

THE CASE FOR PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION FOR LABOUR EDUCATION IN CANADA

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LABOUR EDUCATION AND PLAR

Labour education includes all union and independently provided education designed to strengthen union representation, activity and culture. It is not to be confused with workplace learning that is essentially aimed at making workers more efficient and compliant human resources (for definitions of labour education see Spencer, 1994).

In our view, much of what workers learn in the workplace (the school of hard knocks) and labour education courses is worthy of formal recognition - college/university credit. This, of course, begs the question of how to evaluate this learning. At present, labour and other forms of education continue to be evaluated in terms of traditional higher education standards. This requires individuals to present a case on their own behalf when applying for prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), usually in the form of a portfolio. Naturally, it is easier to get credit for those labour education courses that resemble traditional classroom courses—courses with professional instructors, itemised outlines, assigned readings, and

“objective” evaluation. However, much labour education does not (and we would argue, should not) proceed in this manner. The danger is that increased pressure may be brought to bear on labour educators to restructure their courses along traditional lines. This pressure may come from educational institutions, the state, union members seeking credit, or some combination of the three. This is a concern because it would shift the emphasis of labour education from social to individual purposes. Labour education is one of the few remaining adult education practices challenging the notion that the purpose of education is to serve individualised economic objectives. The purposes of labour education remain social, rather than individualistic -- individuals may learn new skill sets, but these are employed in the service of others, not themselves. Moreover, the success of labour education is not gauged in terms of performance on controlled tests, but in terms of whether graduates can “cut the mustard” in the workplace -- handle a grievance, mediate a dispute, and so forth. Our research does not wish to contribute to such a transformation of labour education; we are attempting to

establish the argument that non-formal and informal labour education can be translated into college/university credits. This involves evaluating the learning contexts of specific courses and programs, rather than the learning of individuals. The challenge, methodologically speaking, is to develop this argument in such a way that it does not impact existing labour education practices.

METHODOLOGY

Our method in this study of PLAR of labour education was to gather a representative sample of labour education courses provided by and for unions. From this sample, we have identified similarities among labour education courses, in terms of content, objectives, methods and length of study. The range of courses unions' offer is immense, we have reported on this diversity and have specifically focused our efforts on shop steward training courses -- almost every union offers shop steward training. Shop steward training courses share common features and provide us with some of the key elements of labour education. Any proposals for granting PLAR are intended to serve only as a touchstone that evaluators can use to calculate credit equivalencies for shop steward training (and other) courses, not as a prescriptive norm: this report should help in such a process. Many unions have very good reasons for structuring their shop steward training courses in a particular manner. Such individual differences need to be considered carefully and sensitively; differences

must be weighed on their individual merit, not in terms of an abiding standard. It is imperative that any proposals remains dynamic, rather than static, and unions have an ongoing opportunity to modify and refine such proposals.

As this report demonstrates Winston has collected a wide range of materials and responses from more than a hundred sources including most of Canada's major unions. These include trade unions, union locals, employee associations, labour centrals (such as the Canadian Labour Congress and the Alberta Federation of Labour), and other organisations, agencies and consortia; as well as a number of business and educational institutions that deliver basic labour education to unions and union members. The report and tables in the Appendix are drawn from more than 50 files of complete union programs that have been summarised.

STEWARD TRAINING AS THE CORE OF LABOUR EDUCATION

A major objective of the field research that Winston conducted from 1997 to 2000 was to gather material necessary to provide an overview of the content, nature, and extent of labour education in Canada today. The course and program packages, event brochures, materials, and other data gathered from a number of individual unions and organisations have come to us in various stages of development and articulation. In over 30 cases, these materials were supplemented by face-

to-face interviews with education officers and union leaders.

The material packages indicate that steward-training courses tend to be the most developed and documented. Although these steward-training courses may be similar in many respects, they also differ in important ways. This is largely because steward-training courses tend to be developed with particular needs and organisational priorities in mind. For instance, many are structured around specific collective agreements, implicit understandings, and legal frameworks under which shop stewards are expected to function. These courses are essentially “tools” courses intended to provide these lay representatives with the implements to do the job of a steward. An examination of course content revealed a number of common and recurrent themes: a close inspection of union structures, grievance handling, disciplinary protocols, membership assemblies, and contracts -- as exemplified in the courses offered by the International Woodworkers, Canadian Division in the Report. Steward courses, however, describe only a small portion of the labour education presently made available to the members and staff of trade unions. Many of the other courses and experiences that unions typically include in their education programs are evident in the offerings of the British Columbia Government and Services Employees' Union. These range from tools to issues courses -- courses that typically link internal union concerns with external social issues, sometimes referred to as awareness courses --for example, courses on equity issues and

sexual harassment. Some of the more typical courses are combined in this case with other courses that reflect the mission, priorities, and/or perspective of a particular union.

Depending on how fully developed and articulated the program, union courses and educational activities are also often layered or graduated. The education schedule of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) provides an example of an elaborate program comprised of four different levels and numerous sub parts. This layering prepares members for admission and recruitment to the next level of union activity, participation, and education. Clearly, Canadian unions are providing their members with a sophisticated and integrated educational opportunity, more sophisticated than was previously offered and comparable to programs offered elsewhere (Spencer, 1998).

SPECIAL EVENTS AND SCHOOLS

Our research also reveals that most unions and labour organisations round out their educational programming with a wide range of educational events and supporting activities, which are far from peripheral or “add-on,” because such activities serve to fulfil key objectives. And although individual unions sometimes provide “schools” and conferences, it is central labour bodies, labour councils, federations of labour and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), that provide the majority of these educational opportunities. Unions in Saskatchewan, for example, depend to a great degree on the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL) and the

CLC, Prairie Region for schools and events, including a school specifically for union women and a special conference on training to meet workers' needs for tomorrow.

Educational events of this nature range from modest one or two-day affairs to weeklong functions. An example of an even longer event is the CLC Prairie Region's annual school held over 4 weeks in January and early February, with an average of 12 courses offered each week. The school's reputation has developed to the point that individual unions now compete to sponsor some of their own courses in conjunction with it, as a way of capitalising on the networking opportunities and sense of union solidarity it fosters. Other regions provide similar schools, but it is important to recognise that although the organisers of such schools like to concentrate resources on broader issues courses, developed in response to challenges unions currently face, these schools' course offerings can range from tools, to issues, to labour studies type courses. Small unions, which lack the resources to develop their own courses, tend to find the tools courses these schools offer of great value. The Report documents many such educational events and supporting activities. For example, many unions bring their stewards and officers together for refreshers, updates, and/or one-day (or longer) conferences to discuss specific topics, such as new legislation or government policy.

The most intensive and advanced labour education experience is the 5-week (formerly 8-week) Labour College

of Canada Residential Program, offered annually by the CLC at the University of Ottawa (4 weeks in Ottawa, 1 in the provinces). This school is regarded as the pinnacle of Canadian trade union labour education, and students are selected on a wide range of criteria, such as prior completion of a large number of union and/or labour central courses. Union activity, experiences, and a certain level of competency are also canvassed. A close second, in terms of intensity and level of socio-economic critique, is the Canadian Autoworkers (CAW) and Postal Workers (CUPW) 4-week, residential membership education courses.

LITERATURE AND READINGS

Unions and other organisations offering labour education usually publish course materials that students can continue to use after they leave the course. Firstly, those who enrol in courses typically receive a kit and a handbook -- for example, a steward's manual or a table officers' handbook. These materials are often supplemented with intermittent publications intended to further advance training and to keep stewards, officers and activists abreast of developments and critically aware of social policy issues. Thus, education (learning) is an on-going activity for these lay representatives.

As part of our study, we collected a representative sample of course readings and literature. For example, course materials the CAW provides to attendees of its Intensive Basic Leadership Program include the Ontario Labour Relations Board rules of

procedure; an analysis of Bill 7; a report on human rights in Columbia; and a report on labour unions in Columbia produced by a Canadian trade union delegation. The program is offered to leading CAW members at the union's Family Education Centre in Port Elgin, as part of the CAW Paid Educational Leave initiative.

WHO PARTICIPATES IN LABOUR EDUCATION?

The measure of these courses is their degree of success in preparing members and activists to deal with the concrete realities of their workplace, their union and their community. The proof of steward training, as far as the unions are concerned, is not measured in terms of some external standard of competence, but in terms of a steward's demonstrated ability to handle grievance and arbitration cases.

As a consequence, access to steward training courses is usually restricted to those who have met certain prerequisites, usually related to this type of work or activity; these can be formal or informal. For example, before attending a steward's training course, a union member may be required to attend other preparatory courses. Or entrance to steward training may be restricted to those who have "proven" their commitment to the union in any one of a number of ways, such as regular attendance of meetings, volunteer work, or picket-line duty. The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), for example, provides "prerequisites" for registrants in its Steward Advanced Training Program (SATP) in the following way:

"A potential candidate for SATP is a steward or chief steward who has demonstrated the potential as organiser and problem-solver at the workplace by applying the basic knowledge and skills acquired on BUS [the basic course], and needs to enhance that knowledge and those skills. One who requires the competence and confidence to carry out the practical work of the local and has demonstrated initiatives in making the union a more effective force in the workplace in the areas of representation, motivation, communication and organisation. And finally one who has a proven interest in and commitment to the basic premise of trade unionism, which is summarised as "people helping people."

WHO DELIVERS LABOUR EDUCATION?

During the period spanning the late 1970s and early 1990s, there was a "back to the locals" movement in the delivery of labour education. This stemmed from a desire to replace staff representatives (the traditional deliverers of education courses) with rank-and-file instructors. Coincidentally (and perhaps by way of explanation), these years are generally recognised as a time of retrenchment in the Canadian labour movement, as unions struggled to adapt to changing circumstances imposed by restructuring of the workplace and work process, globalisation, new management techniques, and unfriendly governments. Moreover, an emergent rhetoric supported a style of education delivered by members rather than paid staff, with an emphasis on popular educational techniques, including peer tutoring and student-identified problems. In Canada, the United

Steelworkers have been prime exponents of this style, as the following statement from their *Program Guide* attests:

"All U.S.W.A. courses were designed to be immediately and practically useful to students. To this end each course was developed jointly by the U.S.W.A. Education Department and local union members with knowledge and experience in the specific office or activity covered by the course. The instructors of the courses are also local union members, chosen for their expertise and educational skills."

Just as those who attend steward-training courses must meet certain prerequisites, so must those who teach them. Again, the prerequisites are a mixture of formal and informal requirements. Instructors may have to attend certain union-run educational programs to prepare them for teaching, or may be required to have served as a steward for a number of years. In addition, those who teach or attend steward training courses tend to be those who are acknowledged (either by union leadership or the membership) to possess the skills and desire to achieve success. Such skills include such things as experience in the "line-of-fire," "street smarts," practical wisdom, and political "savvy."

Whether offered by union staff or members, courses are most often taught in a participatory, "hands-on" manner to reinforce their practicality. Students are shown and required to handle the materials and to experience the situations for which a course is training them. They are also presented with case studies of actual situations to improve their understanding of the dos and

don'ts of a specific task. All courses are taught in a student-centred manner, to encourage students to speak frankly, to ask questions and to engage in discussions. This allows students to influence the direction and emphasis of a course.

This movement toward peer instructors has by no means resulted in a simplistic approach to labour education -- that is, labour education is not member-delivered or controlled without reference to broader union goals (see Spencer, 1992a, 1992b, and 1992c for a discussion of some of the problems associated with this misreading of student-centred, Freirian, and populist labour education approaches). Today, in every major union or labour central, education is designated as the responsibility of a staff specialist or full-time officer, who is most often extensively qualified to carry out these duties, by virtue of a combination of formal education and experience. For example, educators of this description were the primary interviewees in this project.

These two tendencies (student-centred, broader union-controlled) have resulted in a variety of labour education delivery styles or protocols that now constitute a continuum. At one end of this continuum is, for example, unions such as the United Steelworkers, who insist on education provided primarily by the rank-and-file; on the other, unions such as CUPE, in which specialists deliver the majority of courses. In between, unions such as the Saskatchewan Government Employees Union deliver courses through an educational officer but rank-and-file

members are responsible for facilitating such things as group discussions. A few other observations may be made here. There is considerable emphasis on instructor training for both staff and the rank-and-file. This emphasis is evident in most large unions. Even where rank-and-file members deliver courses, they do so under the supervision or direction of specialists. The Public Service Alliance of Canada, for example, has a member instructor program which consists of training members who are interested in acting as instructors within their locals....The trained members are asked to organise educational and training activities within their locals, and set up local education committees. They are sometimes asked to use this experience during union conferences or courses offered by Regional Offices. Several unions take this a step further. For example, while the International Association of Machinists deliver first level courses at the regional level, the bulk of their higher level training takes place at a training centre outside the country (Placid Harbor, Maryland, USA), where selected stewards and officers take courses on topics ranging from leadership and collective bargaining issues to strategic planning and train-the-trainer methodology.

OBJECTIVES AND CRITERIA OF SUCCESS

Objectives for the courses and programs were provided by the unions and centrals canvassed in this project. These objectives reflect both the broad mission (constitutional aims) of the union movement and the broad affective domain of learning (e.g., feelings of

union solidarity). A prevailing theme in these objectives is the concrete demands stewards, officers, and other members face in the workplace, their union and the community. Steward training is not only the central pillar of most union educational programs, but also a microcosm of labour education in general. The vast majority of union courses do not attempt or profess to produce a "steward-in-general"; rather they seek to train specific union stewards (although one can argue that stewards-in-general is exactly what some Federation-run schools aim at because they take stewards from many different unions into one classroom). Great care must be taken, therefore, to avoid evaluating stewards' or any other union courses against some external standard of "training-in-general." The measure of union courses that unions use themselves are often far from explicit but are, nonetheless, present in all cases. Written statements of intent, for instance, occur in a variety of documents and sources (e.g., constitutions, policy papers, resolutions, etc.). For example, the Education Policy of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees specifies how a union steward trained in handling grievances is expected to perform his or her roles within the unionised work environment. Where the measures cannot be found in written form, they can be adduced through interviews and observation of specific educational experiences.

REFLECTIONS ON LABOUR EDUCATION AND PLAR

Labour education in Canada prepares members and activists to better

participate in union and community affairs. It is neither the desire nor intent of the union movement to provide its members with formal qualifications or vocational skills when undertaking labour education courses. (Of course, some unions are directly involved in vocational training, outside or alongside of the unions' labour education program). Nonetheless great numbers of union members are learning a variety of skills and being introduced to knowledge that is in many cases transferable to the formal education system. It is our view that much labour education and the learning associated with union activity is deserving of recognition within the formal system. The length and scope of this report precludes the possibility of locating Canadian developments in an international setting (see Spencer, 1998; 2002 for that discussion). It is worth noting, however, that a number of Canadian initiatives are contributing to a new international definition of labour education. The Canadian use of union members as instructors is being copied by US unions; the CAW/CUPW PEL programs provide a new model approach to membership education; and CUPE's SoliNet experiments with on-line learning (Taylor, 1996) provides another novel approach to labour education. Canadian labour education seems ready and waiting to face the challenges presented by the turn of the century. (For a comprehensive account of the development of Canadian labour education in the last century see Taylor, 2001).

NOTE

This article is based on the introduction to Winston Gereluk's *Labour Education in Canada Today* (for a copy of the report and Appendix of tables see http://www.athabascau.ca/html/depts/workcomm/PLAR_Report.pdf and http://www.athabascau.ca/html/depts/workcomm/PLAR_Appendix.pdf). The report discusses aspects of the current provision of Canadian labour education and relates that provision to an argument for granting prior learning assessment and recognition of labour education.

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<http://www.thompsonbooks.com>. For images, video and other materials related to the history of labour education in Canada see <http://unionlearning.athabascau.ca/>).

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