INTRODUCTION

Workplace education - the provision of literacy, English language and communication skills training to workers on the job, is alive and well and growing rapidly in Australia as industry takes on the challenges of change. In the United States and Canada, workplace education is also emerging from the relative obscurity and marginal status of the last two decades - a shared feature of all such programs. In the 1990s, practitioners of workplace education who have been working in relative isolation from each other are becoming part of an international network that is strengthening the professional and political base of this vital field of education.

In this article a summary and comparison of the scope of activity, the range of approaches and the political status of worker education in the United States and Australia, with some reference to Canadian programs is provided.

The range, scope and tremendous diversity of North American workplace education provision and practice would require a vast research effort to adequately describe oranalyse. However, from recent research and observation, it can be argued, that although the majority of US and Canadian programs of workplace-based literacy and English-as-a-second or other-language (ESOL) training have been plagued by a lack of consistent funding and support, the situation is changing for the better. In most respects, the same can be said for Australia.

The major differences between the Australian and the North American programs are that the core Australian program, the English in the Workplace Program of the national Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), has been in place for 18 years, but on a much smaller scale proportionally than the North American activity. This continuity is a major advantage in expanding provision.

THE COMPARISON

A common complaint across North America is that many programs are mounted in response to local demand, driven by dedicated teachers with varying degrees of employer, government and union support, only to cease after a couple of years due to lack of continuing grants. Teachers with some expertise in the field find employment elsewhere and are unavailable for future projects, which must then be mounted 'from scratch', with all the same inefficiencies characteristic of 'pilot' programs.
In Australia, and in certain Canadian and British programs, there are teachers and coordinators with ten or more years’ experience still operating in the workplace. It is still difficult to find enough industry-specific literacy or ESOL teachers to meet the growing demand but at least there exists a strong core of transferable expertise. With the establishment in Australia of several Workplace Basic Education Programs over the last six or seven years, this core has continued to grow.

Within the Pacific region, numerous commentators in the fields of education, government and industry have remarked on the difficulty of finding any academic staff with an understanding of the industrial context. This gap between business and education is a perennial theme not restricted to the US: however there appear to be fewer mechanisms - such as apprentice training and TAFE - through which teachers can work in, and with industry.

THE SCOPE OF WORKPLACE EDUCATION

With the continuing downturn in the competitiveness and viability of many North American industries, and changes in the labour market not unlike those in Australia, there is a growing recognition of the need for more, and most importantly, better workplace basic education. This recognition is in many cases assisted by state and federal legislation together with strong advocacy by business and unions.

As a recent California senate bill declared:

There is a critical need in California for greater investment in the literacy skills development of our underserved youth and adult human resources.... The current adult education system does not include significant involvement in business and industry in workforce education...yet the workplace is where most of those in need are found. [Calif. Senate Bill No.646, March 5,1991].

The greater investment called for will be additional to the estimated US $2.5 billion already being spent on basic skills in the US workforce. A 1989 survey showed that over 11% of all organisations and over 33% of all large corporations offered ‘remedial training’ and that a third more were willing to do so in the near future. Though less than 10% of companies with fewer than 500 workers provided such training, an average of 22% of all organisations employing more than 500 people did. (Lee 1989). By any measure, this vastly exceeds the scope of the current Australian workplace literacy provision.

An estimate based on English in the Workplace Program statistics for 1990 (see Table 1 below) and knowledge of Workplace Basic Education Programs and other such projects across Australia, indicates that fewer than 300 public and private sector organisations are involved in such provision - a fraction of a percent of the total. Around 7,000 Australian workers attended ESOL or literacy/numeracy courses at work last year - approximately .1% of the workforce, or, being generous, .7% of the estimated million workers lacking adequate language or literacy skills (Wickert 1989). Approximately ten million
dollars (four million dollars of public money, six million by employers) was spent on these programs in 1990.

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(Source: Dept. Immigration, Loc. Govt & Ethnic Affairs)

TABLE 1
ENGLISH IN THE WORKPLACE - 1990 STATISTICS

Virtually all the Australian provision is through TAFE, the AMEP or other government agencies or institutions, with only a handful of small projects involving only company trainers. In the US 42% of training classed as workplace basic education is provided by in-house trainers, 21% by private providers and 37% by public agencies. (Lee 1989)

Approximately 25 million US adults, around ten percent of the total population, are estimated to lack literacy skills adequate to their employment and personal needs. According to the Wickert survey (Wickert 1989), one in seven, or 13% of the Australian adult population have similar literacy problems. A Californian survey reported that 56% of those requiring literacy training were from English speaking backgrounds. In Australia, the figure is around 60%.

While the results of these surveys are contentious in some respects, namely the size and composition of the samples and the definitions of functional literacy, there is no denial of the impact of the problem. A 13,000-sample survey is under way in the US but the results will hold no surprises to those active in the literacy field. The statistics will not change the direction of the work to be undertaken.

THE RANGE OF WORKPLACE EDUCATION APPROACHES

The relative enormity of North American activity and the autonomy with which states, companies and institutions operate has led to the creation of a kaleidoscopic array of approaches. Without the regulation of over-arching public agencies like TAFE or the AMEP, where well established links exist and which adhere to similar standards and approaches, organisations and
individuals are free to address basic education in any way they can or wish to. While fostering some excellent developments, this environment according to US commentators is also responsible for some unsatisfactory programs and practices.

Most of the workplace education advocates or authorities contacted stated that over 80% of all such training takes place outside normal worktime, with some of the biggest corporations most likely to adopt this approach. In Australia, the providers have consistently worked towards conducting all courses in work or paid time. In 1990, the national average was 83% in work or paid time. No courses were conducted in less than 50% work time, many of these being higher order writing or communications courses.

There are strong educational and political arguments for conducting worker education on site and in work time, particularly at the entry levels. These arguments centre on access to training, the legitimacy and integration of the training, the discriminatory effects of after-hours courses on women and shift workers, the fostering of positive attitudes to learning and so on. Winning conducive conditions for worker education often depends on strong union involvement and a clear understanding by management of the value and necessity of the program.

In one Californian company the human resources manager, faced with a decreasingly literate and numerate labour pool, recognised the need to tackle the problem but was unwilling to provide resources for training. The local library was contacted, libraries being common providers of literacy assistance in the US, and arranged for volunteer tutors after hours. The company provides the 'handbooks' and has made a donation to the library.

By contrast, another company located close to the preceding approached employee literacy and English language needs systematically and in consultation with the local community college's vocational education division. Together they gained a US $240,000 grant as a federal National Workplace Literacy Demonstration Project, with the company allocating another half a million dollars in work release, facilities and in-house coordination. The program runs in worktime for Hispanic, Asian and, recently, Anglo workers. It is supported by the training manager and staffed from the college by a coordinator, ESOL and literacy lecturers, part-time learning laboratory specialists, a part-time counsellor and a clerk typist. A component of the grant is allocated to conduct a literacy audit of manufacturing jobs. Other objectives identified include the production of an informational/motivational video and the development of specific computer-assisted learning materials. (This on a budget that, for one company, exceeds the combined EWP budgets of Queensland, Tasmania and the Northern Territory).

Notwithstanding the existence of many projects like this, a considerable number of programs are staffed by volunteers because companies seeking assistance will settle for the cheapest, quickest 'fix', without any consideration of principles of educational soundness.
By way of another example, another company approached the Demonstration Project in the community college for assistance in workplace literary provision. They had identified the need for literacy within the company by the simple tactic of asking supervisors to confront 'suspected illiterates' with a job instruction sheet which they were ordered to read aloud there and then. Seventy employees were thus exposed and then offered literacy classes after work. Only the younger men expressed interest. The company wanted advice on providing a compulsory program for the remainder. The human resources manager was unaware of the need to take into account such concepts as adult learning styles, a needs analysis phase, of job-specific materials and individualised curriculum development. On learning that the college's fee was around $100 per hour without federal funding the manager was aghast: the library volunteers had asked for $40 a day - for materials.

California Literacy, a volunteer agency affiliated with the national Laubach Literacy Action Inc. has been involved in workplace literacy but takes a very strong view that workplace programs should not be run by volunteers. They recognise that workers have different views of their needs which are not necessarily aligned with those of employers, unions or government, and that the majority of workplace programs in the US provide little more than basic skills for current duties. The concept of participatory, collaborative education is not widely understood or accepted.

A successful program in Vancouver, British Columbia, does operate from such a concept. Their approach is based on research into British, Australian, US and other Canadian programs but is strongly tied to local industrial and community needs and responses. They have incorporated the support or planning group concept used widely in Australia, the use of authentic materials, teacher training and the direct involvement of company staff in classroom delivery. The unit will not provide language or literacy training without a component of management training which is designed to address the issues of organisational as opposed to individual communication problems. In Ontario, where English in the Workplace Programs have been in existence since the 1970s, a broad network of Multicultural Workplace Programs across the province provide both literacy and TESOL training.

Another approach and adopted by a Los Angeles area private, non-profit institution providing continuing education for manufacturing managers and staff has been successful in obtaining free office and classroom accommodation from local companies and in establishing a board of directors from industry, education, the business community and local government. It was through the development of customer contact and report writing courses for local companies that the literacy barriers were revealed, leading the institution to provide basic skills training.

A scan of the available literature reveals scores of other workplace education programs across the continent. From the program run for cafeteria workers in Washington DC by the Food & Beverage Workers Local #32 and Employers Benefits Fund to the Rural Adventures in Workplace Literacy project in Blanding, Utah, it is obvious that it would be impossible to categorise or even
quantify all of the activity.

In spite of the growth of effort, there is still widespread dissatisfaction with the state of workplace education among American adult basic educators across all specialties. While literacy and language instruction is slowly turning to a truly contextual, learner-centred approach, the majority of industrial customers retain the traditional views of the 3 Rs and expect teaching methods to mirror their own childhood experiences. More often than not, it appears that the curriculum development process bypasses the worker.

The Australian programs of the late '70s and early '80s learned the hard way how damaging such oversights can be. Unfortunately, as more organisations become involved, it is obvious that here, as in North America, the establishment of programs capable of reaching significant numbers of workers will require a massive campaign to educate the decision-makers. As Paul Jurmo of the Business Council for Effective Literacy, a New York-based advocacy group and clearinghouse, wrote:

On the surface, this growth in interest and activity seems like a good thing. It seems that key players with an interest in a well-educated workforce have now become aware, done some planning, and devoted some resources to begin tackling the employee basic skills problem. On closer examination, however, it becomes clear that we as a field shouldn’t be too satisfied with where we stand today, because the quality of existing programs and the level of commitment to quality programs are not what they should be.

I would argue that, if we - as educators, employers, unions or public policy makers - really want to develop effective employee basic skills efforts in the United States, some hard questions must be dealt with and a good deal more groundwork must be done before we go much further. With careful preparations, we in the US - and those concerned with workplace literacy in Canada and other countries - can learn from the US experience and avoid the mistakes of all too many workplace efforts to date. (Jurmo 1990)

These same comments could apply, with only slightly less emphasis, to the weaker aspects of the Australian efforts - particularly the ludicrously small scope and the limited real support for worker education. Fortunately, recent policy developments at national and state levels here and in the US appear to be addressing the issues in greater depth.

WORKPLACE EDUCATION ADVOCACY AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT

In support of workplace education there exists a complex array of advocates, networks, information systems, research projects and political bodies. The service providers, as in other countries, are probably the most numerous and active advocates, whether through marketing and promotion efforts or by the more durable strategy of educating the industrial community by example and involvement.
The above-mentioned Business Council for Effective Literacy, a national foundation, sees itself as 'a catalyst between the business and literacy communities and works to promote good practice and public policy'. A major concern of the BCEL is that traditional literacy approaches are not suitable for workplaces. The Council promotes participatory and contextualised approaches that go beyond limited concepts of worker and organisational needs.

California Literacy, Inc. advocates empowerment for disadvantaged groups and the development of political force to change mainstream attitudes to minorities. In the workplace, these attitudes take the shape of 'deficiency model' approaches to workers. They see dangers in the concept of literacy testing of workers and emphasise the social rights of workers over issues of skills training or productivity.

State government policy in this area is very much driven by the productivity angle. The Massachusetts Workforce Literacy Plan, developed by government, employer, union, community group, welfare and education representatives is a long-range approach linking literacy to labour markets.

In California, with a population of nearly 30 million, there exist an estimated four million undereducated (a term preferred to 'functionally illiterate') adults, two thirds of whom are in the workforce. The process of planning for their education needs began in early 1989 with the formation of the California Workforce Literacy Task Force. Their report, *California's workforce for the year 2000 - improving productivity by expanding opportunities for the education and training of underserved youth and adults* (November 1990), began by stating: 'Productivity at work is the engine for economic growth, and literacy is the fuel that drives that engine'.

As a result of that report, several state senate bills were passed in March 1991. The most significant established a state tripartite commission charged with the task of developing a master plan that will enable planning and funding for workforce education, formal teacher training and action research. Another bill, the Employee Literacy Education Assistance Act, requires employers of more than 25 workers to 'reasonably accommodate and assist' workers with literacy training needs to find assistance, either by referring them to providers or by inviting providers to the workplace. It does not oblige them to provide time off for attendance. A third bill establishes a tripartite task force to develop and conduct two distance learning projects for the workforce.

At the national level, the Literacy for All Americans Act was passed in October 1990. It created an independent national centre and strategic grants for workplace literacy among other programs for communities, families and volunteers. Nearly $400 million has been allocated to these programs. A further bill if enacted would provide tax incentives for employers whose staff provide volunteer teaching to an education program. The Science and Technology Act 1989 will improve learning technology for worker literacy and technical skills training.

The trade union movement has operated numerous basic education projects
for several years. In 1986 the president of the peak council, the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor & Congress of Industrial Organisations) announced that unions would be negotiating for learning programs in work time and called for 'an adult education program on a scale and of a design never tried before'. Unions are now represented on most worker education planning and policy bodies.

All of these advocacy and policy developments are reflected to a greater or lesser extent in Australia. The trade union movement in general strongly advocates workplace education. As industry and award restructuring efforts proceed, some of the more powerful individual unions have recognised the critical importance of literacy and numeracy to worker career paths. State by state, workplace education policies have been developing along similar lines since the late '80s. Entering the '90s, the momentum for broad-based change is increasing.

CONCLUSIONS

Further concentrated effort is needed wherever significant numbers of workers lack the communication skills required for future jobs and changing industries. Australian, Canadian, US, New Zealand, British and other European Community programs are moving towards similar or identical goals.

North American workplace provision far outstrips Australian programs in terms of range, scope and numbers served. However, the problems of size and diversity that are present in a population fifteen or sixteen times that of Australia's complicate the North American effort. By contrast, the small Australian workplace education field has a history of trial and error which has led to successful models of program delivery supported by consistent funding and professional development. While there appear to be serious problems with the conditions and systems of much of the North American service delivery - problems that the Australian system has been able to deal with more successfully - there are many good programs and policies from which to learn.

The North American and Australian societies are at a critical point in the development of workforce training. Practitioners and stakeholders on both sides of the Pacific are intent on getting it right for the 1990s and beyond. Given Australia's relatively small population, our relatively consistent tertiary education system and our existing forums for debate and policy formation, our prospects for devising and implementing an effective and coherent national workplace education effort are excellent.

The stakeholders in Australia, the US and Canada are beginning to understand the nature of the problems facing the workforce and to recognise the absolute need for collaborative and participative approaches to the solutions. As Paul Jurmo wrote:

Our challenge is to make sure that the basic ingredients of vision, cooperation, qualified personnel and material resources are in place before we go much further with literacy efforts which should be
aiming at creating not only a more productive workforce but a more just and democratic society as well. (Jurmo 1990)

These views are reflected across the entire spectrum of workplace educators, advocates, business leaders and worker representatives here and abroad. As we move to expand and integrate worker education, a valuable component of all future work will be the consultation and cooperation of the widest possible array of stakeholders. The North American connection is an essential part of this process.

REFERENCES


