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# Picture this: immigrant workers use photography for communication and change

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## Abstract

This research investigates the ways in which English as a second language (ESL) learners used autodocumentary photography in a learner centered workplace literacy program to solve problems and facilitate language learning. By using learner-generated photos and stories as the basis for the curriculum in a critical approach to literacy, insights were gained into the ways in which these workers perceived their lives and learning in a new culture. Additionally, the ways in which they adapted to and changed the environment of their workplace were assessed. Implications for workplace educators include the responsibilities to foster the development of critical awareness and empowerment in learners and to consider the transformative possibilities of workplace learning.

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This project employed an innovative approach to workplace literacy in which workers' concerns, expressed through their photographs, are central to the learning process. Many workplace literacy programs use grammar skill-based or competency-based approaches to instruction which learners do not find relevant to their own life experiences. These techniques seldom engage learners or serve their needs.

Autodocumentary photography used with learner-generated curricula can help beginning learners of English to express themselves immediately through their own stories and photographic images of community, family, and work. By taking photographs and sharing with the class the pictures they create, learners empower themselves through developing themes and discussions about their lives, and language learning is enriched by their involvement in meaningful communicative activities. Focusing on the shared experiences of work and family that the participants capture on film and with their words helps to overcome many of the linguistic and cultural barriers faced by second language learners.

This research (Gallo, 2000, 2001) involved immigrant and refugee factory workers from Colombia, Mexico, Vietnam, and the former Yugoslavia who were beginning English learners. Many of the Mexican and Vietnamese students had limited literacy in their first languages as well which makes acquiring reading and writing skills in another language particularly difficult (Graham and Cookson, 1990). The participants ranged in age from early 20s to 60s, and their seniority in the factory also ranged widely from several months to more than 20 years. A total of 22 learners participated in a 26-week ESL program held inside the non-union plastics manufacturing plant where they worked. A critical ethnographic case study was employed which included field observations, photo-elicitation interviews and learners' writings as sources of data.

The primary questions guiding the research were: how do immigrant workers find meaning in the often repetitious, dangerous, and physically grueling labor of a modern factory; and in what ways does gaining confidence in written and spoken English in the workplace classroom translate into a greater sense of empowerment in other aspects of learners' lives? The conceptual



framework of this research was based in Freire's (1973/1993) theory of critical literacy and feminist approaches to photography (Neumaier, 1995; Wang *et al.*, 1998).

While the use of visual images created by others can be a valuable way of starting conversations in a classroom situation, using images that the learners themselves have chosen and created has an even more powerful impact. By taking their own photographs they are able to represent how they see themselves and present their images as they would like others to view them. This is in sharp contrast to viewing images which others have selected for them or of them. This project was groundbreaking because it encouraged learners to photograph the often invisible realm of the workplace in order to scrutinize its dynamics. By photographing meaningful situations in the workplace, workers could objectify these situations and allow themselves opportunities to reflect on power relationships and concerns within the workplace.

### **The current context of workplace literacy in the USA**

Workplace literacy programs take place on-site in many companies and provide basic skills training including English as a second language, reading, and mathematics for company employees. In the USA these programs are usually paid for by a combination of private and public funds and concentrate on training workers in the specific skills that are required for their work. Many politicians and educators have touted these programs as the panacea for economic uncertainty in this post-industrial age of information. Better skilled workers will ensure greater productivity and economic security as North America competes in the global marketplace, the argument goes, though thousands of jobs are being lost overseas to even lower-skilled and lower-wage workers. Innovative companies initiate continuous improvement, total quality, and learning organization schemes which pay lip service to the concepts of employee empowerment, teamwork, and shared vision, while slashing job security and wages. The contradictions inherent in these policies are largely ignored by the many stakeholders in the workplace literacy arena. These include politicians,

corporations, and educational providers, all of whom have incentives for exaggerating the extent and effects of illiteracy in the workplace. Yet these are the voices most often heard in any discourse on workplace literacy. There is a commonly held belief that rampant worker illiteracy is to blame for a sundry list of workplace woes including poor production, high turnover, and inferior quality job performance. This belief in workers' deficits is central to many workplace literacy policies. The idea that illiterate (and therefore incompetent) workers are to blame for loss of economic competitiveness, as well as their own problems is a popularly held belief (Hull, 1997a). Through this cacophony of ominous warnings about the dangers of illiteracy and the unquestioned assumptions of the widespread benefits of literacy skills training, the voice of the worker is rarely heard.

Although much of the literature proclaims workplace literacy programs as a win-win situation for both companies and employees, there are numerous disincentives to workplace literacy perceived by workers. Instead of workplace literacy programs being relevant to workers' need of learning how to navigate the power dynamics and culture of the workplace by reading the world of work, the programs are more often focused on the literacy demands made by company management (Fingeret, 1994). The narrow approaches of the curriculum meet primarily the needs of the employers rather than participatory program structures which suit the needs of learners both inside the workplace and outside. Unlike training provided for management, basic skills training for front line workers is often associated with anxiety provoking pre- and post-examinations and monotonous drills.

There is a popular belief that "what is good for the employer is good for the employee to be more productive and flexible, to define self in terms of work and to seek advancement in the system" (Gowen, 1992, p. 37). However, the workers do not always embrace the same values as management. An overly simplistic view that literacy instruction will improve organizational performance as well as advancement opportunities for participants is a naïve but common perspective among many stakeholders. This belief operates in sharp contrast to the realities of racism, classism, sexism, favoritism, and other barriers in the workplace, which are well recognized by

employees. Instructional providers as well as management encourage workers to “buy into” the false hopes of improved job opportunities and advancement in exchange for improved English and reading skills.

Skills-based and competency-based notions of literacy are those most frequently found in workforce literacy programs (Hull, 1997b) and these programs generally have a behavioristic and Tayloristic approach to language learning which focuses on deficits in learners’ knowledge and behavior rather than learners’ strengths and capabilities. These approaches can be demoralizing and discouraging and fail to expand upon learners’ current strategies and successes. Rote memorization and drilling of decontextualized vocabulary and grammar structures are also unlikely to result in the sophisticated fluency required within the cultural arena of the workplace. Auerbach (1990) examined excerpts from workers’ ESL textbooks through the past 100 years and found that they presented a consistent philosophy of worker education: “that its purpose is to socialize learners into particular slots in the workplace hierarchy, teaching them to conform to employers’ needs, accept the workplace as it is, and become ‘good’ workers” (Auerbach, 1990, pp. 223-4).

One of the greatest weaknesses of workplace literacy programs is the absence of follow-up in transferring learning from the training room to the job and home. ESL students report that their newly acquired English speaking skills are more often met with impatience and criticism by supervisors than encouragement. The old ways of communicating through translators and hand gestures are easier to accommodate than the time-consuming decoding of new English in the busy workplace. Another problem in transfer of learning is that the memorization and recitation of decontextualized vocabulary in a structured classroom have very little in common with the demands of hurried and complex conversations of the shop floor. The skill of reading in the atmosphere of a supportive and safe classroom versus reading out loud to a supervisor on the plant floor is akin to the experience of walking on a painted line on the floor compared to walking on a high balance beam. The skills are ostensibly the same but the reality of the context changes the degree of difficulty. Rather than focusing on improving communication practices at all

levels of an organization, most programs place the full burden of adapting to existing practices on the ESL learners.

A further barrier for workers with limited literacy is the texts that are found in the workplace. Company documentation is often encoded in a baffling blend of legalese and technical obfuscations that confound even the most educated and experienced readers. Even when beginning English students have a grasp of enough vocabulary and grammar to comprehend simple, straightforward statements, the subtleties of sarcasm, hidden agendas, and implications inherent in normal workplace conversation and writing are often lost on them. Workplace literacy programs which teach workers to read words without reading between the lines are omitting one of the most important dimensions in workplace communications. Another example of indecipherable texts is that of material safety data sheets (MSDS). Though the very lives of the workers depend on their ability to read the safety instructions about handling dangerous chemicals on the MSDS sheets, the terminology used such as “carcinogenic” and “fetotoxic” is unlikely to be understood by the average manufacturing worker (Szudy and Arroyo, 1994). The use of such difficult language by management may be interpreted as a complete disregard for the audience to whom they are writing, a display of their power used to confuse and humiliate the uneducated, or even a deliberate attempt to withhold information. Purcell-Gates (1995) refers to such practices as “exclusionary written language style”. One way to avoid these confusing messages is to encourage employees to have a voice in the way policies are written. Worker involvement in rewriting company documents in clear language is not only an empowering literacy activity (Rhoder and French, 1994) but also a demonstration of common sense to those who would choose to confuse rather than enlighten their readers.

Perhaps the most significant barrier to the success of workplace literacy programs is that workers themselves are almost never consulted during program planning and curriculum development. Educational providers and company management are usually the only parties involved. Even programs involving unions do not include significant learner involvement in these areas (Chaney, 1994). This exclusion of the primary stakeholders during program design

and implementation naturally leads to distrust and suspicion of the program being foisted upon them. Workforce literacy programs which are action-based and participatory are not as simple to set up and evaluate as more traditional programs and the “messiness” of allowing learners input into program design and content as well as the ambiguous nature of qualitative evaluations often discourage implementation of these methods. Employers have also historically been concerned that educating workers excessively could incite them to demand better conditions, wages, and opportunities (Askov and Aderman, 1991). Because student-centered, participatory programs based on learners’ own agendas are difficult to measure in quantitative terms and take control away from the teacher and employer in unpredictable ways, they are rarely used in workplace literacy programs in the USA. This research is particularly important in that it offers an alternative approach to workplace literacy, offering the possibility that workplace learning can be emancipatory and transformative rather than utilitarian and technocratic.

Despite its shortcomings, workplace literacy can offer considerable advantages for learners. Beyond the ordinary intrinsic and extrinsic rewards associated with other types of adult basic education (ABE) programs such as improved self-esteem and job opportunities, workplace literacy education provides some unique benefits to learners. The convenience of the scheduling and location of programs as well as the opportunity (in many cases) to be paid for their time in class makes it an unparalleled educational opportunity for low-waged workers. These are laborers who often work long hours either holding down more than one job, or working overtime in order to meet their basic needs and therefore lack the time and resources necessary to travel to classes after work hours (Hull, 1997b). Another positive aspect of these programs is the inclusion of job related content matter that is relevant to their work and more likely to be useful in their daily lives than the content of generic ABE classes. Women who have been denied education opportunities by their partners or families can also benefit from these programs by participating clandestinely or without blame (Gowen and Bartlett, 1997). Additionally, workers who may not have ever considered furthering their

education, may be exposed to and develop an interest in learning. All of these factors combine to make workplace literacy programs potentially one of the most accessible, relevant, and effective means of educating adults. Despite these possibilities, relatively little is known about the dynamics and processes of workplace literacy. Boyle refers to workplace literacy as “the shadow education system” because “The system of employer-based education remains largely a silent phenomenon – unacknowledged, unstudied, and unregulated – even as it continues to develop and institutionalize” (Boyle, 1999, p. 259).

Worker empowerment is not a goal embraced by all companies offering workplace literacy classes. For some, imparting basic knowledge about filling out forms and understanding orders is all that is desired. However, for the many companies committed to continuous quality improvement, employee empowerment to make suggestions, solve problems, take responsibility for their work, and implement changes is essential. In these types of organizations, a curriculum built on employees’ needs and concerns is the best way to involve workers in taking control of their own learning and their own work (Schultz, 1992). Encouraging workers to write, speak and read about topics and problems that impact their lives is a major step toward empowering the participants to make positive changes in their work environment through their new communication skills and advantageous to workers and management alike.

### **Project description**

This program used learners’ own photographs of their work and lives to build a curriculum based on themes that were important to them. Immigrant workers seldom see themselves portrayed realistically or positively in mainstream media. Too often they are ignored or belittled; portrayed as exotic, pitiable or comic. Therefore, it becomes an empowering exercise to show themselves through their own visual perspectives as multifaceted individuals expressing their joys and concerns.

All participants were given disposable cameras and asked to take photographs of what

was important in their lives in and out of work. The initial response to using the cameras was excitement and enthusiasm as they began to document and share their life experiences, communicated through images despite linguistic barriers. The film was developed commercially and pictures were enlarged on overhead transparencies for class discussions. The photographs taken depicted the students at work and home in a variety of candid and posed situations. Some participants added to the class discussions by bringing in other photos and letters from home to aid in telling their stories. One woman transcribed her entire photo storybook in phonetic Vietnamese and shared it with the other Vietnamese speakers. Others wrote their family histories and asked to have them typed up so that they could share them with their children.

Most of the participants worked as machine operators, material handlers and assemblers, manufacturing small plastic components. Much of their work involved heavy lifting or very fast, repetitious hand movement, which left some noticeably sore and tired by the end of their shifts and the beginning of the class. Two of the students worked the midnight shift and voluntarily attended class in the early afternoon during their normal sleeping hours.

The conditions in the molding plant were very hot, often exceeding 100°F during the summer because of the heat generated by the machinery that melted the plastic. Spending class time sitting in the air-conditioned conference room was a welcome respite for these workers.

One man described a photograph of himself with a co-worker, their uniforms dark with perspiration:

In this picture Julio and me were working together. We are choosing the tools. Julio has a wrench in his hand and I'm looking into the toolbox for my pipe wrench. We have to fix and set up between ten and 12 machines every day ... We were sweating because this day was too hot, 113°F, more or less.

Sharing their photos led the students to generate the themes that they then expanded through discussions and writing exercises. As we asked basic questions about the picture ("Who is this?" "What is he doing?") and then wrote key vocabulary words offered by the class on the image we generated a vocabulary list of significant words. We later created picture dictionaries using photocopies

of the pictures and writing appropriate vocabulary words next to each image.

Our first writing exercise was for each class member to select one of his/her own photos and write a description of it to be made into booklets. They took turns reading their own stories about their jobs, families, and cultural experiences from the booklets, and we discussed them at length. These booklets were also displayed on the company bulletin board for all employees to read, and several workers from the plant and office stopped by our classroom to remark how much they liked the essays and pictures. Learners found it heartening to see their own language progress as stories became longer and more descriptive in each book.

Some of the topics generated included working two jobs, coping with the heat in the plant, balancing overtime and family time, and difficulties finding opportunities to practice English. Another exercise we completed was brainstorming ideas for improving production, safety, and scrap reduction and submitting these to the company suggestion box. Workers also collaborated in class to write the following memo to management about their concerns.

### **ESL class suggestions for improvements**

We need paper towels in the lunchroom because if you spill something you can't clean it.

Sometimes people spill the food on the table and that is why the tables are dirty.

We need a new microwave or two in the lunchroom. One microwave is not working. The door does not work. When you close it, the door does not open again.

We need cold water to drink in the lunchroom.

We need cold water to drink in Compression.

Some of the refrigerators do not work well. They are not very cold.

Some people leave spoiled food in the refrigerators. They need to be cleaned, they are too dirty.

We need more towels and soap in the bathrooms.

Some people have seen a rat in front of the bathroom.

The bathrooms are dirty. We need someone to clean the bathrooms every day.

There are not enough bathrooms for everybody.

Smoking should be in a different area, not by the lockers. It makes our clothes smell bad.

The plant manager wrote back to us with a comment after each suggestion explaining how it was being addressed, and we read these

in class together. The company had quickly addressed the majority of the class's concerns. Towel dispensers were installed in the bathrooms and lunch area, a new microwave was purchased, pest control was called in, refrigerators were cleaned, and the bathrooms were painted, washed, and waxed. Students were enthusiastic and felt empowered by the changes implemented. The day a new microwave was installed as a result of our request, one man wrote in his journal, "I like lunchroom today good because the office change the microwave good," and a woman wrote, "Everybody are happy today."

The photographs which learners took allowed them to initiate conversations, build social relationships, share experiences with co-workers, friends and families, and begin discussions of workplace concerns and inequities. Learning ways of using language in order to gain entrance to the domains defended by institutional gatekeepers is a valuable literacy skill (Cushman, 1999). "Put it in writing" joins "We are only discussing items on the agenda" as common dismissals of the concerns of workers made by those in power. Limiting access to discussion of workplace issues by invoking rules of "proper" language usage is a way of silencing those who are not well versed in the discourse styles of the dominant group. In this project, learners began to use the preferred language and customs of workplace discourse for their own purposes by writing memos and suggestions, speaking up at meetings and discussing discrepancies between written and practiced policies.

Conversations about their photographs suggested that workers found meaning in their work through the social ties and financial stability provided by their jobs, rather than plans for career advancement or inherent interest in their acts of labor. Though management saw achieving English fluency as a key to job success, most of the learners felt that they were unqualified or not interested in moving into higher position. No one ever mentioned career advancement as a goal within the company. On the contrary, it was treated as a joke. Students laughed during a story in which a character expressed interest in learning English in order to become a supervisor, and one woman's remark when receiving her certificate at the end of the class, "Diploma! Now I work in the office," was met with amusement as well. When asked if they

would like a promotion to group leader or supervisor everyone said no. Too much responsibility and headaches with people, a student explained, and only a little more money. It also seemed obvious that all the supervisors were men, and virtually all the people in higher positions were white US citizens. Workers realized the barriers they faced in education and language acquisition made the likelihood of significant job advancement unlikely. Of the areas where English proficiency was needed in their lives, work was one of the least important. Because the jobs were allocated for non-English speakers they were structured to require as little English communication as possible. There were very low expectations about the amount of English that needed to be understood at work. For these workers, learning English was a way to help their children with school, ask questions about their benefits and paychecks in the office, communicate better with friends at work, and to interact in day-to-day situations in an English speaking culture, rather than a key to advancement at work. In this study, learner-generated photography was central to workers' experiences of critical reflection, communication improvements, community building, creation of knowledge, and change making.

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As a result of these classes, workers gained the confidence to make suggestions, go to the personnel office and discuss work situations, and speak up about their opinions for improving the company. Finding their voices in this way allowed these learners to take control of and responsibility for their jobs. As one Vietnamese woman explained: "Before we were too scared to go to the office and ask for more money; now we know more English and we're not scared!"

By engaging the class in participatory activities while sharing their stories and photographs, we were able to introduce the technical vocabulary and awareness of work documents desired by company management.

At the same time, workers were encouraged to create learning projects which were personally meaningful and led to taking action to bring about changes in their working conditions and lives at home. By voicing their concerns they were able to persuade management to provide improved environmental conditions as well as implementing suggestions which improved safety, production and on-time delivery. Publishing their stories on the class Web page and in booklets distributed throughout the plant legitimized their work knowledge and bolstered their confidence in using more English.

It seemed apparent that the enthusiasm generated by sharing their images positively impacted the amount and quality of writing, reading, and discussion going on in the classes. In comparison to the sometimes lackluster responses generated from questions about textbook workplace scenarios and the usual company-related materials (memos, employee rulebook, production sheets), the opportunity to work with topics of their own choosing and creation had a powerful effect on the degree and type of participation in class. Additionally, this class helped to impart a sense of pride in their achievements of learning a new language and succeeding in a new country where their difficulties and victories are seldom acknowledged.

### Implications for workplace educators

The ever-encroaching fields of workforce training and human resource development (HRD) threaten to subsume the field of adult education, allowing corporations to limit and control the educational opportunities available for many people. This research has shown that encouraging individuals to have input into the skills and education they would like to gain instead of restricting the curriculum to that deemed appropriate by the employer, provides opportunities for life enrichment both in and out of the workplace. When learning which is funded with tax dollars (paid by workers) becomes corporate welfare providing company-specific, non-transferable, dull and ineffective training designed to promote profitability without concern for human costs, we need to reevaluate our basic values.

Delimiting the possibilities and richness of education to the constraints of mere job

training is neither conscionable nor effective. Learners who have acquired critical thinking and decision making skills are better off and have more to offer society and employers than those who have solely been granted the right to learn the narrow and momentary business mandated job skills. When business interests focus on problem-solving learning programs rather than problem-posing ones, they limit the questions and the issues that can be raised, and by whom. It is important for adult educators to ensure that the logic of the workplace, in which profit takes precedence over humanity, is not allowed to go unquestioned. Otherwise, as Cunningham (1993, p. 14) has argued, adult education may become “the hand maiden of corporate America” .

No one is merely a worker, they are also physical, spiritual, and social beings whose aspirations are not limited to their roles on the job. Especially in areas of repetitious labor where there are limited opportunities for creativity, advancement, and interest inherent in the work itself, it is necessary for workers to find fulfillment outside of their job tasks. By embracing the multi-faceted talents and energies of people, education can be more helpful than focusing upon a narrow role, particularly when that role is deemed comparatively unimportant as it was for these students who saw themselves first as family members and much less significantly as machine operators or floor boys.

It is also of vital importance that educators are sensitive to the dynamics of the workplace in which learners may have little choice about their own participation in training. The power structures of workplace learning are very different to those of programs in which learners enroll voluntarily and can leave at will. Seemingly innocuous classroom requests may be viewed as coercive or threatening by worker-learners. It is also necessary that educators carefully consider the impact that their evaluations may have on learners' livelihoods and reputations on the job. Unlike the comparatively anonymous atmosphere of a college or community learning program, in the workplace, the perceived weaknesses of learners can quickly be spread through the company, leading to the possibilities of denied raises and promotions or even termination of employment. Additionally, adult educators can take on a positive role in the workplace as a liaison between workers and management,

advocating for workers, as well as bringing about change. As outsiders, we have a unique perspective on the often exploitative culture of the workplace which we can bring to light by discussions with those inside the culture. Such discourse has the potential to bring about changes in attitudes and practices at work where “business as usual” is rarely questioned.

As adult educators, we must strive to foster awareness of the disparities in educational opportunities which are provided for different groups and seek to eliminate these inequities. For poor and working-class students, deference to authority, compliance, obedience, and punctuality are the values stressed in their training, rather than creativity, leadership, and thinking skills.

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**‘... By using literacy education for purposes of empowerment and transformation in the workplace we can open the doors of opportunity for learners, providing them with the hope of a better future...’**

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Additionally, the exclusion of those less conversant in the discourse styles of the dominant culture from education privileges under the guise of “standards” is another gatekeeping technique used to limit employment possibilities. These practices are used to track people into dead-end jobs based on their class, race, gender, or ethnicity instead of opening doors and providing opportunities. We cannot remain silent as these commonplace practices continue. By raising our voices as well as encouraging our students to raise their own, we can denounce the unfairness of such policies and call for their restructuring. Adult educators must strive “to direct their practice towards the emancipation of learners rather than their renewed servitude” (Bouchard, 1998, p. 138).

Boyle (1999) suggests that adult educators are divided in their support of workplace literacy. While some believe the workplace is the ideal setting for those who cannot access outside schooling, others believe that the employers’ purposes will prevent liberatory or critical education, and programs will benefit only the organization, not workers. Nevertheless, an uneasy partnership has sprung up between adult educators and businesses for the purposes of workplace

literacy. The tradeoffs of learner-centeredness and critical approaches in exchange for the access and much needed financial support provided by business seem fair to many literacy providers. Although business may appear to be an ally of literacy educators with many overlapping interests, it is important that a balance be kept between learners’ and management’s interests, particularly when programs are funded by public grants. The needs of corporations are not identical or even compatible with the needs of the people. Although we may need jobs, we do not only need jobs, and training focused solely on the needs of the current job market is short-sighted. Critical thinking skills, communication skills and decision making skills are all necessary in addition to form filling and “widget” assembly skills.

As Collins (1989) describes, the workplace literacy arena can be the site for power struggles between big business’s desire to control the socialization and attitudes necessary to maintain a compliant workforce and workers’ desires toward empowerment, decent wages, and safe work conditions. By using literacy education for purposes of empowerment and transformation in the workplace rather than further reinforcing workers’ subordination by limiting their educational opportunities to filling out forms and reading rules, we can open the doors of opportunity for learners, providing them with the hope of a better future.

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