, their learners “must learn the value of education in its own right and not simply as a ticket for a good job” (as cited in Gowan, 1992, p. 122). Gowan (1992) also found that many of the learners in the hospital-based workplace literacy program she studied wanted access to the General Education Diploma not only because of the supposed opportunities for advancement that it may or may not represent, but also simply for its own sake (p. 121). My data is inconclusive on this point. In some ways worker-centred literacy may be joined to the dominant, productivity-oriented system of meanings and practices in that it aims to secure advancement for learners within the status quo. This perspective does not challenge the underpinnings of capitalism, it simply aims for a redistribution of what Bourdieu (1997) calls cultural and institutional capital.

At the same time, labour literacy advocates also believe “that the system needs to be changed” and see “the goal of workplace literacy instruction as empowerment through the development of a critical consciousness in order to change the current social, political, and economic system” (Gowen, 1992, p. 22). As Holland, Frank and Cooke (2003) define it, the radical/critical (or “proper”) view is:

> literacy for active citizenship and necessarily has a political dimension. It is embedded in social and cultural practices and relations rather than being simply a technology. To be literate is to continually ‘read’ one’s world (understand social, cultural, political aspects), the write and rewrite it, and thereby transform one’s relationship to it (p. 12).

It is in this sense that labour literacy activists posit emancipation as that moment of understanding the links between our private situation, and that of others (hooks, 1994, p. 47). Worker-centred literacy aims to bring about shifts in critical self-reflection, perspective transformation and sense of agency that Mezirow (1995) describes as transformational. Further, these advocates describe a literacy agenda that aims to promote inclusion and community in opposition to the alienation and individualism working life under capitalism, and to produce shifts in socially structured relations at the workplace. Literacy is thus offered as a source of alternative conditions and consciousness for working people and for the working class. This latter approach involves “a recognition of the class interest in education as something more than a tool
for enhancing the marketability of our labour capacities. It is a revolutionary questioning of the sources and goals of knowledge…” (Stinson O’Gorman, 1996, p. 169; italics mine). This perspective aims to fundamentally re-wire relationships to cultural, institutional and embodied capital (Bourdieu, 1997). In this view of literacy, “[m]anagement and worker interests are often significantly different, and sometimes irreconcilable” (Holland et al., p. 13).

Thus, labour activists’ views of literacy are both liberal and critical. This ambiguity is also reflected in the way they talk about the learners/workers. On the one hand, advocates clearly seek personal and collective transformation for all participants, including themselves. On the other hand, they sometimes objectify their fellow union members, and speak of empowerment in terms of something they can give to or create for the ‘other’ in their own ranks. In this, they are reflecting the subjugated position of the learner reflected in the dominant discourse. Indeed, even Freire’s (1968/1973) work establishes a dichotomy between ‘human’ and ‘dehumanized’, and positions the ‘liberating’ educator as someone who ‘enters into solidarity’ with the ‘oppressed’ in “their struggle to recover their lost humanity” (p. 28).

In contrast, Razack (1999) advises a problematization of the notion of subjectivity in critical pedagogy. She argues that critical educators are often guilty of sentimentalizing and essentializing the voices and stories of the ‘oppressed’, and points out that by unproblematically configuring oppressed knowledge “as suppressed therefore valued knowledge,” critical educators often gloss over the structured power differentials between their position (‘the listener’) and that of the learner (‘the teller’) (p. 37; p. 45). This stance both reveals and reproduces “the complex ways in which relations of domination are sustained, lived, and resisted” (p. 36). For example, such passive acknowledgement can contribute to the maintenance of the status quo, rather than its upheaval, as it serves to reassure participants that Canada is actually “diverse and full of folklore” (p. 37). Listeners of the stories of the oppressed can also easily fall into the trap of what, citing Monture-Angus, Razack calls “appropriating pain,” or “basking in the sense of having visited another country so easily and feeling no compulsion to explore their own
complicity in the oppression of others” (as cited, p. 52). As a critical educator reading Razack’s words, I felt a stab of shame, as I realized there have been moments, probably many, in my practice when I have sentimentalized or basked. There are probably moments like that in this paper, and in the way I deal with the stories the interviewees shared with me from the place of positional authority of the one analyzing and framing them. I take Razack’s comments as a reminder that all of us who are engaged in critical education for social change need to remain self-critical and open to being made aware of our blind spots. Without this, it becomes impossible to question or critically evaluate the educational project (Razack, p. 44).

Overall, however, the philosophy of worker-centred literacy is an alternative to the controlling and reductive agenda of dominant perspectives on worker education. Chapter Five will turn from a discussion of philosophy to an investigation of practice, and will show how this ambiguous stance is reflected in the practical applications of worker-centred literacy. Specifically, I will measure three worker-centred literacy program models against liberal vs. critical approaches to participatory programming.
CHAPTER FIVE: THE PRACTICE OF WORKER-CENTRED LITERACY

5.1 Introduction
Having examined the discourse of labour literacy activists to explicate their alternative representations of the ‘problem’ of workplace literacy, I will now turn to an examination of the ‘solution’ proposed by the discourse of worker-centred literacy. This chapter will investigate the practical applications of worker-centred literacy. I will look at the three examples of worker-centred literacy programs that my interviewees were involved in designing, implementing and evaluating (although the evaluation material is thin on the ground): the Ontario Federation of Labour’s BEST program, and, in British Columbia, the Hospital Employees’ Union BEST program and the LEAP program. I will argue that these program models span a spectrum from the liberal to the liberatory. In practice as well as philosophically, worker-centred literacy is ambiguously non-hegemonic.

Since the Canadian Labour Congress (n.d.) proposes popular education as a key influence on the worker-centred approach to literacy I will use this methodology as a yardstick for comparing the critical orientation of these programs (p. 12). This theoretical framework will allow me to tease out the liberal, learner-centred aspects of these programs from the actual moments of critical analysis. I will argue that, despite the references to popular and critical education in the course manuals and promotional material, these programs engage in participatory education in ways that are learner-centred as opposed to critical. This practice is consistent with the liberal, humanist traditions in adult education, and is aimed at improving the position of the individual within the existing status quo, rather than challenging its underpinnings. However, worker-centred literacy carves out subversive moments in which more radical goals are advanced.

Thus far, my discussion of worker-centred literacy discourse has been concerned what Fraser (1989) calls the “ideological” aspect of the “framework for inquiry,” in that it has been concerned with how labour literacy activists ‘talk’ about worker-centred literacy (p. 145). I have investigated the way labour literacy activists frame the notion of literacy, and have outlined the ideological meaning system of worker-centred literacy. I have
argued that the discourse of labour literacy activists is not a closed system, but is also the site of competing claims and interests. As a result, their discourse is ambiguous - it both resists and reproduces the dominant perspectives. In this chapter, I will continue this examination of the ideology of worker-centred literacy in relation to the dominant discourse on workplace learning, taking program materials and manuals as my focus.

As I have mentioned, Fraser (1989) and Ball (1990) suggest that there is also a structural, political-economic aspect to the inquiry framework. I have outlined some of these elements in my discussion of the struggles to obtain funding for union-based literacy programs. By examining worker-centred literacy programs in practice, I will now investigate some of the “the local particularities of everyday experience” of worker-centred literacy (Smith, 1999, p. 73). The analysis in this chapter will consider the funding, resources and support offered to worker-centred literacy by government, industry and labour, and the impact of these structural and political-economic elements on the material, everyday reality of the programs in practice.

I will suggest that labour literacy activists propose a vision for literacy that aims, in part, to restructure the position of workers within the economic system, but relative lack of support for worker-centred literacy from governments, employers and unions makes this challenging, and forces activists to pull back from some of the more radical aspects of their agenda for literacy, or to work towards them in subversive social spaces and ways. In the next chapter, I will examine ways that activists are working strategically to advance their notions of worker-centred literacy within the labour movement itself.

Since I have neither interviewed program participants nor engaged in an ethnographic study of these programs in practice, I will not be able to comment conclusively on any impacts of these programs on the “matrix of consciousness” (Smith, 1999, p. 73). I am still engaged in investigating and articulating “the limits of the possible” defined in and by the ideological space of worker-centred literacy policy and programming within the context of global capitalist society, and the role of worker-centred literacy in transmitting or resisting the dominant culture (Ball, 1990, p. 11).
5.2 Learner-Centred vs. Critical Approaches in Participatory Education

Stinson O’Gorman (1996) points out, “the term ‘popular education’ has been co-opted to refer to everything considered even remotely learner-centred or ‘popular’ and is, as a result, being stripped of much of its liberating content in educational circles” where the term has come to refer “strictly to the practice and methods of the original liberating model” (p. 167). While all approaches to participatory education use “methods and structures [of] participant-directed, participant-controlled, and participant-centred learning,” they must use these in combination with “the critical dialogue of dialectical materialism” in order to accomplish the revolutionary agenda of popular education (pp. 167-168). In keeping with this distinction, there are definite methodological differences between learner-centred and critical approaches to workplace literacy. Below, I will tease these differences and their impact on three worker-centred literacy program models.

In her introduction to *Learning about participatory approaches in adult literacy education*, Norton (2000) gives an excellent overview of the range of ways in which the term ‘participatory education’ has come to be understood, and I will use her summary as a springboard. Accordingly, Jurmo described participatory approaches as ones in which learners have “higher degrees of control, responsibility and reward vis-à-vis program activities,” while Fingeret describes participatory education as “a collaborative process that places learners at the centre of instruction,” and Gaber-Katz and Watson described learner participation as a “continuum ranging from using found materials in the program to becoming active in the community” (all as cited in Norton, p. 11). According to Norton, Auerbach first distinguished “participatory education” from “learner-centred approaches,” and described the former explicitly as “a critical education process aimed at social change” (as cited). Building on Auerbach’s work, Norton continues to draw a clear distinction between learner-centred and critical approaches. To summarize, a learner-centred approach is defined as a process whereby:

- Learners are involved in setting their own learning goals and determining their own curriculum,
• Materials are used that have meaning for the learners,
• Learners have opportunities to take active roles in creating meaningful materials,
• Both the cognitive and affective development of learners is supported, and
• There is a high degree of equality among learners and teachers or tutors (pp. 12-13).

However, the learner-centred approach focuses on individual interests and individual rather than group learning. It is thus not likely to lead to social analysis (Norton, 2000, pp. 16-17). Norton cites Gaber Katz and Watson who also questioned, "whether a self-determined curriculum, which focuses on the individual learner's experience, can also be a 'social change' curriculum that will support the empowerment of individuals and the community through collective action" (as cited, p. 17).

Similarly, Stinson O'Gorman (1996) argues that not only is systemic or dialectical analysis key to popular education, but so are "popular participation" and "actual involvement in joint political action" (p. 169; p. 170; italics original). Mezirow (1995) makes a similar distinction. On the one hand, he argues, transformative learning nurtures students' "[r]eflective judgment" and "crucial sense of agency" (p. 125; p. 127). Merriam (1995) argues that, for Mezirow, "[i]n adulthood, development is synonymous with perspective transformations" (p. 123). Mezirow distinguishes this approach from the one used in the "community development and social action education" pioneered in North America in the Highlander School, and in which "social action educators... devote themselves to working within oppressed groups throughout the entire process of transformation, including taking collective political action themselves" (p. 123; p. 124).

In short, collective systemic analysis and social action are central components of an engaged critical pedagogy. Program participants may engage in reflection, but without the action-reflection-action cycle, which Freire (1968/1973) calls praxis, the program is not one of critical or popular education (p. 52). Participants may even engage in systemic reflection about the circumstances of oppression, but without collective action aimed at upsetting the hegemonic production and reproduction of oppression, the praxis is still lacking.
5.3 Situating Worker-Centred Approaches

My analysis will be centred on a comparative methodology of three worker-centred literacy programs: the Ontario Federation of Labour’s BEST program, and, in British Columbia, the Hospital Employees’ Union BEST program and the LEAP program. Little literature exists in this area, and more documentation and research is necessary to capture the methodology employed in these programs, as well as how the learners experienced them. I will draw on texts that are specifically related to these three programs, and the material from the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and the national body of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the two main labour organizations engaged in promoting the worker-centred model of literacy. My discussion will also draw on my own experience and stories from my colleagues.

An ambiguous methodological approach that spans the spectrum of participatory approaches, from learner-centred to critical can be traced throughout the printed curriculum and promotional material that describes worker-centred literacy. At first, when the CLC ‘talks’ about adult education, they appears to mean the liberal, learner-centred approaches that dominate in the field of adult education in English-speaking Canada today, as opposed to popular education or critical pedagogy. In *Union based literacy course: Participant notes*, the CLC (n.d.) defines the core principles of the worker-centred approach as follows:

- Adult learning is voluntary.
- It acknowledges and builds on what adults already know.
- It recognizes that adults’ backgrounds are varied and rich and it provides opportunities for these differences to be taken into account and valued.
- Adult learning is significant – it relates to adults’ interests, goals and needs (p. 13).

Similarly, in *Learning for our lives: A union guide to worker-centred literacy*, the CLC (2000a) defines the “keys to a worker-centred approach” (p. 23). It:

- Builds on what workers already know
- Addresses the needs of the whole person
- Is developmental
- Reflects the diverse learning styles and needs of adult workers
- Involves workers in decision-making
• Looks to integrate literacy training with other aspects of workplace training
• Assures confidentiality
• Is open to all
• Is accessible (pp. 23-25).

Only one of the CLC’s ‘keys’ in *Learning for our lives* seems immediately consistent with a critical approach to education, and that is:

• Worker-centred learning enables workers to have more control over their lives and jobs (p. 25).

Under this point, the CLC offers an explanation that highlights some potential for working collectively on systemic issues. They write:

The objective of a union literacy program is to empower its participants. Programs promote values like fairness, solidarity, and community. While building on their literacy skills, members also learn about their individual and collective rights. A worker-centred approach builds confidence and self-esteem. It strengthens the role participants play in the union, in the workplace, and in society (p. 23).

It seems that empowering participants to play stronger roles in the union, the workplace and society is mostly to be achieved through building self-esteem and inculcating the value of solidarity. Individual transformation, it is hoped, will lead to social change.

However, *Seeds for change: A curriculum guide for worker-centred literacy*, clearly envisions a literacy program that engages in critical, collective, systemic analysis (Canadian Labour Congress, 2001). It states, “Education is not neutral. Underlying every education program is a particular vision of society and what it means to be human…. The struggle over curriculum is essentially a struggle over whose interests the education process is to serve” (p. 3).

Further, *Seeds for change* is clear about the role literacy plays in their vision of society and what it means to be human (CLC, 2001):

As trade unionists committed to action on behalf of human wholeness and social justice, we must understand literacy in its fullest sense – as the exercise of critical reflection and action, both individual and collective (p. 7).
This political stance towards education translates into a critical approach to workplace literacy, one that explicitly engages program participants in a collective, systemic analysis of their “everyday/ everynight” lives (Smith, 1999, p. 75). To illustrate, *Seeds for change* states:

Our definition of literacy includes both **tasks** and **skills**. Yet our definition goes one step further by taking into account the social and cultural practices – often institutionalized as systems – which structure our lives.... If we look closely at examples of real life literacy activities, we will soon see that they are embedded in and carried out in the context of social systems. Indeed, any given literacy cannot be dealt with in isolation – it can only be ‘read’ and critically understood in the context of the larger system of which it is a part. This is what Paulo Freire meant when he said, ‘Reading the world precedes reading the word’ (p. 7; bolds original).

*Seeds for change* goes on to give an explicit example of a literacy activity that combines literacy skills, real-life tasks and collective systemic analysis. It argues that filling out an accident report at work “entails much more than simply decoding the words on the page” (p. 7). In fact, “to really grasp the significance of the accident report form we have to know quite a bit about how the Workers’ Compensation system works: for example, what the specialized terms mean within the system, what the procedures and rules are and the nature of our rights and obligations” (pp. 7-8). The goal is to enable the group to “complete the form effectively in order to access our rights in the system” (p. 8).

However, the analysis does not stop there. The agenda is not only to learn how to work within the Workers’ Compensation system, but also to collectively determine strategies for changing the entire structured hierarchy of which Workers’ Compensation is just one manifestation or application. *Seeds for change* demonstrates a belief that learning a literacy activity in and of itself is not enough to create lasting change:

Furthermore, knowing something about the larger system and critically reflecting on how it affects us as workers helps us realize that **merely filling out a form correctly may not be enough to ensure that we access our rights**. Indeed, we may need to develop **individual and collective strategies to both deal with the system and to change it**. Taking action to change a system like Workers’ Compensation requires one to learn about the even larger systems of government and the processes of influencing and bringing about change. Thus, there is a whole other level of literacy tasks and skills in the context of dealing with systems (p. 8; italics mine).
Another example of ‘talk’ about worker-centred literacy that seems to come from a
critical perspective is found in the presentation of then-Executive Vice-President of the
CLC to the National Summit on Literacy and Productivity. Jean Claude Parrot’s (2000)
description is consistent with classic, Freirean popular education approaches to literacy:

Let me give you an example. A group of night cleaners were participating in a
literacy class that their union had negotiated with their employer. The class took
place in their downtown office building at 11 p.m., partly on work time, instructed
by a co-worker who had been trained by her union. One night Michel, a
participant, came in with his hand in a bandage. When his colleagues asked him
what had happened, he said that he had cut himself on a rusty metal garbage can.
His co-workers all knew about the problem with the garbage cans. They had
raised the issue with their supervisor and nothing had been done.

This time, it was different. Gisèle, the instructor, understood the situation well.
After all, she was a cleaner on the same shift. She seized the opportunity to help
the participants find a way to deal with the situation within the context of their
workplace literacy program. She asked Michel and the other participants about
their experiences with workplace injuries, writing key words on the board. Then
she asked them to write down their stories and to share them with the group.
Spelling patterns and verb endings were discussed. They talked about what they
could do about the problem of the rusty garbage cans.

They looked at the clauses in their collective agreement that dealt with safety on
the job. Together, they decided to write a letter to the health and safety
committee to raise the issue. They discussed what should be included in the
letter.... Ultimately, the letter was sent on behalf of the class and the rusty cans
were replaced with plastic ones.

This was a process that took place over several weeks. It included a number of
literacy tasks, like writing about one’s experience, reading sections of the contract
and composing a letter. It developed participants’ skills, such as reading for
understanding and spelling. But these tasks and skills came out of the experiences
of the workers, from their real lives. The process went beyond looking at an
individual situation. It helped the group work towards an understanding of how
decisions are made and where change is possible by dealing with the systems
surrounding an actual incident. This way of learning not only helped the
participants understand these systems better, but it engaged them in a process of
how they could stand up for themselves to affect positive change (p. 2).

Thus, through the texts of these two manuals and this speech, the CLC ‘talks’ about
worker-centred literacy in a way that sometimes seems consistent with liberal, humanist
traditions in adult education, and sometimes clearly draws on the critical traditions in
popular education. Methodologically speaking, the CLC describes an approach that straddles somewhat contradictory aims. On the one hand, literacy is a tool for promoting and advancing the individual within the existing social order. On the other hand, literacy is a tool for engaging in collective systemic reflection and action to change that social order.

5.4 The Ontario Federation of Labour’s BEST Program

These methodological and theoretical tensions can be traced in the two other program examples as well. Aspects of the OFL-BEST program methodology seem indebted to popular education, and yet, in the end, the program appears to have more in common with transformational as opposed to critical literacy.

From popular education, BEST-OFL draws a community-development perspective and focus on praxis. Tamara is clear that worker-centred literacy uses a community-development model, one that is catered to each individual worksite and to the ‘generative themes’ that are relevant there:

> [I]t [is] important to understand the culture of the workplace, which was the other thing about working with the local union. To know what the particular issues were... what the challenges were, what the threats were... So we would try to sort of tailor the arguments to the particular situation... [W]e would need to look at the workplace and see which kinds of programming were appropriate to that particular workplace and that location.

Writing of their experience in the OFL-BEST program, Connon-Unda and Clifford (1997) attest the program was originally envisioned as an “agent of change in the workplace, the union and the community” (p. 145). Further, they specifically stress that the “action and reflection cycle” is “an essential element in the BEST approach to adult education” (ibid.). While the “starting point for learning is always the experience, knowledge and desires of the participants,” there is a “commitment to unforeseen development,” and the end goal of organizing learning around “the lived experiences of participants and their efforts” not only “to describe and make sense of that experience”

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3 For the sake of coherence between the text of the study and the text of the quotes, I will mostly refer to these three program models in the present, although none of them currently have programs operational.
but also “so that [the participants] may take effective action towards desired ends....
Actions are taken in the group, in the workplace, in the union and in the family and community” (p. 148). These actions then lead to a further round of reflection, as they are “described and reflected on, in personal journals, in discussions, and in the monthly portfolio process for assessing progress” (ibid.).

All aspects of the program follow from these goals, including “the educational approach, the project structure, the use of co-worker instructors, and their selection and training” (Connon-Unda & Clifford, 1997, p. 146). The curriculum “is not prescribed but emergent. It is organized around themes that are relevant to participants’ lives” (ibid.). The instruction is given by co-worker instructors, who are “not expected to be... teacher[s] but to model being good learner[s]... The relationship is fundamentally one of peers engaged in a collaborative venture” (p. 149). Co-worker instructor training for the OFL-BEST programs was intensive. It began with a two-week residential pre-service, and continued with several in-service sessions through their first 36-week program. The training re-enforced the action-reflection-action cycle, as “during all stages of training, instructors experience first-hand the kinds of processes they are expected to facilitate back in their workplaces” (p. 150).

These examples strongly suggest that the OFL’s BEST program employed a methodology drawn from critical pedagogy and popular education. They used generative themes, they engaged in an action and reflection cycle, they encouraged collective systemic analysis and the linking of personal to collective experiences, and they employed peer co-instructors in order to promote radical solidarity and power sharing among the group. However, Jean Connon-Unda, one of the founders of the OFL-BEST program, nevertheless assured me that actual moments of collective systemic analysis and action were fleeting (J. Connon-Unda, personal communication, May 17, 2004).

Without more explicit literature on the practice and outcomes of the program, it is hard to be conclusive. However, a close reading of the way that Connon-Unda and Clifford (1997) describe their approach implies that is has more in common with transformational
education, as opposed to critical literacy, in that the overall emphasis seems to be less on systemic analysis and collective action, and more on literacy as a tool for changing one's relationship with oneself, one's subjectivity. In writing about their experiences in the OFL-BEST program, Connon-Unda and Clifford explicitly situate literacy development "in the context of a more encompassing adult education approach, [that] fosters not only the growth of literacy skills, but also the development of a clearer and stronger sense of self" (p. 147). The goal of the program was not the mere addition of skills within a continuing status quo, but rather "a re-orientation of the subject towards self and context.... Through a process of shared exploration and critical reflection, participants become familiar with the broader contexts of their personal situations" (p. 147; p. 149). Here, the OFL-BEST program appears to have more in common with transformational education. This perspective recalls Mezirow's (1995) 'perspective transformations' and to hooks (1994) definition of transformation is "that historical moment when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one's political circumstances" (p. 47). In their own words, the Connon-Unda and Clifford argue that their approach "is consistent with what hooks calls 'an engaged pedagogy'... [which] is holistic, connecting self-actualization with wholeness and a quest for a union of mind, body and spirit. The emphasis on wholeness is socially constructive. It challenges the splitting off and compartmentalization of essential aspects of our humanity, a destructive process through which we are divided, first against ourselves, and then against each other" (p. 150).

5.5 The BC Experience: BEST and LEAP

Both the HEU-BEST and LEAP manuals also emphasize a community-development implementation model. However, these programs are more clearly liberal and learner-centred in their approach and methodology than the OFL-BEST program. The literature on these programs is almost entirely lacking in any discussion of systemic analysis or collective action, and focuses on facilitating a 'return to learning' for working people.

Basic education for skills and training: The Hospital Employees' Union program coordinators' workbook (Evans & Twiss, n.d.), defines the guiding principles of HEU-BEST as follows. BEST programs:
• Are first and foremost about empowerment for working people
• Focus on returning to learning
• [See] learners [as] active participants in their own education, not passive recipients of someone else’s learning agenda
• Are about workers helping workers
• Are accessible to workers
• Offer a framework for a joint union-management approach to workplace basic skills education
• Assure participant confidentiality
• Use college instructors to provide support (pp. 1-3; italics original).

Here, ‘empowerment for working people’ seems to mean empowerment within existing social structures, as the BEST program aims ‘to enrich the lives of workers and to expand their potential as workers, as individuals, as family members, as union members, and as citizens’ (Evans & Twiss, n.d., p. 1). The overarching goals of the programs are clearly learner-centred, and do not appear to involve collective systemic analysis and action.

Implementing a worker focused learning program in the workplace: The LEAP experience (Evans, Twiss and Wedel, n.d.), expresses a similar set of basic assumptions for that program. LEAP:

• Builds on the rich background of experience and prior learning that adult learners bring with them
• Is an opportunity for participants to move towards their ambitions for the future
• Makes education accessible by offering a program in the workplace during work hours at no cost to participants
• Is planned, implemented, and coordinated in a collaborative manner, which involves all partners in an active role
• Values peer tutors as a resource for helping adults to learn. We call this the ‘workers helping workers’ model
• [Takes] the learning needs of the participants [as] the priority (p. 3).

Again, there is no notion here of upsetting the dominant paradigm, and the overall goal seems to be one of helping learners meet their ambitions within that paradigm. In principle, then, both BEST and LEAP programs lend themselves more to learner-centred participatory methodologies than to critical or popular education approaches.
In practice as well, these programs seem to favour an emergent curriculum design based on learners' individual practical needs, rather than collective, systemic issues. There is no set formula for what BEST or LEAP programs will look like. "Each program is a unique combination of learning needs, personalities, and circumstances" (Evans and Twiss, n.d., p. 27). The programs are grounded in individual learning goals. I know that when I was active as a college-based instructor in BEST and LEAP programs in BC, the phrase I commonly used and heard was, "learners will set their own goals and work towards them at their own pace." Learner goals might be to get their General Education Diploma, to learn how to help their kids with their homework, to gain certain skills and credentials that might help them transfer to other jobs within the system, or to become supervisors themselves. I have worked with learners towards all of these goals in my capacity as a college instructor in BEST and LEAP programs.

Goal-setting with learners is a therefore a central program activity. There is no formal assessment or testing as part of the program; the instructor and tutors determine where to start on a particular course of learning in discussion with the learner and through casual or non-invasive observation of the learner's work. Then, the instructors and/or tutors develop individualized lesson plans in direct response to each learner's needs. Typically, learners are grouped with others sharing similar needs and worked on a specific activity, then the group changes as the activities change. These goals are tracked and revised as necessary throughout the duration of the program (see Evans and Twiss, n.d., p. 27).

The *HEU program coordinator's workbook* (Evans and Twiss, n.d.) gives this illustration of what goal-setting looks like in action. Speaking to a peer tutor who is helping a learner work towards their General Education Diploma (GED), the workbook describes:

> Together, you decide to start with the writing part. After a few discussions and reviewing some writing samples, you realize that the learner's writing skills are quite low. With the help of the instructor, the learner and you decide to work on upgrading her writing skills before getting into the GED book.

In this example, the learner's **mid term** goal is to bring her writing skills up to the level where she could pass the GED composition exam and her **long-term** goal is
to complete the GED. This requires the ability to write a 200-word composition in 45 minutes. In the short term, the two of you agree that the learner will write a series of short pieces on topics of her choice. Once it is written, the learner will go over each piece with the tutor. Focusing on the learner’s own writing, the two of you will explore what makes effective writing, how to develop ideas in writing, and strategies for improving grammar and spelling.

These short, mid and long-term goals are written down on a worksheet and kept in the learner's file (p. 27; bold original).

We found from experience that this approach works best with learners who arrive with specific, concrete and practical learning goals, such as passing exams for the General Education Diploma or for Steam Engineer’s tickets. Therefore, when interviewing learner applicants for the programs, one of the screening tools we used was an assessment of whether each applicant had clear goals for what they wanted to get out of the program.

As Stinson O’Gorman (1996) points out, “knowledge itself is not power” and “in and of themselves these basic skills [reading, writing, and mathematics] are not oppressive or liberating. Rather, they are simply tools that can be employed to maintain oppression or facilitate liberation” (p. 167; p. 182). My analysis so far indicates that both HEU-BEST and LEAP programs clearly favour a learner-centred approach aimed at building particular sets of discreet skills for specific tasks, within a respectful, gentle and accessible environment. These programs do not generally seem to include systemic analysis or collective political action. In short, HEU-BEST and LEAP literacy programs aimed to facilitate workers/learners acquisition of basic skills and their advancement or well-being within the dominant, capitalist system, but not their or their fellow union members’ liberation from that system.

I am noting that these programs elements of ‘adhesion’ with the oppressor. However, this does not mean that I consider these to be ‘oppressive’ programs. I am not positing these programs as interventions that will either ‘maintain oppression’ or ‘facilitate liberation’, but, rather, as sites of conflict between these opposing forces. I see these programs not as instances of opposing forces, but as the location of different interests’
interactions. They are a “complex and polyvalent nexus of compromise formations in which are sedimented the outcomes of past and future struggles as well as the conditions for present and future ones” (Fraser, 1989, p. 157). Below, I will trace some of the more radical, critical elements of OFL-BEST, HEU-BEST and LEAP, as well as some of the structural and political-economic constraints in which these programs operate.

5.6 Further Considerations

5.6.1 Shifts in Relations

Perhaps the liberatory potential of BEST and LEAP programs is best explored through the types of social relations these programs aim to facilitate among participants. Borrowing from Stinson O’Gorman (1996), I will argue that:

by excluding management and local union officials from the day-to-day operations of the [BEST] programs, and by continuing the struggle for a participatory approach within the classes, [BEST] programs attempt to maintain a degree of independence in their structures and relations, and ideally escape the authoritarian relationships that usually pervade workplace activities. [BEST] is not a direct part of the activities of a union local or of the employer. It does, in a very fundamental way, belong to participating workers (p. 176).

In this sense, workplace literacy programs present a challenge to what Dorothy Smith (1999) has called the ‘ruling relations’ that structure social relationships at work. Smith talks about the “the complex of objectified social relations” as having both “particularities” of everyday/ everynight life, as well as “abstracted discourses and forms of organization” (p. 73). These programs provide a space in which working people can experience day-to-day relations that contradict and counteract the authoritarianism and individualism that defines the modern workplace. In so doing, the programs open up the possibility of collective engagement with the abstract, ideological ruling relations that structure capitalist society and workers’ lives.

Worker-centred literacy programs can create a site and an opportunity for workers to engage in community-development initiatives and political literacy (J. Brooks, personal communication, December 10, 2005.) To illustrate, a CUPE local is currently partnered on a workplace literacy program in a work site that is largely “dysfunctional” (P.
Hodgson, personal communication, December 7, 2005). There is almost no committee structure within this very large (750 to 1,700 full and part-time employees in off season, and double that number in peak season) workforce for the workers to meet and discuss work-related issues, or for the workers and management to meet (ibid.). The literacy project Working Committee is made up of volunteer tutors and the instructor from Capilano College. Although the project Working Committee was intended as a venue for talking about the literacy program, it has provided an occasion for workers’ collective engagement around a host of other work issues as well. In the course of the meeting, committee members are often ‘sidetracked’ and talk about work-related issues, grievances and questions. They share information and develop strategies for addressing these issues. When the employer representative is present at the meetings, committee members take the opportunity to bring these issues forward to her. They take what they learn back to their co-workers. From the perspective of the college instructor, the Working Committee meetings are sometimes “frustrating” because the education program may be far down on the workers’ priority list of issues to discuss (ibid.). However, these meetings have created a space and an opportunity for workers to engage in collective analysis and action around the terms of their work, and for them to communicate with an otherwise inaccessible employer (ibid.).

The model for educational delivery used in all three programs also has the capacity to alter the relations of people at work, and it seems that this was a deliberate intention on the part of program architects. In OFL-BEST, HEU-BEST and LEAP, the program planners all chose to use trained peer tutors in an effort to disrupt traditional hierarchies at work and in the classroom. As Jim says:

My idea of the empowerment model is the peer-led.... [I]f you have peers working with peers, then you start to have more of an organic exchange of ideas... and your power base [will] change. Traditionally our education system is power-based.... [But] if it’s peer-based, that quickly is diminished, because on any given day, even the leaders need some help. The leader of the group, you know, the peer, will need some help. And then the power shifts.

The use of peer tutors in the Canadian workplace literacy classroom stems back to 1902, when the Canadian Reading Camp Association (which later became Frontier College)
introduced the concept of the “labourer-teacher,” largely in an effort to establish a greater rapport between the workers and the “college kid,” and also to offset the costs of hiring college instructors (Morrison, 1999, p. 35). However, as Jim’s quote indicates, BEST and LEAP use peer tutors not only as a practical necessity, but also as a political act aimed at creating relational shifts in power.

In keeping with the goal of creating a shift in power, the selection of peer tutors for BEST and LEAP focused simply on individuals who had “good communication skills... and the desire to help others help themselves” (Stinson O’Gorman, 1996, p. 179). These personal characteristics were seen as more important than any particular qualifications or experience; indeed, when I worked in HEU-BEST and LEAP programs, we found that individuals with past formal teaching experience did not make good tutors, as their tendency was sometimes to reproduce the structured unequal power relations of the traditional student-teacher relationship and the prescriptive model of education proposed by the dominant discourse. As well, these individuals often had more privilege than the learners we were trying to reach, so there was a real class-based aspect to their relationship to the learners and to teaching. We also argued, as Stinson O’Gorman does about the WEST program, that “requiring a previous commitment to the trade union movement as a necessary criterion for prospective course leaders might actually limit some of the most liberating potentialities of this approach” (p. 180). The peer tutor model was not intended to replace the hierarchy of the classroom or the workplace with that of the union, but to open a space for a shift in relations and interpersonal, relationship-based experiences of empowerment.

As a result, it is possible to argue, as Stinson O’Gorman (1996) does, that the principle and ongoing struggle for all those taking part in the daily activities of the BEST and LEAP programs is “to avoid mimicking the educational practices of the dominant society” (p. 183). Stinson O’Gorman’s reference to Felix Cadena’s “three models of social intervention” is a useful tool for examining the potential of peer model to disrupt “the destructive tendencies of alienation and commodification” of the modern capitalist economy. In “vanguard intervention, the educator would assume the formal function of
leader to promote his ideology. In the *paternalistic model*, the educator assumes a ‘benevolent’ position of superiority” (p. 182). Neither of these educational approaches is truly liberatory, since these actions, although they may be “motivated by compassion,” actually “result in dependency rather than self-affirmation” (ibid.). Only in “the *participatory model* of intervention” is there “a recognition of the educator as part of the group” only by “taking responsibility for their own learning and consciousness will participants overcome dependency and transcend existing social relations” (ibid.). This latter approach is clearly what Freire (1968/1972) has in mind in his liberatory model of education in which the students have opportunities to understand that they educate the teacher (p. 59). In keeping with the *participatory* model of intervention, BEST and offer an approach to learning in which no one person is the keeper of the knowledge, and all participants are encouraged to define their own learning agendas. These programs aim to use an active approach to learning in which knowledge is created through dialogue, as Freire and Horton (1991) discuss in *We make the road by walking*.

The difference between this approach and the more traditional, learner-centred participatory models is that here the learner and tutors are *peers* and, in principle at least, share power equally throughout the learning endeavour. The implication is also that the sense of equality and collectivity that is nurtured in the space the classroom opens up will suffuse outwards into the workplace as well, disrupting the hierarchies according to which worker’s lives are structured, and creating a culture of solidarity.

The three programs I am examining address the use of peers differently. The OFL-BEST program was entirely delivered by peers. There were some professional educators who worked as Regional Coordinators and designed and implemented the peer instructor training, but they had no function in the classrooms in which the program was delivered.

In BC, various forms of a ‘hybrid’ model, combining peer and professional instruction, were developed. HEU-BEST peers worked with college instructors in the classroom. Sylvia explains that this choice was, at first, a response to lack of funding and the
inability to do what the OFL-BEST program had done with the peer model. However, the use of a college instructor later became a conscious choice on the part of the HEU:

*We didn’t have the infrastructure in BC [to go ahead on our own], so we decided to work with a community college. But then I realized the value of that, because you’re trying... to connect people. I mean some people are going into the program and that’s an end in itself. They’ll just go and that’s all they wanted and that’s great. But for others, they get the bug and then they want more. Well, you know, if you’re not connecting them to the place where they’re going to get the more... then you’re not doing them any favours because you haven’t demystified that whole system that they were never part of, right? Because they’ve never done post-secondary and that’s for other people, it’s not for them. You know? So by bringing the college to the workplace... they [may] say, ‘Oh yeah, that’s for me. I had a college instructor in my class!’... ‘I did a college class’... And so you really start to connect them.*

Sylvia understood that for many working people, a college education is a distant ideal or is simply something that’s not for them. A college education is a form of “institutional” capital that many working class people do not possess. She felt that having an actual college instructor in the classroom was a way of demystifying college education, making it something that learners could consider for themselves (Bourdieu’s “embodied” capital). In a practical sense, the instructor would also be able to help interested learners figure out how to navigate the systems of post-secondary education (an act of systemic analysis and information-sharing similar to Bourdieu’s “cultural” capital).

LEAP takes the ‘workers-helping-workers’ approach one step further, by having no professional educators in the classroom at all. The college instructor facilitates the peer tutor training, interviews learners and helps with initial setting of goals, and sometimes visits the program part of the way through to revisit and adjust learner goals. Otherwise, the instructor is available by phone or email to provide support from North Vancouver to the programs elsewhere in the province. Jim explains that, from his perspective, having an exclusively peer-lead program is crucial. He feels there is some reason to mistrust professional educators, who too-often bring a skills- and abilities-based focus to literacy work, and do not relate to the empowerment perspective. Too often, professional instructors are unsure “about how to reconcile the turning over of the power to the individual learners.”
The terminology is illustrative of the differences in these approaches. In the OFL-BEST program, peers were called ‘peer instructors’, in recognition of their greater role in the classroom and of the focus on collective rather than individualized learning. Of OFL-BEST volunteers, Tamara says:

*We called them ‘instructors’. We... never used the term ‘tutors’.... To me tutor implies one-on-one. In fact, in Nova Scotia do you know what they’re calling it?... They’re calling them ‘peer learning guides’.... And in Saskatchewan they call them ‘course leaders’ which is another interesting term.*

These instructors receive substantial initial and in-service training, and are tasked with trying to implement the more critical, popular-education based approach of that program, including engaging in collective systemic analysis with program participants, a project that requires some talent and training to facilitate.

By contrast, in both HEU-BEST and LEAP programs, the volunteers are called ‘peer tutors’, a term which seems consistent with the more individualistic, skills-based, one-on-one approach employed in those programs. However, it seems clear in all cases, the program planners shared Jim’s belief that peers would not only be familiar faces who made the program more comfortable and accessible, but also would engage in social relations of equality in opposition to the structured hierarchies of the traditional classroom, the surrounding workplace and, even, the union itself.

There are problems and unexplored issues inherent in the peer-based approach to program delivery, not the least of which is the potential for ‘lateral oppression’. There is a kind of assumption behind the peer-based delivery model that peers, as long as they are from the same class background as the learners, will readily overcome their own, internalized experiences with the dominant education systems, and with social relations mediated by unequal power. Yet, as Stinson O’Gorman (1996) argues, “Trying to avoid the trap of vanguard or benevolent patterns of social intervention becomes a continuous practical and theoretical struggle for all involved,” and often both tutors and learners unconsciously expect and enact a more traditional, hierarchal set of classroom
relationships (pp. 183-184). As Razack (1999) points out, in privileging the voices of the ‘oppressed’, we run the risk of glossing over the multidimensionality of the voices within the group, and seeing unity where there is, in fact, diversity. This is not an argument against peer-based programs. Rather, it is a point for activists to consider when engaging in program development.

This study has focused on the perspectives of labour literacy activists, and has not investigated the experiences of the learners and tutors who participated in these literacy programs. It is, therefore, beyond this study’s scope to analyze the actual social relations that were formed in these peer-based literacy classrooms. Some work has been done to document the outcomes for peer tutors/instructors of participation in these programs, for example Connon Unda and Clifford (1997). Further study would also be needed to determine what impact participation in these programs on participant self-concept, agency and ensuing actions. I can conclude, however, that worker-centred literacy programs are established with the goal of creating a space of possibility for participants to experience human relations and shifts in power within the context of dehumanizing, hierarchical workplaces. This approach represents a sharp departure from the prescriptive intent of the dominant discourse of workplace literacy.

5.6.2 Coming to Voice

The transformational impact of the peer-based approach can also be understood not through the lens of popular education at all, but rather through the concept of ‘voice’. Bell hooks (1989) describes the feminist focus on voice as a movement from silence into speech. She calls this “a revolutionary gesture” and “a metaphor for self-transformation” (p. 12). hooks is writing about her own the experiences, and those of other women of colour. However, her words can be read with special resonance in relation to literacy learners. She argues that ‘coming to voice’ is a particularly transformational event for people “who have previously never had a public voice... [and] who are speaking and writing for the first time” (ibid.; italics mine). Marginalized and disempowered groups, such as working people and the working class, are frequently silenced by external forces, or by themselves as learn not to speak “for fear our voices will not be heard nor
welcomed” (Audre Lorde, as cited in hooks, ibid.). Marginalized groups have so few opportunities to speak their/our own truths in their/our own “multi-dimensional” voices, that coming to voice is “an act of resistance” (hooks, ibid.). Then, “[s]peaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject” (hooks, ibid.). Echoing Freire (1968/1972), hooks explains the political implications of this personal, inner shift: “Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless – our beings defined and interpreted by others” (ibid.).

Collective social action does not necessarily have to be the result of the personal transformation that is catalyzed by experiences of speaking one’s own truth. hooks (1989) maintains that this kind of conscious, shared speech is already a form of resistance with powerful political implications. To illustrate, hooks cites Mariana Romo-Carmona:

The stages of increasing awareness become clear when we begin to recount the story of our lives to someone else, someone who has experienced the same changes. When we write or speak about these changes, we establish our experiences as valid and real, we begin to analyze and that analysis gives us the necessary perspectives to place our lives in a context where we know what to do next (p. 13).

hooks’ (1989) notion of ‘coming to voice’ is related to both Freire’s concept of praxis, and to the developmental paradigm shifts and growing sense of agency that Mezirow describes. Before the cycle of action and reflection can start, and before any collective social action can be planned or carried out, there needs to be a sense of coming to voice, of speaking to an audience who understands, shares and validates one’s experiences. Coming to voice is the act that links the personal with the political, and precedes agency or collective action. As hooks explains, “Awareness of the need to speak, to give voice to the varied dimensions of our lives, is one way women of colour begin the process of education for critical consciousness” (hooks, p. 13; italics mine). Speaking from the position of subject, as opposed to object, not only brings the speaker “face-to-face with this question of power,” it also forces her “to resolve this question, to act, to find a voice” which is itself a transformational, political act (hooks, p. 15). Whereas dominant

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4 hooks articulates her intellectual and spiritual ties to the former in her essay Freire (1994).
discourses continuously write (of) her as an object, the act of speaking forces the speaker “to become that subject who could place herself and those like her at the center of [the] discourse” (ibid.). Of her own experience, hooks is clear: “I was transformed in consciousness and being” (ibid.).

Worker-centred literacy programs create opportunities for such transformations, and I believe this is what the ‘empowerment’ model intends. The programs carve out physical time and space for working people to meet and talk, they welcome and engage the workers/learners as whole people and they support shifts in relationship and community building. Even without an engagement in praxis, this approach to learning creates a space where personal and community transformation and empowerment are at least a possibility.

These external and internal spaces of possibility exist in opposition to what Jim calls “the psychology of capitalism.” Alexander (2001) uses the term “dislocation” to describe the negative psychological effects of capitalism on people and communities. Reflecting Polanyi’s theories, Alexander argues that healthy communities are inconsistent with the free market rules that guide and promote the expansion of global capitalism. He explains, “In order for ‘free markets’ to be ‘free’… [they] must not be encumbered by elements of psychosocial integration such as clan loyalties, village responsibilities, guild or union rights, charity, family obligations, social roles, or religious values” (p. 1).

Alexander’s work focuses on the rise of addiction in market societies, but it is equally relevant here. He argues current market-based social (and educational) policies undermine our ability to care for one another, and to build sustainable, healthy communities. As a result, Alexander argues, “we have become dislocated from the myriad intimate ties between people and groups… that are essential for every person in every type of society” and for society itself” (ibid.). Or, as Ehrenreich (2001) discovers in *Nickel and Dimed*, her scathing investigation of working class life in America, “there is no we” in contemporary capitalist workplace culture (p. 23).
By creating spaces where caring, connection and integration are possible, worker-centred literacy focuses on building community and giving learners an opportunity to experience an I and a we (Connon Unda & Clifford, 1997). Sometimes this is as simple as hearing a co-worker speak your name, and knowing your co-worker’s name in return. Having entered for a year to explore the (to her) ‘parallel universe’ of low-wage jobs, Ehrenreich (2001) is surprised at how she disappears: “No one notices my face or my name, which goes unnoticed and for the most part unuttered. Here... I am ‘baby,’ ‘honey,’ ‘blondie,’ and, most commonly, ‘girl’” (p. 11). Similarly, in his story about Willie, Hugh speaks of the transformational effect of personal naming within the workplace: “And just that alone is — it makes the hospital an incredibly pleasant place to work. You know, when people talk to one another and not afraid of each other.” Hugh is the only peer tutor I interviewed, and so his take on the impact of the program on participants is more first-hand and intimate than that of the other labour literacy activists. In my own experience, workplace literacy programs, especially those that incorporate a focus on writing and discussion, give participants an opportunity to tell and reclaim their stories, and this can in and of itself be liberating. In recognition of the deafening silence that all too commonly characterizes current work places, Ehrenreich (2001) dedicates her study to “all those people... who’d had so much more to say than anyone ever got to hear” (p. 2). Thus, even if the programs fall short of the development of a working-class consciousness, they may create moments of ‘coming to voice’. These counteract the alienation of capitalism, under which the “individual is atomized to the point where no one can understand – and therefore no one can assist in ending – the oppression of another” (Stinson O’Gorman, 1996, p. 168).

5.7 Constraints to Worker-Centred Literacy

5.7.1 Program Planning Context: Collaborating With and Subverting Capital.
There are serious structural limitations to the ability of unions to engage in critical literacy in the workplace, and these undoubtedly have some impact on the way these particular programs were developed and implemented. In many ways, even the liberal and humanistic approach to education that worker-centred literacy offers is hard to
achieve and sustain given the structured hierarchies within which literacy program planning in the workplace must take place.

When it started in 1987-88, the OFL-BEST program had the benefit of full government funding from the Ontario Ministry of Skills Development. This gave program planners the freedom to develop the programs that they wanted, and to train peer facilitators in popular education approaches. Since then, however, government funding for workplace literacy programs has become almost non-existent. The National Literacy Secretariat will fund some workplace literacy pilots and research projects, but funding for program delivery is always left up to provincial governments, who largely choose to neglect this area.

Thus, in BC at least, our experience has been to work for and within joint union and employer support for programs, which is reflected in the LEAP principle that “the Workplace Education Program is planned, implemented, and coordinated in a collaborative manner which involves all partners in an active role” (Evans, Twiss and Wedel, n.d., p. 3). Both HEU-BEST and LEAP were run jointly by the employer and the union through a local coordinating committee that included the community college partner. From the perspective of Capilano College, the educational provider partner on most of the HEU-BEST and LEAP programs and my employer in the programs, one of the program goals is clear: “To provide a framework for a joint union-employer approach to basic education in the workplace” (Twiss, 2003, p. 7). The joint committees at each site are responsible for the recruitment and selection of participants and tutors, the logistics of the class, as well as ensuring on-going co-ordination and support. This is an essential aspect of the program, as without the support and involvement of management and supervisors, the inconveniences of re-scheduling may hinder a potential learner’s participation. In many cases, the programs relied on the employer to fund full or partial release time for the employees to attend the program. Further, as government funding though Forestry Renewal BC and the Healthcare Labour Adjustment Agency dried up, the architects of these programs looked to the employer to pay for the college instructor as well. When this was not forthcoming, the HEU-BEST program folded. LEAP
continued on for a few years with the financial contribution of Canfor, but that eventually ended, and there are currently no LEAP or BEST programs running in BC - although one LEAP site has negotiated for basic skills money as part of its Collective Agreement, so their program may start up again.

As a result of these funding issues, HEU-BEST and LEAP assumed a posture of cooperation and collaboration with the employer, rather than being a union-driven program like OFL-BEST. We needed the employers to be allies and could not afford to exercise the autonomy of the OFL. (Stinson O’Gorman, 1996, makes the same argument of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour’s WEST program, p. 176). Given that unequal power relations in the workplace translate to unequal power relations in the program planning process (Wilson and Cervero, 1996), the joint union management approach means that many of the more radical goals of worker-centred literacy are not on the overt agenda, and all committee members, including the union representatives, start to adopt aspects of the dominant, productivity-oriented discourse around workplace literacy. Thus, for example, while Tamara says that the people who set up OFL-BEST consciously rejected the productivity arguments:

*One of the rules at the very outset was, we will not, we will not promote this program on the basis of productivity [repetition and emphasis original]. We will not promote this program on the basis of ‘your workplace accidents will decrease’. We can’t do that because if we do that we’re putting low productivity, we’re putting workplace accidents on the backs of workers. We can’t do that. And so we didn’t promote it on that basis.*

In stark contrast, the architects of the LEAP program shamelessly used both productivity arguments and all kinds of graphs and charts in an attempt to make their program appealing to management. One of the program volunteers presented some of their tactics at a training session:

- The company expects pay-back. Be prepared to answer, ‘What do we get out of this?’
- Use the ‘safety’ angle
- Show the return on investment. The company will save on the bottom line because of things like less numerous Worker’s Compensation Board claims. You have to talk dollars and cents when you are talking to management
- Explain they get more confident employees who are pro-active at work
• Say employees are apt to take action to prevent big problems
• Explain about how learners put something back into company programs through such means as the Employee Family Assistance program, the safety program, the environmental program, etc.
• Explain that learners are more apt to fill out equipment repair memos, log sheets, log books, etc. (T. Dawson, personal communication, Oct. 10, 2003)

In this context, true worker-centred liberatory literacy becomes a subversive activity, where systemic analysis around workplace issues is addressed in secret and as an aside within the broader context of the program, and without the knowledge of the management players on the joint committee. I saw elements of this subversive approach happening in BEST and LEAP programs in BC. For example, issues like understanding the Collective Agreement were a regular part of the curriculum, but were never shared with the management ‘partners’ on the coordinating committee.

Here are two other examples of social action literacy education that come from a college instructor in the BEST program. First, in one local hospital, a Manager in the kitchen had a practice of ordering employees into the office and intimidating them into working harder. The Steward in that area told the employees, who were mostly South East Asian women, that they did not have to talk to the Manager without another union member or Steward present. However, this situation kept occurring. This Steward happened to be a tutor in the BEST program, and many of the learners in the BEST program came from these same kitchen areas. One day, the Steward/tutor came into the BEST classroom with a stack of laminated cards on hot pink paper that she had created. On one side, these cards were printed with a dialogue that captured the language and tone of this Manager: “I want to see you in my office right now...” etc. However, this dialogue also included a possible response from the women. The dialogue “gave them language to use in response.” On the back, the cards also cited the relevant article from the Collective Agreement, both directly from the Agreement and in a clear language version that the Steward/tutor had written. That day, the participants in the BEST class read and discussed these cards, explained the clause, and then went back to the workplace and distributed them to others. They carried these hot pink cards in their pockets. (D. Twiss, personal communication, Nov. 2005)
The second example concerns the 2004 HEU strike in BC. In 2004, the Liberal government in British Columbia, under Premier Gordon Campbell, introduced Bill 29, which “altered signed collective agreements between health care employers and unions, and cleared the way for private corporations to take over the management and delivery of health care support services in hospitals and long-term care facilities” (Griffin Cohen, March 2003, p. 2). The HEU went on strike. Later that year, Honourable Graham Bruce, Minister of Skills Development and Labour, introduced Bill 37, which upheld the revisions to the Health Sector Collective Agreement Act. Among other things, Section 6 of the Bill declared:

Immediately after this Act comes into force and despite the Labour Relations Code...

(b) a trade union and the employees represented by that trade union must not strike or declare a strike and must terminate any strike,
(c) every employee must resume his or her duties and work schedules of employment with the employer,
(d) any declaration, authorization or direction to go on strike given before or after the coming into force of this Act becomes invalid,
(e) an officer or representative of a trade union must not in any manner impede or prevent, or attempt to impede or prevent, any person to whom paragraphs (a) to (c) apply from complying with those paragraphs (http://www.legis.gov.bc.ca/37th5th/lst_read/gov37-1.htm).

Thus, Bill 37 ended the strike by health sector employees and made the rewritten collective agreement binding; it also made further collective action illegal. Further, the Bill contained an automatic and retroactive hourly wage rate reduction of 11% effective in 14 days (D. Twiss, personal communication, Nov. 2005).

In the BEST class, rumours swirled around about this Bill and its implications. A tutor noticed that her co-workers had been getting their information from the media. On the spot, she went to the Internet and printed the Bill. The class read it and talked about it. According to the Instructor, “You could not incite them to anger when they were just hearing it on the radio or reading the papers, but when they had it in their hands and saw it right there they realized the extent of the betrayal and it was an incredibly powerful
transformation.” She adds, “Many of the women in the HEU are passive; they were not activists.” (D. Twiss, personal communication, Nov. 2005)

These examples of collective systemic analysis are closer to popular education than my analysis of the available program material has so far indicated. In both of these examples, the activities were not the instructor’s ideas. Because the program created the kind environment where the learners and, in these cases, the tutors were creating the curriculum and the instructor was a support person, they were able to act on these moments. If there had been a set curriculum, such as in most competency-based workplace literacy programs, nothing would have happened. Moreover, these examples indicate that, operating within the ideological, structural, and political-economic constraints of global capitalism, advocates of a worker-centred approach to literacy may speak about their project in terms of liberal education that are palatable to their employers and the government, and then subversively pursue a more radical agenda. Despite their overall liberal, learner-centred approach, in fleeting moments like these, BEST and LEAP programs did engage praxis aimed at facilitating the development of “working class consciousness” (Stinson O’Gorman, 1996, p. 167).

5.7.2 The Trade Union Context: Resisting and Reproducing Capital

Thus, the ‘watering down’ or subversion of the more radical goals of worker-centred literacy is partially a result of the unequal power relations in the program-planning context. However, the contradictions in worker-centred literacy are also linked to the ambiguously non-hegemonic position occupied by trade unions themselves, through both their complicity and their resistance, unions define and maintain the total social system (Althusser, 1971).

While organized labour opposes and works to mitigate some of the worst excesses of unfettered capitalism, it may also seek the growth of capitalism - as long as that includes gains for their membership. In terms of worker-centred literacy, this means that unions might sometimes espouse popular education principles, but sometimes they and their members may simply seek access to the dominant education system, and the
qualifications, credentials and high-paying jobs that system promises and gate-keeps. As Stinson O’Gorman (1996) argues:

Taken alone, the educational goals of worker-centred literacy could easily do nothing more than attempt to ensure accessibility to the dominant education system, rather than providing a meaningful alternative. [Worker-centred literacy] is not necessarily committed to disrupting the status quo; rather it is, as part of the trade union movement, committed to improving the position of workers within the context of present social relations (p. 167).

Stinson O’Gorman (1996) argues that popular education in the context of worker-centred literacy is not overtly defined as a part of a “larger popular strategy” for social change, as were the revolutionary popular education projects in the South, from which popular pedagogy has been borrowed (p. 168). Worker-centred literacy is part of the trade union movement, and these organizations, while they might be ideologically opposed to capitalism, are nevertheless immediately and practically engaged in helping their members to a bigger piece of the capitalist pie.

To draw on Wolff’s (n.d.) discussion of the ideological state apparatus, it can be said that by advocating for worker-centred literacy programs for their members (which is, on the surface, unions taking a stance of resistance to global capitalism), unions are nevertheless enabling and supporting capitalism by seeking compensation for workers for (and thereby allowing) rising rates of exploitation and their negative social effects. It may be that unions only embrace the ideology of competitiveness strategically and in order to lobby for this compensation for their members. However, it has also been argued that the weakness of the Left (in labour unions, parties, and movements) stems in part from its having endorsed this competitiveness rather than undermining it within the framework of an anti-capitalist politics (ibid., abstract). In some ways, then, worker-centred literacy is ambiguously non-hegemonic and both resisting and reproducing (even by means of resistance) the total social system.

In the same vein, the workers/learners in these literacy programs also occupy, in various ways and to varying degrees, positions that are socially, economically and otherwise differentially and ambiguously non-hegemonic. Speaking of the ‘North Americanization
of popular education’, Razack (1999) reminds us that it is important to trouble the use of the term ‘oppressed’. She argues:

Paulo Freire’s pioneering work on the fostering of critical consciousness in oppressed groups continues to be applied relatively straightforwardly in North America, for instance in ways that often stop short of interrogating the category of *oppressed* for the North American context, as opposed to the Latin American context, in which Freire’s work originated (pp. 43-44; italics mine).

In order to talk about this in a way that is grounded, I’ll use my own experience and identity as a yardstick. In the BEST and LEAP programs where I worked, there was a fair amount of difference among the learners. In the pulp and paper sector programs, there were some learners who worked in jobs that were relatively highly-regarded, highly-skilled, highly-paid jobs, and who, for example, made more money than I do (if that is any measure of degree of oppression) and were studying advanced applied math that was well beyond the reach of my education. They were also predominantly white men. In contrast, in the hospital-based programs I met many learners with significantly lower levels of formal education than I have. A glaring exception were the learners, mostly women from South East Asia, who had obtained Masters degrees or the equivalent from their country of origin, and who were working in food or building services at the hospital for a variety of reasons, including language barriers and the fact that their non-Canadian credentials were not recognized here. All the hospital workers I met made less money than I did working as a College instructor.

I don’t want to oversimplify. The influences of various experiences of oppression and entitlement on the social construction of both opportunity and subjectivity are more complex and layered than this discussion implies. My goal here is simply to illustrate Razack’s point that the notions of oppressed and oppressor in Freire’s work do not translate seamlessly into the contexts in which these worker-centred literacy programs take place. This point has profound implications for the potential for critical literacy education to take place in the classroom. Quite simply, the learners themselves might not necessarily be committed to disrupting the status quo; rather for them, as for their overall union organization, a central goal of participating in education might be, in part, to improve their position of within the present structures.
I also do not want to imply that there is anything morally wrong with the desire for personal or collective advancement and gain, or the efforts on the part of union officials and organizers to work for more of these benefits for themselves and their members. My point here is simply to spell out some of the ways that the position of trade unions in the context of capitalism defines and limits the ability of worker-centred literacy to create personal and collective social change. Indeed, it is perhaps arguable that the ambiguous positioning of labour in relation to the dominant hegemony is a more fundamental source of these contradictions than the structured power imbalances discussed in the last section. These complexities result in, and are the result of, an ambiguously non-hegemonic educational project. Therefore, in addition to identifying the external constraints to its project, it is perhaps also useful for labour to trace this ‘other’ in themselves (Spivak, as cited in Razack, 1999, p. 55).

5.8 Chapter Conclusions – and New Questions

In these examples, worker-centred literacy does not always seem to be critical literacy or popular education in the strict sense of the terms. While HEU-BEST and LEAP clearly base their curriculum in the individual and group interests of the learners, and envision education as a tool for social change, they do not exclusively use generative themes as their content, nor do they adhere to the action-reflection-action cycle known as praxis. Even in the OFL-BEST program, there is a sense that the elements of a critical approach in the philosophy and principles of worker-centred literacy, was enacted only in moments throughout the program. There are indications that labour literacy activists are aware of the methodological limitations of their approach in terms of critical literacy education, and that these programmatic choices may be a deliberately pragmatic or subversive response to structured power hierarchies in the program-planning model. Certainly, both BC-based programs came to rely for funding and permission on a cooperative, joint venture with employers, which meant that any radical goals were pushed off the acknowledged agenda, and a more liberal, learner-centred and even productivity orientation was adopted, at least on the surface. True critical worker-centred literacy education became fleeting – a hope and a dream.
However, although the educational methodologies of HEU-BEST and LEAP, and, to a certain extent, OFL-BEST, had more in common with learner-centred approaches than with critical or popular education, the types of social relationships they sought to develop in the classroom through their delivery mechanisms had clearer liberating and emancipatory potential. In some ways, it may be that one of the biggest outcomes of BEST and LEAP was simply to carve out a space at work where workers could be together away from the eyes of supervisors and managers and where they might, on occasion, start to bring other aspects of their selves into the workplace, and to relate with their co-workers on a different footing than is allowed on the shop floor. Where corporate culture creates isolation, invisible people and alienating workplaces, worker-centred literacy programs create community. Relations of dominance may indeed persist and return in these spaces, but as Stinson O’Gorman (1996) argues, “worker-centred literacy and programs like it continue to pose alternatives as long as capitalist social relations are not imposed” (p. 186; italics mine).

Moreover, building on an underlying understanding of the structured nature of social inequality across class lines and of education system’s role in perpetuating this inequality, these programs aim to create quality, meaningful and accessible educational opportunities for working people. In a sense, this aspect of their project seeks to address what Bourdieu (1986) calls cultural and institutional capital. Perhaps more crucially, they bring workers together and aim to give workers not only the skills and confidence to speak in their own voices and to make those voices heard, but an audience to validate what they say. This aspect of the worker-centred literacy project seems to address those issues internal to an individual’s self-concept, such as our self-confidence, our notions of what we are capable or worthy of, and what we dare to dream of for ourselves. These concepts recall Bourdieu’s notions of embodied capital and Foucault’s notions of the socially constructed nature of subjectivity.

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5 Ehrenreich (ibid.) illustrates dramatically how, in the workplaces she studied, social interaction of any kind between employees was discouraged, made impossible and punished. It is important not to underestimate how challenging it is simply to get a space where workers can gather without management supervision.
Finally, worker-centred literacy achieve these goals in the face of a dominant discourse around workplace literacy that prescribes, at best, narrow-minded and ineffectual learning for workers and, at worst, the incursion of the productivity agenda into the hearts and minds of workers. Drawing on the conclusions of two writers who have each produced significant analysis of the programs I am investigating, I too will conclude that worker-centred literacy poses a challenge to the dominant agenda that has political, psychological and even spiritual dimensions. Where the dominant agenda is to use “control over knowledge production systems, the dissemination and use of knowledge, and people’s access to knowledge to perpetuate systems of domination of the few over the many, to preserve the status quo, and to undermine the forces of social transformation,” worker-centred literacy seeks, if not to reverse the dominant agenda, then at least to “reverse patterns of oppression” and to “generate patterns of freedom” (Stinson O’Gorman, 1996, p. 169; p. 170). As such, these programs represent “attempt[s] to intervene in the destructive tendencies of alienation and commodification” and, even when they fall short of systemic analysis, “to create a place where the seed of working class consciousness might [at least] be fertilized” (Stinson O’Gorman, p. 182). Where dominant agenda promotes the “splitting off and compartmentalization of essential aspects of our humanity, a destructive process through which we are divided, first against ourselves, and then against each other,” worker-centred literacy treats the learner as a whole person and promotes unity of body, mind and spirit (Connon Unda & Clifford, 1997, p. 150). As such, these programs connect “self-actualization with wholeness and the quest for a union of mind, body and spirit” (ibid.) In short, worker-centred literacy programs offer a grassroots agenda for change and hold out the possibility for small revolutions to happen every day. In so doing, these worker-centred literacy programs upset the social and political apple cart - which is, I suggest in closing, perhaps one reason why it is so challenging to secure sustainable funding for these projects.

However, I don’t want to fall into the trap of romanticizing or sentimentalizing the voices of the oppressed (Razack, 1999, p. 37). Razack contends that, while the act of storytelling for social change - what hooks calls, ‘coming to voice’ - which central to the methodology of critical pedagogy, may be personally liberating for anyone overcoming
the silence of oppression, it is not enough, on its own, to create systemic change. Unless we learn to examine not only how we ‘hear’ the stories of others, but also what we ‘know’ and how we know it, we’ll never be capable of successfully defining “what it is we want to change about the world and why” (pp. 54-55; p. 46).

The history of the Hospital Employees’ Union in BC is a case in point. Bill 37 forced HEU to end the strike and go back to work. Shortly afterwards, the Government of British Columbia, acting under the terms of the revised Collective Agreement, proceeded to contract out a number of jobs. A private company, Sodexho, now has contracts with the Fraser Health Authority to provide cleaning services and with the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority to provide patient and retail food services. Some individuals, who had been support workers for years in local hospitals, got their jobs back with the new employer – but these were now jobs with reduced wages, benefits and rights. Many of the individuals who had participated in the BEST program were affected by this change. The HEU has since re-unionized some of these workplaces, and in 2005, Sodexho employees in hospitals throughout the Lower Mainland went on strike again. Their dispute was sent to the Labour Relations Board on November 4, 2005 - the 51st day of a strike that had expanded to include more than 1400 Sodexho workers (http://www.heu.org).

This example illustrates Razack’s (1999) point that simply hearing the stories of oppressed people, or, I would add, creating situations were moments of transformation or shifts in relation can take place, is not enough to bring about an external shift in structures of oppression. Indeed, Razack cites Richard Broscio’s reminder that, in the end, education may simply not be “the leading route to social change” (as cited, p. 51). Once we have ‘heard’ marginalized voices, it is crucial to then ask: “To what uses will these stories be put? (Razack, p. 37). This is the topic of the next chapter.
CHAPTER SIX: TAKING IT HOME

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will argue that labour literacy activists are engaged in building union capacity to carry out the true, reforming aspects of their vision for worker-centred literacy. The resistance that labour literacy activists encounter to their agenda within the labour camp suggests that labour as a whole may yet be reticent to reposition its relationship with capital, at least as far as its most marginal members are concerned. These activists are seeking out opportunities within the ideology of labour itself to harness the political will to create a learning society in the true sense of the word. This is not an easy task, not only because labour advocates of a worker-centred approach operate within the structured constraints and limitations of existing workplaces and the dominant discourse, but also because they are constrained by the current position of organized labour in relation to capital and its own grassroots members.

What directions for labour education and the labour movement in general do labour literacy activists propose? Whose interests does the emerging, alternative and/or oppositional discourse of worker-centred literacy serve? The act of asking these questions is important, since “posing for discourse the question of power means basically to ask whom does the discourse serve?” (Foucault, 1972, p. 115). According to Foucault, power is “not an institution,” such as the labour movement, nor “a structure,” such as a union, but “a complex strategic situation” (1990, p. 93). “Labour” means many things: the union, its public figureheads, its discourse, the membership, and the movement, to name just a few. Worker-centred literacy is positioned, then, at the intersection of “a complex and heterogeneous configuration of elements (including ideologies that are residual or emergent, as well as the currently dominant)” (Ball, 1990, p. 3). To look at this situation, I will examine the location of different interests’ interactions with the project of worker-centred literacy, which is the complex nexus of interests, ideologies, compromises and strategies that make up this moment in union development. My intention here is not simply to point out that there are, of course, “ruling relations” within the house of labour, but more importantly, to start to outline “the limits of the possible”
for worker-centred literacy and for labour at this moment in its relationship with capital and with its membership (Ball, 1990; Smith, 1999).

Problematizing the notion of subjectivity inherent in critical approaches to adult education, Razack (1999) points out that there is a general tendency in the practice of critical pedagogy “to discourage critical reflection of various hierarchical differences within oppressed groups” (p. 44). The same may be said of labour. The result is that efforts to come to consensus around what actions to take in the face of oppression may be complicated, in part because, rather than engaging in a collective critical reflection, labour remains caught in the histories of its members, who are unable to ‘hear’ one another. Thus, “unless we want to fall into the trap of demanding that the oppressed speak with one voice before we will believe them, we are still left with the difficult task of negotiating our way through our various ways of knowing and toward political action” (p. 50).

What Spivak calls “unlearning privilege” will involve a critical self-examination on the part of all labour of how labour ‘hears’ the stories of workers/learners, what labour ‘knows’ and ‘how’ labour knows it (as cited in Razack, p. 54; p. 55).

Using this framework, I will argue that labour literacy activists, through the project of worker-centred literacy, encourage labour to “trace the other in self?” (Spivak, as cited in Razack, p. 55). The result, they hope, is that labour will be more able to successfully define “what it is we want to change about the world and why” – and how (Razack, p. 46).

Using data from my interviews, I will argue that worker-centred literacy presents an alternative view of what unions could be, one that may find increasing importance in the context of labour’s role in the expansion of global capitalism. Worker-centred literacy brings an emphasis on ‘grassroots members’, and extending the union ‘learning community’ far beyond those who have traditionally participated in labour-sponsored education and training, and these are important ways of growing and strengthening both
local unions and the labour movement as a whole (Forrester, 1995, p. 143). However, worker-centred literacy is not just about the union acknowledging and reaching out to or accommodating the ‘other,’ the marginalized, silent and increasingly diverse and non-traditional members in their ranks. It is also, fundamentally, about tracing ‘the other in self’. Thus, labour literacy activists engage in a form of praxis of their own by turning their gaze back on the union itself, looking for ways that unions structure and perpetuate internal inequality, and strategizing around alternate ways that unions could engage in more inclusive, collective and democratic practices. At issue here is not simply what kind of teaching method will be used in the workplace classroom, or whether labour definitions of learning will be expanded to include ‘working life education,’ but also whether or not unions will be willing to embrace the diversity within their ranks, engage in more participatory practices in their own decision-making and reflect on its relationship with capital. Thus worker-centred literacy presents “an argument for renewal within trade union life and, more urgently, in democratic understandings and practices” (Forrester, 1995, p. 169). Labour literacy activists argue, as Stinson O’Gorman (1996) does, that “by adapting the practices of popular education and extending our notions of knowledge, we can begin to revitalize and again revolutionize” not only our classrooms, but also “our movements” (p. 168).

6.2 Union Education in the Knowledge Society

The position of labour in relation to capital is far from fixed; rather, labour is in flux or, some argue, in crisis. As Forrester (1995; 2002) argues, “Given the intimacy with which trade unions are historically woven into their socio-economic environment,” any “analysis of trade union activity, as it emerges into the 21st century, is likely to be situated within a framework that lists the problems and difficulties confronting organized labour” (p. 138). While he does not talk about globalization per se, Forrester implies it by the scope of the changes he has in mind – they are industrial, political, cultural, and societal in nature (2002, p. 138). Writing from a British context in the 1990’s, he identifies “a number of important and significant changes” in the contemporary “economic and industrial relations environment” (1995, p. 171). These include “the impact of anti-union legislation, two economic recessions, a hostile ideological onslaught and mass
unemployment” (1995, p. 171). To this list, he adds “fundamental changes in the labour market,” “upheavals resulting from… privatization and deregulation,” and “continuing membership decline” (1995, p. 172; 2002, p. 138). Moreover, Forrester argues that “[c]ollective confidence in a series of earlier relationships, with the state, the Labour Party and the membership, are… seen as problematic and in need of renewal and reformulating” (1995, p. 171). To make this point with a specific recent and local example, similar issues can be seen in the heated debate around changes to the way labour unions are affiliated with the British Columbia New Democratic Party. This move was an explicit attempt to “modernize the relationship” between the Party and organized labour (The Vancouver Sun, Nov 2, 2005, A3). These ongoing challenges have:

resulted in a certain loss of nerve and sense of purpose and an undermining of collective confidence and direction. The weakening of a collective identity and sense of solidarity, expressed and reinforced in the culture and communal relationship of many sections of the working class, has instead been increasingly replaced by a receptiveness to individualism and to claims on behalf of ‘the national interest’… (1995, p. 171).

In some ways, this crisis has been brewing since the 1970’s, with the collapse of the welfare state and the changing role of unions within the new social contract (Pierson, 1998). As Block (cited in Forrester, 2002) argues, labour’s crisis has links to overarching socio-economic changes, as “the ‘master concept’ that of industrial society – is not longer ‘persuasive’ for ‘making sense of our own society’” (as cited, Forrester, p. 138).

The revised rules of post-Fordist, globalized capitalism present new challenges and opportunities for organized labour. Forrester (1995; 2003) presents trade union education, in which category he includes workplace learning and basic skills, as one way that labour can answer positively, not just defensively, to the increasing hegemony of productivity-oriented discourses around education, and the underlying economic-orientation of current social policy in general, with its emphasis on accountability, outcomes and the corporate bottom line. Further, he proposes education as a way that labour can renew and modernize itself in the face of the challenges of the 21st century. “Trade union education,” he writes “has an enhanced importance and centrality within [this] context of ‘the weakening of a collective identity and sense of solidarity’” (1995, p. 171).
While acknowledging that there is to date still little substantial evidence and evaluative data about union contributions to workplace learning, Forrester provides examples of British unions “attempting, through their educational and training activities, to explore more inclusive activities that begin to address a more ‘modernized’ agenda (2003, p. 138).

Unions have generally endorsed the current discourse around ‘lifelong learning’, and sometimes use the same terms as government and employer groups. For example, Jackson and Jordon (2000) demonstrate an “apparent consensus” among stakeholders over the new training policies - although also showing how policies actually favour business (p. 1). Castleton’s (1999) research shows the labour movement as a whole plays along with other key stakeholders, such as government, practitioners and management, in endorsing the dominant productivity-oriented, skills-deficit views on literacy. Therefore, it can be argued, as Forrester (2002) suggests, that labour as a whole has adopted a tacit agreement with the mainstream arguments for workplace literacy and learning. This is a pragmatic and problematic stance. As Holland et al. (2003) point out, in reference to the impact of shifts in the global economy:

In all these developments [changes in the global economy], trade unions have gradually come to have less and less influence on traditional workplace issues. Now training, as much as pay and conditions, is a key bargaining issue. While the involvement and endorsement of workplace training and education is considered vital by many practitioners, concerns are expressed that unions’ sanctioning of the New Work Order stifles critical debate (p. 22).

Forrester (1995; 2002) argues that unions must embrace the lifelong learning and access to education agenda, without buying into the mistaken and simplistic linking of skills shortages to reforms in education and training. He argues: “The nature and direction of this workplace learning agenda is an agenda still to be contested and detailed” and workplace learning is simply “too important to be left to the employers or to narrowly focus on job-specific learning” (1995, p. 176; p. 177). Unions must “steer a delicate and often frustrating course” through the rhetoric that surrounds lifelong learning (2002, p. 141). For example, while “strongly agreeing with the need for workplace accredited learning by employees and the development of transferable core skills,” unions must at
the same time put forward “strong misgivings over the competency model of learning” that underpins much of the skills and learning agenda (1995, p. 177). While learning at work is “generally designed to improve task- and job-related performance” it is also “much more than this” and it is highly “unlikely that any workplace or sector will achieve its task- or job-related goals without providing a much wider learning environment” (ibid.). While accepting, on the surface, the human capital paradigm and the consequent opening for increased investment in learning at the workplace, unions must also continue to argue not only for investment in workplace learning but also “for increased investment in ourselves as working people” (ibid.). In short, unions are arguing “for social justice as much as economic growth” (ibid.). This is a task not to be undertaken lightly, as a “successful eventual outcome to this ‘contested agenda’ of workplace learning by the trade unions could transform the learning experience and aspirations for millions of trade unionists at work” (ibid.).

In part, this embrace of education represents a move on the part of labour to respond to the dominant human capital paradigm, the emergence of lifelong learning as a dominant policy framework, and the resulting emphasis on the learning organization and human resource management. Tied as it is to capital, labour must engage in these changes, and seek to steer a course for their members between some of the more exploitative aspects of this new framework, which utilize workplace learning as a strategy to harness intellectual capital and align people with their business interests, and some of the opportunities that nevertheless exist for labour to share in this new form of wealth creation. Labour may even take advantage this moment in policy formation to seek the creation of a real learning society.

However, it is not just about reacting to changes in the new workplace and new forms of wealth creation. It is also a reforming vision of labour education, “offers the possibility of a wider membership engaging more systematically with the harsher and, often, bewildering circumstances” of the current era (Forrester, 1995, p. 170). Forrester calls this ‘working life education,” by which he means a “more varied and conceptual learning experience” that moves away from traditional union courses material with its central
focus on “the increasing difficulties of immediate workplace concerns” and towards courses that provide the basis to engage with, and make sense of, the contemporary processes of profound economic and political change (ibid., p. 170; p. 174). He argues that this shift in educational priorities is all the more important given the extent of the socio-economic transformations of recent years, and the fact that: “For many millions of citizens, it is only through their trade unions that there is a chance of educationally making sense of the bewildering and often painful dislocations and aspirations characterizing the [contemporary] ‘free market’ society” (ibid.).

As part of his project, Forrester (1995) calls for “membership learning experiences” (p. 178). He points out that “The targets cannot be achieved without extending the ‘learning community’ far beyond those who have traditionally participated in education and training” (p. 176). In particular, by operating out of the bounds of traditional union education, labour will be able to connect with a wide variety of members who, because they did not fit the traditional model of the white, male, full-time worker, have hitherto been excluded from most union activities. Forrester (1995) is clear:

[A] weakness that has characterized trade union education over the last 20 or so years has been the absence of any serious focus on ‘missing audiences’. While priority for any union must be given to education of its present and future lay officials, the absence of learning strategies designed to involve, for example, particular trade union communities or the general membership remained a strategic shortcoming (p. 172).

The mass-model delivery systems of most labour education programs have simply not been effective for reaching out to the vast majority of the membership. There are, however, other possibilities, and chief among these are ‘return to learn’ schemes which have been successful in reaching out to non-traditional members, including those who “have never attended a union meeting and know little or nothing about their union” (Forrester, 1995, p. 178). In the programs Forrester (1995) refers to, these were mostly part-time women workers. Forrester encourages unions to exploit new delivery systems for educational programs, including evening and weekend classes, and open and distance learning programs (p. 178). The initiatives Forrester describes are mostly literacy and basic skills programs. He encourages unions to shift the way they approach learning, and
to view membership-learning strategies not as an add-on, but the centre of their activities (p. 178).

However, this vision of workplace learning represents a departure from traditional union education, which has been “dominated by a collective bargaining agenda” (Forrester, 1995, p. 179). For example, here in British Columbia, the mainstays of the Harrison Winter School for labour education are courses on collective bargaining training, shop steward training, union communications, union counselling, facing management etc.:

While the labour market... provides the backdrop for the learning outcomes, the immediate objectives are driven by wider social, political and educational priorities. Issues of inequality, of democratization and of learning progression, for example, are evident as strong themes in the provision. An explicitly small ‘p’ political consideration... informs and shapes the agreed learning agendas, at a pace and at a level determined by the student (Forrester, 1995, p. 179).

Building on Forrester’s points, and incorporating data from my interviews, I will argue that worker-centred literacy presents an alternative view of what unions can be, one that may find increasing importance and resonance in the context of the need for a renewed vision for labour, while also encountering resistance to the challenges this makes to labour’s traditional ways of doing business. In essence, their approach aims to make human capital arguments work all for all labour members. They present an argument for social justice as well as economic growth, and see worker-centred literacy as a tool for achieving these aims within labour. As Levine (2005) asks:

What is literacy work? Is it only about organizing literacy programs for adult learners? Or is it also about looking at the organizations and systems we are part of to see who is included and who is left out? Can literacy play a role, beyond skill development, that could foster greater inclusion and participation? Some unions and central labour bodies believe it can. We are beginning to rethink our approach to literacy and its companion, clear language. We are moving away from the project-based, grant-dependent approach in which literacy is appended to the regular work of the union, the ‘caboose’ at the end of the train. Instead, we are emphasizing how literacy and clear language can be ‘part of everything we do’ (p. 14).

With Levine, I would like to discuss what can be learned from this shift.
6.3 The Contributions and Challenges of Worker-Centred Literacy

6.3.1 Growing and Changing the Union

Workplace literacy is a tool for growing and strengthening the union because it brings to the table not only new activists, but different activists. Through literacy programs, unions can reach out to and engage members who were previously marginalized within their own union, excluded due to lack of skills, confidence or interest, or because they did not fit the profile of the typical (white, male, Anglo-Saxon, full-time) worker. Forrester (1995) has pointed out that through “return to learn” schemes and other forms of “membership learning experiences” and “working life education,” unions can start to address the weakness, hitherto characteristic of trade union education, of “the absence of any serious focus on the ‘missing audiences’” (p. 172). These initiatives extend the “‘learning community’ far beyond those who have traditionally participated in [union] education and training” and, indeed, create a bridge to groups of members who have never attended a union meeting and “know little or nothing about their union” (p. 176; p.178). Specifically, these groups include women, part-time workers and ethnic minority communities (ibid.).

My interviewees also spoke about the benefits to the union from literacy programming. Sylvia:

*If you are designing your program really in the context of access and equity, then you can’t help but activate members, and that’s what really builds the union. The union is only as strong as its members. And you know, the more members that are involved, the stronger that you are going to be. And that are informed and that are willing to get informed and take part in union activities, then the stronger that you will be. So that’s a real benefit to the locals.*

Members who were simply disinterested or unwilling to get involved in traditional labour education, with its collective bargaining agenda, can also find a place for themselves in the literacy program as learners or tutors, or on the literacy committee. Sylvia:

*[I]It’s not the regular folks that are part of [literacy] committees at labour. It makes a difference... [The] literacy working group... is not a committee of the [union]. If it were an official committee, then different people... would be there. But because it’s a working group, you can have the people who are actually involved with literacy be there and that makes a huge difference.*
6.3.2 Clear Language

To these activists, clear language means many things. Not only do individual members need to have greater opportunity and ability, including communication ability, to participate in the union, but the union’s systems of communication need to become more open and transparent. This perspective takes into account the fact that language is also shaped by relations of oppression and dominance, and can be used to include and to exclude. To avoid reproducing class and other inequities, unions need to use both a language and communication strategies that speak to, include and listen to all their members. Clear language is, therefore, the other side of the literacy coin; it speaks directly to opening up the way that unions communicate with their members.

These trade unionists “understand the politics of class” and that clear language is a way “to counter the power of elites and their language of exclusion” (Levine, 2005, p. 16). Moreover, they see clear language as a way of building support for worker-centred literacy, and also as a way of achieving their aims of increasing and diversifying union participation. These two goals are interlocked within their definition of ‘literacy’. As Levine says, “It was becoming clear that the way to get literacy into the ‘innards’ of the labour movement was going to be through clear language” (p. 16). Moreover, for these activists, clear language is part of an agenda for literacy that includes individual and collective transformation, and this involves the union ‘looking at’ itself. Literacy is thus posited as a “two-way street,” a path that invites labour into a “paradigm shift” (ibid.). Ultimately, clear language starts to involve critical self-reflection on the part of the union. As cited in Levine (2002; 2005), Barb Byers, CLC Vice-President says, “Clear language offers us a great opportunity. We wonder why our members aren’t involved. Rather than assume it’s because they’re apathetic, why don’t we take the opportunity to look at ourselves?” (as cited, p. 29; p. 16)

Tamara:

*And clear language has been a big help. It’s the other piece. It’s the flipside of the literacy coin. So when we talk about literacy having an impact on the larger labour movement, I think clear language is the key to that. It’s the touchstone that people can resonate with, because we are all negatively affected by unclear*
language, we all have an opportunity to improve how we communicate in various ways and if we get that piece, then I think we're on our way to integration of a real understanding of inclusion.

Tamara is clear that ‘walking the talk’ is not just about including the so-called vulnerable or marginalized groups within labour:

Well, at one time it was only about, or at least mostly about, a group of people who hadn't had a chance to go very far in school, who were at the bottom of the workplace hierarchy, who were immigrants and who didn't have the language or didn't have literacy in their original language, etc. That it was about that vulnerable group, for want of a better word. And that will always be there.

Here, labour literacy activists engage is a systems analysis of their own. They recognize that language by itself is only a tool, and clear communication means not only a careful selection of the words and terms we use, but also unpacking the communication systems that structure and give meaning to language use. It is also about changing the way unions do business. Tamara:

But [literacy has] become much more for all of us, for me. That it's about looking at how we do business, for want of a better word - at how we run our programs, at how we run our schools and our courses, and [at] our publications and our conventions and everything that we're a part of.

Sylvia offers some concrete examples:

[We are looking at] literacy and clear language, and again in the context of access and equity, what we say is that... we also need to look at what we can do as a union to make ourselves more accessible. And that's the piece of clear language. And that's more inclusive as well, right? It's not just how you write your newsletter and that, but how you run your meetings. You know, our Conventions have a long, long ways to go to be accessible. If you look at the material that's distributed, the literacy skills that you would need to fully participate in a Convention, not only do you need to know, need to understand what's written, but you need to understand the politics of it. And, you know, you can't just get up to the mic and speak. There's a whole technique as to who goes and what each person is going to say and all of that. So... on the surface very democratic, like many of the structures that we have in North American society on the surface look democratic, but in practice they're not, because they are not accessible and they are not equitable.

However, while the notion of an inclusive language and transparent, equitable systems of communication aims at upsetting structured hierarchies, it also risks minimizing or
‘whitewashing’ the differences in language use among different groups and individuals within the union, and overlooking the fact that minority groups have historically developed dialects that define their difference and carve out areas of resistance to the dominant linguistic norms and ways of knowing. For example, Gowan (1992) draws on the work of Baldwin and others to provide an articulate summary of how Black English was developed “so that slaves could communicate with one another in a way that the master could not understand,” and was, thus “an act of resistance against White dominant culture” (p. 55). Seen from this perspective, language, like literacy itself, is not a neutral concept, but can reflect relations of domination – or of resistance. It is therefore important for unions and labour literacy activists to question where their concepts of clarity come from, and whether the use of language that they promote emphasizes inclusion and transparency over recognition of linguistic and epistemological differences within their membership.

6.3.3 Strategic Planning and Cooperation

Labour literacy activists also envision trade unions adopting to their own strategic planning processes the kind of action-reflection cycle that is part of the popular education methodology. As Levine (2005) notes, “[s]trategic planning and integration” is a key component of the agenda of worker-centred literacy, “at least among some members of the CLC Literacy Working Group,” and is an approach they hope will catch on throughout their organization and movement (p. 16). Tamara:

[A]nother piece of it is that part of the kind of literacy work that we do involves action and reflection - that’s implicit in how we learn and how we instruct... [W]e need to do, and then we need to look at what we’ve done, and then we need to revise and figure out how to do it next time... I think that’s such a valuable way to work... [a]nd I don’t think we do that often enough generally in the labour movement. I think we have some shared values and visions and we sort of march towards those values and visions, but we don’t take stock nearly enough. We don’t say, you know, ‘Well, okay, so we ran this campaign, or we taught this course, or we had this conference. What did we learn from it? What did we do well? What could we have done better? What was the feedback? What changes will we make next time?’ Whereas... with literacy, even though we could do better in that area, I think it is part of what we do... [T]he labour movement could well benefit from that way of doing things.
For Jim, the key to sustainable and effective labour movements is for unions to engage in strategic planning. This is where the gap lies:

> See, to me it's about how do we facilitate those discussions take place in labour? They simply don't organically take place now. If we stay with the traditional set of 'Here's what we've done and here's what we should do' then there's no room for that conversation to take place.

Even without engaging in systemic analysis, labour literacy activists believe that labour could benefit from a more collaborative, community-development style of operating, modeled on literacy programming. Central to this notion is the idea that unions need to share power and cooperate amongst themselves. Sylvia:

> I mean part of the interesting thing about literacy, when you look at how labour has worked on the issue, is the amazing cooperation that has happened around the issue of literacy amongst the unions. You think we are all a big happy family in the house of labour, but there's lots of competition, right? ... Unions are still raiding each other and going after the same membership and crazy stuff like that. So unions... each want to have the best training program, say education program, or services or whatever that they deliver. They want to have the best website. Like we don't really coordinate on a lot of things. We've started, and through the CLC in terms of unions education people are working together a lot more and it's great. There's a bit less of that competition and ownership of the material. But in literacy it's like it never existed.

### 6.3.4 Shifts in Power

In my interviews, the more we talked about the challenges of embracing a notion of literacy as individual and collective transformation, and the more I read and re-read the data, the more it became obvious that these activists have concluded unions may indeed be systemically resistant to the notions of literacy they are bringing forth, and in particular to the notion that implementing a social justice agenda around literacy starts with changing the union itself. This approach to literacy means embracing a more radical vision of collectivism and democracy than most unions currently follow, and this involves a fundamental change in the way unions operate. Engaging in their own forms of praxis, these activists take their analysis home, and look at the ways in which labour organizations, which are their chosen vehicles for social change, also structure and perpetuate marginalization even as they claim to fight against it.
Sylvia believes that a democratic union is a strong union, but she acknowledges that not all organizers may feel the same way:

[When you’re looking at the original definitions or objectives of the BEST program, you know, ‘To empower working people to speak with their own voices and make their voices heard,’ that’s about democracy, right? It’s more democratic workplaces, but also more democratic unions. So I guess if one believes that a truly democratic union is a stronger union, then you have to say that it definitely strengthens the union. But there are obviously – not everybody’s going to support that notion.

For labour literacy activists, power-sharing underpins the literacy/clear language agenda. This is not just about giving people the opportunity and the ‘know-how’ to speak; it is also about who is listening and what they hear. Sylvia:

“[Y]ou need to be in a certain position... like if you are higher up in the hierarchy and you’re speaking, then it has more of an impact than if you’re Joe Somebody, first-time delegate and you get up at the microphone.”

As mentioned, this recalls Razack’s (1999) work on storytelling for social change, where she writes:

“When we depend on storytelling, either to reach each other across differences or to resist patriarchal and racist constructs, we must overcome at least one difficulty: the difference in position between the teller and the listener, between telling the tale and hearing it” (p. 36).

If storytelling is to be at all useful as a tool for social change, we must pay attention not only to what is said, but also “to the interpretive structures that underpin how we hear and how we take up the stories of oppressed groups” (Razack, 1999, p. 37). Doing so across difference requires an engagement with ‘unlearning privilege’.

For Jim, social change is always about shifts in power, and positive social change is, to him, about a power shift from those that have more to those that have less:

My belief is honestly that within the human condition... if you are in a position to give power away - for whatever reason you have some power - if you’re generous enough and wise enough to give it away, there’s a neat thing that happens - is you get more way more power! By giving power away. And I think if organizations start to understand that, and [my union’s] starting to understand that as we give more and more power to our members, we become, as an organization, way more powerful. And then we have more to give away. And it’s a never-ending cycle.
And it's about expanding the pot - that the more powerful our members feel, the more powerful we are. The more we give of power, the more powerful we're going to feel, the more powerful we become. And it's a cycle. And if they do that in communities - to me, that's the human condition - [and] that has definitely defeated all the different regimes - whether it's South Africa with Apartheid. And just go on and on. The simple fact is that when people finally believe that they can make a difference - it's empowerment.... And so... until organizations understand that if you're gathering power, that means you are disempowering. If you're disempowering, your organization's becoming weaker. Corporate organizations never last, because they do that. They suck all the power out of the organization. And then they burn bright. And then they're out. Then someone else buys the power.

Interestingly, as noted previously, Jim's words carry the traces of the very same structured power hierarchies he is passionately speaking against. People can unlearn privilege and 'put down their power,' but cannot really 'give power away.' The 'oppressor' cannot be the one to 'liberate' the oppressed; "it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity" (Freire, 1968/1973, p. 32). Nevertheless, Jim presents a powerful and hopeful modality for organizational development, one that takes as central premises shifts in relations of power and the overturning of structures of oppression.

In the previous chapter, I concluded that worker-centred literacy holds out the potential for personal transformation and shifts in relations, but falls short of being truly liberatory pedagogy due to its inability to fully engage in dialectical analysis and action. In this chapter, I have argued that labour literacy activists engage in a form of praxis of their own by moving their focus away from what kind of literacy programs to provide to their members, and into systemic analysis of the limits and possibilities for liberation within their own, trade union context. Rather than evaluating the learner as a victim of oppression, they are evaluating their own context and strategizing ways of moving their emancipatory agenda forward within that context. Rather than continuing to focus, from a position of compassionate superiority, on what kinds of programs they can create to empower the learners, they are now strategizing around ways to democratize the union. The site of the 'problem' and its potential 'solution' has shifted from the members to the union collective. To reference Levine (2005), labour literacy activists have become
aware of “the inherent dangers of the charitable model of ‘us’ taking care of ‘them’” (p. 15). Under that model:

literacy was not one of the union’s traditional priorities…. It was deemed worthwhile if external or negotiated funding was available. If not, literacy usually ‘didn’t make it’ on to the union’s agenda and was thus generally, though regrettably, expendable (ibid.).

However, “the new consciousness has to do with understanding that union literacy is also about us” (ibid.)

6.3.5 Taking it Home

Despite many efforts and successes, some of which are documented in this study, worker-centred literacy remains a marginal endeavour within most union contexts. None of the activists I interviewed started off understanding or embracing literacy as a tool for change, and they still face an uphill battle in trying to convince others in the labour movement of the needs and opportunities presented by literacy. Jim says that it was, at first, he had difficulty getting the concept of literacy across to the other JUMP Coordinators, and convincing them to support it. Jim:

[Interesting enough, management had seen the need for a literacy program long before the union side did. All the obstacles we had were from the union side, predominantly.... I think it’s because they honestly didn’t believe there was a need.]

Similarly, Tamara describes how getting BEST started was a huge job, and convincing unions of the need for literacy was no small part of that difficulty:

And because there was no track record anywhere for anybody doing this stuff, and because unions had no track record, it was a huge job, you know, convincing the unions this was a good idea – let alone convincing the employers that this was a good idea. We were selling snake oil.

Indeed, of her experience of working with the local union and bringing them on side, Tamara recollects that, “sometimes that was as big a struggle as getting the employer on side. In fact, in some cases we had the employers and the unions were reluctantly there.”
It is still not easy to convince unions to support this kind of an approach. At the end of the day, literacy takes a back seat to other pressing concerns that vie for limited union resources. Hugh recounts a story about a time shortly after the BEST program has been shut down, and the HEU was headed into a bitter strike over Bill 37. He and some fellow-members from the Hospital Employee’s Union tried to get a motion passed at Convention that money be allowed for worker-centred literacy programs like BEST. I asked him how it went:

*Hugh:* *I think it was passed.... But whether they’ll go ahead with it, it’s hard to say.*

**SE:** Do you think it’s a priority for union executives?

*Hugh:* *Priority, no. [pause] No, I don’t think it’s a big priority. But I can see that some of them realized that there is a need. But there’s so many other needs too, I suppose.*

**SE:** Do you think it’s a priority in this [inaudible]?

*HUGH:* *I think it’s even more. Even more of a need now. But I think the union has decided to go a different route with the peer counselling. But I’m going to go and see what they have in mind with the peer counselling.*

**SE:** Do you think training is more necessary than counselling?

*HUGH:* *[pause] Well, it’s kind of like a band-aid solution, right?*

**SE:** Which is? Counselling?

*HUGH:* *Counselling. Yeah.*

**SE:** Yeah. Whereas training is not?

*HUGH:* *Training, would be, I would think, more beneficial.*

**SE:** Why?

*HUGH:* *Why would training be more? Because it gives people – well, it’s hard to say because I mean, with counselling, maybe you’re dealing more with a holistic approach to things. But with training you could get somebody ready and maybe confident enough to go out there and see that there are options. You know, find other work. Most people know nothing other than the hospital. Most people in the hospital have been there, you know, for eons.*
Perhaps one of the reasons that worker-centred literacy remains a marginal endeavour within most union contexts is because the people it targets, for example, those that have been in the hospital ‘for eons’, are not the regular labour activists.

Similarly, the outcomes of worker-centred literacy do not speak to the usual labour agenda. I asked Hugh if people who went through BEST “became more active in the union.” He replied, “There were a few, yes, there were a few. Not a great many.” However, Hugh concludes, “But people were taking more assertive steps in demanding what was rightfully theirs.” Thus, worker-centred literacy offers unions a chance and a path for renewal and reformation, but, perhaps because the needs of literacy learners do not correspond with a traditional union agenda, they are often overlooked.

Perhaps another reason why literacy is a difficult concept to advance within labour is that it has the potential to challenge the existing power structures within the union. As Stinson O’Gorman (1996) argues, “With the notable exceptions of the popular struggles of the labour movement’s formative days and of individual members’ participation in projects outside the official sanctions of the labour movement (which such organizations as Highlander), the North American labour movement has not indicated, until very recently, any degree of support for, or interest in, the methods of popular education or in popular participation in decision-making” (p. 171). Ultimately, labour literacy activists ask whether or not unions will be willing to listen to the diversity of their membership and to adopt participatory practices in their own decision-making. These activists end up turning their gaze onto their own union organizations and “posing... the question of power” by asking, whom does the union serve? (Foucault, 1972, p. 115)

6.4 Chapter Conclusions

I have argued that one of the key ways labour literacy activists use literacy as a tool for creating social change - how they ‘walk the talk’ – is by engaging in a form of praxis of their own: by turning the discussion of literacy and change away from the learners and the classroom, and back towards their efforts to change the union itself and the way the union movement traditionally does business.
Claus Offe (as cited in Stinson O'Gorman, 1996) offers a five-stage model of the development of trade unions that proposes “new possibilities for collective action and democratization” (p. 171). According to Offe, trade union development moves from the “dialogical pattern of collective action” through “three successive stages of increasing bureaucratization and oligarchic decision-making driven by the need to ensure the survival and success of the organization itself” (as cited, p. 171). In the last, fifth stage of its development:

The trade union’s survival depends on a renewed sense of mobilization and activation. This return to collective action ‘in which members’ willingness to act is of paramount importance’ is generally equivalent to the first stage, but differs in two ways: it is likely to be based on only a faction or division within the already existing institution, and it tends to be based on a ‘much broader range of political, legal and institutional arrangements’ (p. 172).

Stinson O’Gorman (1996) argues, “there is growing evidence that many North American labour organizations are rapidly moving into this fifth stage of organizational development” (p. 172). The movement for worker-centred literacy can be seen as ‘a faction or division’ within the existing institution of labour. Like the factions described above, the movement for worker-centred literacy includes “increased rank-and-file participation in decision-making, an end to hierarchical ‘leadership’ structures, and an ‘alternative’ view of what unions can be” (ibid.).

Offe’s analysis, as cited by Stinson O’Gorman above, is a structural one. However, the stages of trade union development that he seems to be talking about take place within a broader context. There are political-economic forces that drive ‘the need to ensure the survival and success of the organization itself’ and which threaten ‘the trade union’s survival’. Ultimately, I have indicated that the agenda of worker-centred literacy is not simply to democratize union governance or expand union membership; it is fundamentally about ‘posing the question to power’ in terms of labour’s relationship with capital. I will address this further in my conclusions, which are my own, not necessarily those of my interviewees.
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS

Workplace literacy is situated on the front line in the war of position between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces. The dominant, capitalist discourse only recognizes the value of workplace literacy in purely economic terms, if at all. In this discourse, workplace literacy is reduced to essential skills-based training. However, within the dominant discourse there are residual liberal notions of literacy and learning that are about democracy and citizenship. The ideal of a just society still has resonance in Canadian society. When engaging with workplace literacy discourse, both labour and employer groups compromise their ideological imperatives, while covertly attempting to advance their true desired aims within the broader historical context.

Union organizations, by which I mean their public face, their leadership, act in their role as the democratic representatives of the organized working class with a mandate to increase its collective power. Standing with their exploiters, unions may sometimes ‘speak’ the economic rationalization for workplace learning, thereby echoing the employer’s call to upgrade the skills of the labour force in order to adjust to changing economic circumstances. In this sense, unions may be using the language of the dominant discourse in order to secure the resources they need to deliver and sustain programs, or simply in order to secure more resources. Unions may also be simply unaware of the issue of workplace literacy and learning, or may place it, and the members it would engage, low on the list of action items. In these ways, unions inevitably help ensure the continued success of the dominant discourse and, by extension, the capitalist system.

Labour literacy activists, however, strive to ensure that the potential for worker-centred literacy to create progressive change is not entirely lost. Looked at from the perspective of the labour movement as a whole, it could be said that the movement positions the need for workplace literacy safely within the dominant liberal discourse, using rationalizations that fit with the ideology of the dominant, free-market discourse, while at the same time

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6 I am indebted for my analysis in this section to many conversations with Nathan Allen.
mobilizing labour literacy activists to seize any opportunity to use literacy's potential for social change.

Currently, the détente between labour and capital, as seen in their apparent rhetorical "consensus" on the value of a skilled workforce, gives some hope that the project of workplace literacy will continue, at least in the near future (Jackson & Jordan, 2000, p. 1). However, should the tension that labour brings to the discourse of workplace literacy and learning disappear, the public discourse would be moved still further in a market-driven direction. Labour's vigilance is therefore required to maintain workplace literacy programs that truly benefit the membership, and to insert into the dominant discourse the value of workers not solely as human resources, but also in all their humanity.

In this, labour is not faced with an easy task, and it will become more challenging with the pace of change. Capitalism relies on permanent structural unemployment, and the consequent competition among workers, to bring down labour costs. Moreover, as information becomes more accessible, and workplaces more technologized, the notion of a knowledge society (i.e., economy) is becoming more significant. The landscape may shift still more as access to information and technology become limitless to some, yet denied completely to others. This change may deepen the class divide between 'haves' and 'have-nots', and differentially affect the ability of social groups and classes to participate in society and in employment. The rate of technological advancement may also lead to a radical redefinition of the nature of work.

Labour occupies an ambiguously non-hegemonic position in relation to capital and, thus, to the ongoing changes and expansion of global capitalism. Labour has a role in aiding economic and cultural hegemony through its engagement with the very structures and processes supporting capital, such as by mediating the relationship between employer and employee. On the other hand, while, labour leaders shake hands with industry representatives on television, they still sing with members about their true ideological goal to "create a new world from the ashes of the old, as the union keeps them strong" (Chaplin, 1915). While this may be a reasonable state of affairs, it cannot be taken for
granted, as it is hard-won. In many ways, it was only the threat of revolution that originally made this relationship necessary and possible. This revolutionary threat is still part of the ethos, if not the practice, of labour culture. If labour is to maintain its role as an advocate for progressive change, and to continue working towards its goal of "solidarity forever", persistent action is required. Otherwise, labour runs the risk of becoming weaker and even irrelevant, opening up the possibility for capital to return to a more cost effective, and more coercive, means of maintaining control (Gramsci, 1971).

Such ‘persistent action’ includes the labour movement’s self-examination of its own ambiguously non-hegemonic position. As expanding economic globalization continues to contribute to a decline in the numbers of union members, labour’s power is diminished. Further, many union members no longer identify with notions of the working class, and do not perceive labour as an oppositional movement, but view the union’s role as one of protecting of their personal interests. The rise in the number of ‘white collar’ unions may further contribute to this loss of purpose, if these unionists then use their privilege to create of labour a tool for protecting their interests.7 These developments limit labour’s larger role in creating progressive social change.

Thus, faced with the challenges of the new, global capitalist agenda, the trade union movement’s survival may depend on creating ‘a renewed sense of mobilization and activation’. To achieve this, trade unions must ‘trace the other within themselves’. This means renewing their responsibility to enfranchise workers by becoming more inclusive and by involving more marginalized members in the union’s democratic process, and in deciding our collective fates.

The current context therefore presents labour with new challenges and new opportunities. Within this context, labour’s influence on the discourse of workplace literacy and learning will become more important. As industries demand (some) skilled workers, labour will have more opportunities to affect how workers will obtain those skills. This

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7 Offe (as cited in Stinson O'Gorman, 1996) claims that most of labour’s efforts of renewal are aimed at rebuilding "the bridge between leftist intellectuals and ideas and working-class activists that had been destroyed by the end of the 1940s" (p. 172).
increases the opportunities for labour literacy activists to create progressive change through worker-centred literacy. At the same time, labour needs to be vigilant in ensuring that the rest of the membership is not left out of this new agenda for learning and work.

To ensure this, labour must take lead in framing the discussion on how to deliver the new program of education. The purely economic rationalization for training could lead to union members back further into a cave of subjugation and alienation, that place where “we are divided, first against ourselves, and then against each other” (Connon-Unda & Clifford, 1997, p. 150).

Workplace literacy’s public mandate of improving workers opportunities for advancement through greater skills is valuable in and of itself, yet it is in the larger potential to empower members to become activists that labour can really gain ground towards the creation of a more egalitarian society. In this sense, skills upgrading becomes a means of supporting greater participation by currently marginalized members in democratically deciding their future. Worker-centred literacy can help make these members aware of their rights and of their capacity, when united, to ‘read the world’ – and change it.

The role of literacy activists is vital to maintaining labour’s role in advancing democracy and equality, and forcing a negotiation not only on the new terms of work and learning, but also on who labour represents in these negotiations, and how. Worker-centred literacy is thus a catalyst for necessary institutional self-reflection and for the labour movement to reconcile its place as both a part of, and critic of, the dominant culture. In this sense, the struggle of labour literacy activists to provide a critical, transformational pedagogy for marginalized union members mirrors the struggle faced by the labour movement as a whole to achieve its ideological objectives. The labour movement needs to reconcile its own inherent contradictions, and worker-centred literacy is one way this could be accomplished.
Therefore, union leaders need to recognize that they and their organizations are also, indeed, a component of the ideological state apparatus, and so help to maintain the current dominant culture responsible for creating the economic and social conditions that continue to exploit their memberships. Unions need to take the lead from labour literacy activists in striving to hold their ground in the hegemonic discourse by appealing to liberal sentiments currently residual in the dominant discourse. Indeed, in this sense the task of unions is to ensure that mainstream culture continues to value literacy for reasons other than those that simply advance capitalism.
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APPENDIX A: INITIAL LETTER OF CONTACT

July 29, 2003

My name is Sarah Evans and I am writing to invite you to participate in a study about the work of trade union activists in workplace literacy in Canada.

Objectives
The purpose of this study is to explore labour literacy activists' perspectives on workplace literacy program outcomes. I would like to interview you about what matters in workplace literacy programs, why you have chosen workplace programs as an effective site for action and how you work strategically to achieve your objectives. The research project is for my MA degree in Adult Education at the University of British Columbia.

For the first part of this study, I will review the policy context of workplace literacy in Canada. In particular, I will take a look at the key themes in the current talk about workplace literacy program outcomes. I will look at policy documents and statements from federal and provincial governments, trade unions, business, and the broader literacy movement. I will look for differing ideas about what outcomes are valid in a workplace literacy program, and what different interests and ideological agendas inform different definitions of outcomes.

The second phase of my study involves interviewing approximately eight labour literacy activists. These are people who are active within the trade union movement, who may or may not work for a union organization, and who are working to promote literacy and lifelong learning within a union context. I want to know how activists define literacy and why they think literacy is important for their members or for the labour movement. I also want to know what kinds of program results or outcomes you value, and if you are looking for ways to put your version of outcomes on the policy agenda.

What is the point of this study?
First, the labour literacy movement is relatively new, and efforts are being made to put literacy on labour's agenda, and to put labour perspectives on literacy onto provincial and national policy agendas. Through this research, I hope to document some of the principles, perspectives and strategies of labour literacy activists.

Second, I also hope that this research will add to our understanding of the type of work activists do when they are trying to influence policy development. The study of how activists strategize to influence policy is relatively new and I hope that this research can add to the growing body of knowledge about this important work.
Next step
I will be contacting you in about two weeks time to discuss this project, answer any questions, and determine if you are willing to be interviewed. Thanks for taking the time to read this information letter.

Sincerely,

Sarah Evans, MA Candidate, Department of Educational Studies, UBC
APPENDIX B: LETTER OF CONSENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Project:</th>
<th>Whose Knowledge Matters? Analysis of the Discourse of Workplace Literacy Program Evaluation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>[add date consent is sent]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To:</td>
<td>[name of participant]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From:</td>
<td>Sarah Evans, MA Candidate, Adult Education Program, Department of Educational Studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This letter is to formally request your consent to be interviewed as part of a research project that is for my MA degree in Adult Education at the University of British Columbia.

Purpose of Study: The subject of this study is workplace literacy evaluation. This study has three broad purposes. First, this study will review and analyze the current policy context of workplace literacy evaluation. I will look at what types of evaluation are on the policy agenda at the moment, as well as how evaluation, outcomes, and accountability are 'talked about' in policies and by policy-makers. In this first section, this study will both paint a clear picture of the policy context of workplace literacy evaluation, and also draw out and analyze some of the main themes that characterize this 'evaluation talk.'

Second, this study will document and describe the perspectives that labour literacy activists hold towards the issue of evaluation. I hope to find out more about how activists define literacy, what it means to them and why they think literacy is important for their members or for the labour movement. I am particularly interested in what labour literacy activists think about the current trend towards outcomes-based evaluation.

Third, this study will compare and contrast these labour-based perspectives to some of the main themes that run through mainstream evaluation policies. This study will also discuss the question of how labour literacy activists plan or strategize to influence the policy agenda so that it reflects their values.

Procedures: You will be participating in a semi-structured interview which, if you agree, will be tape recorded. If you do not wish to have the interview recorded, detailed notes will be taken. These interviews will last approximately one hour and the time, location and length of the interview will be negotiated prior. I may interview you over the phone if it is not possible to meet with you face-to-face. Transcripts of the interview will be sent to you, and follow-up phone calls will be made to discuss the interview process and the issues raised. All in all, I anticipate that participating in this research will take 2 to 4 hours of your time.

I have included a list of key issues and questions I hope to cover in the interview. I really welcome your feedback on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the interview.
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introduction/Demographics:
Do you have any questions about yourself before we begin our conversation? Please tell me a little bit about yourself, your ‘background’ (e.g. age, ancestry, birthplace), your education and work history.

Workplace and Labour Literacy Involvement:
When, where, and how did you begin working in the area of workplace/labour literacy? Tell me about your involvement: what kinds of things did you do (e.g. teaching, developing programs and policy, advocacy)? What labour organizations have you been involved with? How have they approached workplace literacy?

Workplace Literacy Evaluation:
In your experience, what have been the outcomes or results of workplace literacy policies and programs? How have learners/workers benefited? What difference does workplace literacy make to participants? What role have organized labour/unions played in determining outcomes of workplace literacy programs? What kind of role have you had in relation to evaluating/measuring and identifying outcomes of workplace literacy programs?

Working Strategically:
What have been your experiences in advocating and influencing workplace literacy programs and policy? Can you think of an example of an advocacy effort that was successful and one that was not so successful? What do you think contributed to these results? What role, in your opinion, have and should unions play in influencing workplace literacy policy and programs? Given these experiences, how do you think your organization (and other labour organizations) should be involved in the current discussion about workplace literacy evaluation? What needs to be in place in order for unions/labour organizations to participate effectively in these debates about outcomes?

Suggestions/Feedback:
Can you think of other individuals that I should invite to participate in this study? Are there some issues, areas or questions that I need to include or pay more attention to?