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New Scholars

[RE]CONSIDERING THE WORKPLACE: TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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ABSTRACT

Corporate contexts are often criticised for their motives regarding the provision of employee learning opportunities. However, emancipatory education need not be in conflict with capitalism. This article explores critical literacy possibilities that synergistically serve employees and support organisational growth. Drawing from literature on adult education and critical literacy, the intent of this article is to make explicit the potential of workplace contexts to promote critical education practices that are attentive to issues of social justice.

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

As evidenced by the increasing number of adult and workplace education programs in Canada, there is a growing interest in literacy and its influence in promoting success for adults. I became aware of this trend when I was approached by a large corporation that, although financially successful, was struggling to retain engaged employees. This problem was particularly evident among frontline workers, many of whom had lower than desired literacy levels and, because of their rotating shift work, no way to pursue academic upgrading. The company sought the support of the provincial Department of Education in the form of an at-arm's-length organisational needs assessment (ONA). The findings of the ONA indicated that employees were seeking continuous learning opportunities that would allow them increased mobility and, simultaneously, demonstrate the

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company's commitment to employee development. In response to these findings, the organisation decided to offer an on-site workplace literacy programme with the aim of providing learning opportunities as a way to improve employee engagement.

With no previous experience of offering learning and development, the company advertised for a candidate with both the theoretical knowledge and the practical experience needed to conceptualise, develop, and lead the workplace initiative. As the successful candidate, I was excited about the possibilities of establishing an on-site learning centre, but I recognised the challenges involved in developing an inclusive and liberating programme inside an established hierarchy marked by a notable lack of collegiality among the various strata.

I spent the first two weeks on site meeting individually with potential learners, hearing stories of previous schooling experiences that had left people feeling marginalised and defeated. These stories invariably included expressions of fear of failure about reentering systems of schooling. This learned fatalism with regard to education is often the result of literacy practices that alienate and silence students belonging to nondominant groups (for example, people coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and members of minority cultures). As their teacher, I did not want to reproduce the practices that contributed to this unhappy relationship with learning. Seeking what Twiname (2008: 152) called "compatible relationships between stakeholder groups . . . for the long term financial [and] social . . . success" of both employees and the corporation, I wondered how the Learning Centre that I was developing might benefit both individuals and the organisation. As this opportunity coincided with my graduate research in adult education, it had the additional benefit of providing a context in which I could interrogate how theory and practice inform each other.

IN THEORY

Several scholars maintain that workplace literacy programmes are most successful when they address "actual problems faced by workers [while being] sensitive to the changing business environment" (Corus & Ozanne, 2011: 185). Before addressing the problems, though, I assume we must understand the people. This assumption led me to explore the literature on adult education with respect to literacy practices.

Adult Learners and Literacy

Teaching adults effectively required me to be attentive to the unique ways in which adults learn. Early in my theoretical inquiries, I uncovered the seminal work of Knowles (1970, 1980) wherein he discussed six principles of adult learning. This framework informed the early development of our learning centre.

First, *adults are autonomous and self directed*. The adult learners with whom I was working had a wealth of life experience. In an effort to honour them and engage them, I fostered a space where they were encouraged to express their views and direct their own learning. This practice took form as I met with each individual and we coauthored a learning plan based on his or her baseline and goals. The learning objectives and classroom schedule were developed to suit each person's requirements.

Second, *adults have life experiences and knowledge that must be honoured and incorporated into their learning*. Exalting the centrality of personal meaningfulness, we were consciously committed to connecting work, family, and lived experience to each learner's new endeavours so that his/her studies would be meaningful. This commitment meant that reading and writing were practiced with texts chosen by students and guided by their interests and goals.

Third, *adults are goal oriented*. Every one of the learners reentered the classroom with a particular goal in mind. We named that goal during our first meeting and collaboratively developed a plan that would move us toward successful attainment of the goal.

Fourth, *adults are relevancy oriented.* Each learner was taking time away from work and home to engage with learning, so it was essential that her/his studies had tangible benefits. As a result, reading and writing were often practiced through addressing real-life requirements like completing forms, writing project reports, and undertaking critical readings of organisational communications.

Fifth, *adults are practical*. The adults with whom I was learning tended to focus on lessons that had the most potential to be useful and meaningful in their day-to-day experiences. Thus, we were mindful of ways to merge theory with its application. This merger not only gave learning value; it also encouraged the learners to examine theory for relevance and even generate new theory from their practical experiences. This was evidenced in conversations about and written responses to the multimodal presentation of current affairs and historical events.

Finally, *adult learners, in particular, need to be shown respect.* Their wealth of lived experience and the daily demands of work, family, and community entitle adult learners to respect in the classroom. Through respect, we were able to establish a learning environment founded on the principles of equality, equitability, and accessibility.

Thinking through these principles helped me to understand and name the values that guided us in the Learning Centre, but they did not specifically speak to literacy practices. As I continued my reading, I returned to Willinsky's (1990) advocacy for "new literacy."

New Literacy

Old literacy, Willinsky said, reinforced the social stratification established by the ruling class in society. New Literacy, though, educated people to expose and

overcome systems of oppression by conceptualising literacy as "a social process that connects community, school, history, and biography" (Willinsky, 1990: x). Willinsky (1990: 30) argued that the moral, psychological, and social worth of literacy begins with students as sources of experience and extends to providing them with the tools and space "to actively read and write their own stories." By shifting control over text and meaning from teacher to student, this new literacy encouraged learners to question their assumptions and biases—to rethink the world and their places in it.

Encouraging students to become meaning makers created spaces where they could actively pursue literacy as a way to change their current realities. Supporting this claim, Willinsky (1990: 84) cited the work of Elasser and John-Steiner (1987), who suggested that "when people are convinced they can shape their social reality and that they are no longer isolated and powerless, they begin to dialogue with a larger world." These conversations positioned literacy as a way for people to discover, confront, and change the social construction of self and its place within society. This agenda led me to interrogate literacy from a critical perspective.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is many things to many people. To historians, it represents an attitude toward the past. To activists, it is a vehicle for social change. To philosophers, it signifies oppressed classes seeking to liberate themselves from subjugated perspectives. To cultural anthropologists, it symbolizes hope for non-dominant groups to resist loss of cultural identity to dominant groups.

As a theoretical construct, critical literacy assumes schools are institutions that perpetuate the status quo through the presentation of texts conceived by the ruling class to promote its continued social and political dominance. As an instructional approach, critical literacy promotes the deconstruction of texts with the aim of challenging repressive practices. In the interest of bridging theory and practice, I draw on two particular articulations, both of which make explicit theoretical and practical implications: Luke (2000: 454) describes critical literacy as both a "theoretical and practical attitude"; and Morgan and Wyatt-Smith (2000: 124) define critical literacy as "overtly a theory for practice." Embracing critical literacy, then, as a pedagogical approach to education, I understand it as a way to engage in teaching and learning that is informed equally by theoretical origins and practical possibilities. Mindful of this dual focus, critical literacy aims first to create in students an awareness of social injustice and then to help them develop critical thinking skills that will enable them to see through subversiveness and challenge systems that continue to limit socially just education.

Critical literacy was popularized by Paulo Freire as *letramento*, which means reading critically being mindful of the social and political contexts implicit in that reading. Freire (1972) first discussed critical literacy in the context of his work in

Brazil. He argued that "education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression" (Freire, 1972: 65). He contrasts this with "liberating education," which "consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information" (Freire, 1972: 67). He says that, in regarding each other as independent, abstract, complex, and conscious individuals, persons "develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world" (Freire, 1972: 71).

Several scholars maintain that the key component of critical literacy initiatives resides in moving beyond functional skill-based competence to include the ability to engage in critical discussions about the hidden curriculum (Corus & Ozanne, 2011; Freire, 1972, 1976; Gee, 2004; Giroux, 2005; Kincheloe, 2008; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011; Luke, 2012; Luke & Freebody, 1997; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Shor, 1992, 1999; Twiname, 2008). In essence, this commitment resides in resisting the blind consumption of text through consciousness of context, worldview, agenda, discourse, and intertextuality.

Context is more than demographics. Although demographical characteristics are part of it, context also refers to a broad spectrum of influences including social, cultural, historical, and political forces. Not only informed by the creator of the text, context is also affected by the readers. Context, therefore, is transient and requires continuous consciousness in our relationship with texts as we pursue critical literacy.

Worldview refers to the lens through which we see the world and our places in it. This lens might be economic, political, moral, religious, social, or a composite of many ideologies. Because texts have both readers and writers, worldview involves a negotiated relationship between the discursive backgrounds of many people.

Agenda refers to intent. The authors of texts generally present material with a particular goal in mind. This intentionality often determines what information is included and what is omitted. At one end of the spectrum, intent might represent the provision of material as a catalyst to provoke individual thought. At the other end of the spectrum, the intent might be the deliberate coercion of those who come in contact with the texts. Similarly, those who engage with texts do so for a myriad of reasons. The reasons for engaging with texts also inform how they are read.

Discourse refers to the codified totality enveloping our communication. Informed by each individual's lived experience, discourse is born of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, social class, spiritual beliefs, age, political exposure, and education. Just as persons with similar experiences or ideologies may share common discourses, those who do not have like backgrounds are often excluded from these discourses. The aim of critical literacy is to interrogate the limitations of dominant discourse while making room for counter discourse. The goal is not to destroy, but to unpack with the intent of understanding more fully those who have been silenced and then create spaces for more socially just education.

A term first coined by Kristeva in the mid-1960s, *intertextuality* refers to the intermingling of understandings gleaned from texts to reflect the inclusion of information offered by subsequent texts or even subsequent readings of the same texts. That is to say that intertextuality is the notion that texts are not interpreted for their own contents alone but are informed by all other texts to which both the author and the reader have been exposed. Critical literacy requires that we should be attentive to the intertextual influences that shape both the creation and the interpretation of texts.

Critical literacy, then, requires educators to teach students how to read and write in relation to the awakening of consciousness. It challenges what is positioned as legitimate knowledge and encourages conversation between groups who historically have had power and those who wish to alter these relations of power (Apple, 2004; Corus & Ozanne, 2011; Luke, 2012). Critical literacy asks us to understand literacy as a social process that has the capacity to reduce the disenfranchisement of society's non-ruling groups.

Guided by the possibilities of critical literacy, the Learning Centre was conceptualised as a place not of finding out but of "finding meaningfulness . . . in students' experience" (Willinsky, 1990: 68). Disavowing mechanistic approaches that positioned literacy as either top-down or bottom-up, our approach focused not on model building but on meaning making (Corus & Ozanne, 2011; Gee, 2004; Giroux, 2005; Greene, 1988, 2000; Luke, 2012; Willinsky, 1990).

Scholarly discourse refers to this practice of meaning making as merging the personal and the public elements of knowledge. At the Learning Centre, students were encouraged to take ownership of their education and negotiate understandings in relation to their lived experiences. Shor (1999: 2) discusses this kind of critical literacy—"words rethinking worlds, self dissenting in society—as connecting the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical, for rethinking our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity."

IN PRACTICE

Thus motivated, the Learning Centre cut its teeth on critical initiatives. The first time this pedagogical ideal manifested itself in practice was toward the end of the pilot phase of the workplace learning programme. Originally approved on a 12-week trial basis, the Learning Centre had an uncertain future, and many learners, just settling into their studies, expressed uneasiness about the potential end of school. I encouraged them to write letters to management expressing their concerns. Several critical results were born of this correspondence: the employee-participants improved their written literacy skills in such a way that they adeptly produced persuasive business correspondence; they were exposed for the first time to the agency born of voicing their needs and becoming their own collective advocacy group; and, as the program was consequently extended by eight months,

they discovered the power of education to effect change. Close on the heels of this win, the employee-participants decided that they would like to know more fully the operations of the corporation so that they would be more knowledgeable about advancement opportunities. Once again, they practiced their writing skills in letters to management. As a result of these requests, they were granted guided tours of the plants, which outlined the potential for growth and promotion. I worked to make their learning meaningful in other areas as well. The employee-participants began to discover geometry in the operation of cranes, physics in mechanical work, and integers through temperature and personal banking. With each new discovery, our engagement with learning deepened.

The Learning Centre was developed to represent opportunity and responsiveness, two qualities that I assumed were essential to meaningful education. Originally established to assist in the attainment of General Educational Development (GED) certificates, the centre expanded its course offerings to include adult basic education, secondary credits in English and mathematics, postsecondary refresher courses, and computer training. During my four-year tenure at the centre, more than 200 learners successfully achieved their goals across more than 18 programmes.

Dedicated to creating a sustainable space where learners could engage with their studies with the intent of improving their opportunities, we fostered practices that protected the integrity of critical-emancipatory adult education. Among these practices were *learning beyond training*, *nonreporting*, and *cost sharing*.

Learning beyond training defined learning as employee centred, personally motivated, and optional. This was in direct contrast to compliance, operational, and required training. While the former is entirely at the discretion of the employee, the latter is mandated by the employer.

Nonreporting protected the confidentiality of the learning plans of each employee-participant. The level of education attained, both when individuals first enrolled and when they competed their studies, was not disclosed to the organisation. Disclosure was entirely at the discretion of the learner. The only reporting mechanism to the organisation involved the cost-share initiative.

Cost sharing was based on the assumption that learning would benefit both the individual and the organisation and, for that reason alone, ought to be cost-shared. As a result, the organisation paid for a full-time teacher and classroom resources as well as for one half of the time each employee-participant spent in formal learning. That is, for every two hours that employees attended school, they were compensated by receiving one hour's regular wage.

The three practices reviewed above resisted what Giroux and Freire (1987) implicated in social reproduction. Reproduction theory posits that institutions such as schools and workplaces reproduce the "class-specific dimensions of inequality" (Giroux & Freire, 1987: ix). Drawing from the work of Weiler (1987), Giroux and Freire view power as "both the medium and the expression of wider structural relations and social forms that position subjects within the ideological matrixes of

constraint and possibility" (Giroux & Freire, 1987: ix). In Weiler's view, centres of learning are neither exclusively dominating nor exclusively liberating. Rather, because the domination and resistance mutually inform each other, schooling has the potential to be emancipatory. Through the reimagination of schooling practices, learning can provide the tools and space for students to overcome oppression. Weiler cites Freire's work in Brazil to stress the importance of understanding that both teachers and students are agents in reconceptualising the role of learning in fostering social justice. Influenced by this same commitment, the students and I collaboratively identified characteristics that ought to guide teaching and learning for critical consciousness.

Learning Ought To Be Voluntary

It is important that adult learners opt into critical literacy opportunities for reasons of their own choosing, be those reasons personal or professional. Learning should not be the result of coercion or under the threat of penalty. Although researchers as early as Lindeman (1926) argued that learning connected to professional advancement is a type of coercion, Knowles (1986) argued in favour of learning connected to professional advancement as long as it was not mandatory. Indeed, to preclude learning for professional advancement denies the relevancy orientation of many adults. In our particular learning centre, students opted into the program without recommendation or coercion. Some learners enrolled with the aim of achieving very particular outcomes, while others simply enjoyed the opportunity to pursue intellectual and practical growth.

Learning Ought To Be Accessible

Every effort must be made to ensure that learning occurs in a safe, convenient space and does not result in economic hardship. The Learning Centre was conveniently located on site in a bright, fully equipped classroom away from the hum of production. The programme was entirely employer funded, and employee-participants were compensated in one of two ways if they opted to attend: they were either paid half of their regular hourly wage to attend off shift, or they were permitted one two-hour learning period twice weekly during their paid shifts.

Learning Ought To Respect Student Confidentiality

Confidentiality is an inherent right of learners in voluntary, specifically critical, literacy programs. While there are instances where reporting is necessary (for example, compliance-based training and regulatory credentialing), these instances should not be part of critical literacy programs. Learners have the right to pursue critical literacy free from fear of reprisal, judgment, and penalty. The right to share or to protect the nature and progress of her/his learning must reside with the learner.

The right to confidentiality was guarded fiercely in the Learning Centre. All student records were kept under lock and key. Students were welcome to their files at any time, but no other learner, employee, staff, or management could gain access to these records. Similarly, no learner reports, progress or otherwise, were forwarded to the corporation. The only two practices that approached reporting were the use of coded attendance reports to facilitate compensation and, with the learner's permission, the circulation of congratulatory e-mail messages upon successful program completion.

Learning Ought To Be Student-Generative

Teaching for critical consciousness requires that students collaboratively inform their learning. Assuming the student is voluntarily engaging in learning for personal or professional fulfillment, teachers ought to foster spaces uniquely devoted to helping learners realise their goals. Except in situations where learners voluntarily pursue a program that has, by necessity and regulation, predetermined learning objectives, learning goals ought to be student directed and teacher facilitated.

In our particular learning centre, students coauthored their individualized learning plans, which articulated both short-term and long-term goals.

Learning Ought To Reflect Student-Informed Assessment

Except in circumstances where learners of their own volition pursue a program that, for the purposes of credentialing, requires standardised testing, teaching adults for critical consciousness ought to redefine the teacher-student roles with regard to assessment.

Giroux (2005), Shor (1999), and Willinsky (1990) remind us that, in the average classroom, the student is graded based on her/his ability to absorb what the teacher defines as legitimate knowledge. Teaching for critical consciousness shifts the responsibility away from the teacher and requires the student to make meaningful the material that is being studied.

The Learning Centre was dedicated to helping students demonstrate the attainment of their goals in personally meaningful ways. When their goals required a regulated credential (for example, a GED certificate), the students informed the learning plans that prepared them for standardized tests. When their goals required no such credential (for example, adult basic education or professional writing), their learning outcomes were deliberately unique.

Learning Ought To Witness a Commitment to Social Justice

Because so many adult learners, particularly in workplace literacy programs, previously disengaged from formal learning due to feelings of marginalisation, it is essential that critical literacy programmes demonstrate a commitment to social

justice. As such, The Learning Centre purposefully worked at breaking down barriers and creating situations that challenged the established hierarchy. This was most evident in the consideration of hats.

Of Hats and Radical Acts

I discovered very early in my tenure that I had entered a world of hats. Frontline employees were White Hats, which suggested low rank, low pay level, and lack of power. Maintenance personnel were Green Hats and were widely envied because they were not among the hated Blue Hats or the disempowered white ones. Blue Hats were resented by all who were not defined by them—they were the supervisors who had the appearance of power to those below them and only obligations to those above them. Finally, No Hats were management and generally regarded with disdain by all who were Hats. The hats (or lack thereof) were evident on the floor, in the yard, and at lunch. They determined who sat with whom on breaks and even where people parked their vehicles. Declaring the Learning Centre a *Hat-Free Zone* was an important step in making it a place of equality.

I recall vividly the day it all began to change: a senior manager who had been in his role for more than 30 years joined the Learning Centre. We had already met privately to establish a baseline and to build his learning plan, but the other learners did not know that a manager was about to join them. The first day he arrived in the classroom, the atmosphere grew thick with tension. Two of his employees already seated at a table looked at me with a combination of suspicion and fear. I offered them a quick glance of reassurance as I welcomed their manager.

He sensed the tension and handled it graciously. He knew I would not disclose why he was at the Learning Centre, so he simply asked if there was any room at the table for a man with only Grade 8 education. As looks of surprise replaced looks of suspicion, the barriers weakened. Within a week, the manager asked one of his employees for help in learning fractions. A month later, they were poking fun at each other as the manager struggled to make sense of algebra. Overhearing the conversation, I suggested that they think of their chemical formulas as algebra and work backward to see how unknown variables were useful. Their learning became both collaborative and relevant as the barriers fell away. Six weeks after that first manager walked through the door, two more followed. In a world so strictly governed by rank, this egalitarianism was radical.

TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Teaching and learning for critical consciousness is uniquely challenging within systems designed to perpetuate the status quo. Although corporate capitalism is justly criticised for its tendencies toward economic rationalism, its desire to remain competitive provides surprising possibilities for critical-emancipatory

literacy practices. Not bound by formal systems of schooling and the trappings of liberal arts assumptions that alienate many learners, workplace settings provide expansive possibilities for people to read and write for critical consciousness. Although multiple motivations lead learners to engage with the critical literacy program, their stories are powerful attestations to the possibilities of workplaces to promote equitable opportunities for learning and, by extension, career advancement.

This is Mike's story:

> I had already gone back to school twice and ended up quitting both times. I really wanted my Grade 12, but I just couldn't seem to make it work. It was the same old story—walk in, scared senseless, sit down in an overcrowded room with 20 or 30 others and one teacher: one time books were handed out; the other time, we were plopped in front of a computer screen. Both times, though, it was sink or swim. Both times, I knew I was going to fail so I saved myself the time and quit.
>
> When school was offered at work, I wasn't even going to go. I figured it would be more of the same. But people were able to go in and meet with the teacher without making a commitment so I decided to check it out. I knew within five minutes that I would make it this time. I was able to attend class during my workweek and the classroom was on site. I could come and go as I needed to, and I set my own pace. The class size was small, and the teacher sat with me to help. There was no one standing at the front of the room talking at me.
>
> Maybe the biggest thing was that the teacher didn't think she knew everything. She actually listened to us and learned from what we said. If she was trying to teach algebra formulas and I could do the problems in my head, she learned to see the problems as I did. I got my GED this time, and I stayed on and got academic English, and math, and completed computer training. I then became a classroom mentor and began a programme for certification as a workplace educator. I don't know whether or not I'll pursue more studies, but I can now, if I want to. Who'd have thought it?

Here, Cory tells his story:

> Getting my GED was on my mind a lot. I had come so close to having my Grade 12 when I was in school and, well, it was just something I needed to do. I am only 25 years old. At the time when I quit, I felt like it was more important to be earning money than studying irrelevant stuff that clearly wouldn't help me in my future. I see now that I should have stuck it out but I didn't and here was this new opportunity . . . a program that was accessible and tailor made to accommodate my shift work. I figured that I best not let it go by if I was ever to complete Grade 12.
>
> I went in for the assessment, covered some of the ground work to prepare for the manual, and got at it. I could move pretty much at my own pace and, whenever there was a stumbling block, I only had to sigh or mutter and I got help. I have my Grade 12 now plus my academic English. I'm working on my academic math and considering room for future training and mobility.

Heather tells her story:

> I had been out 32 years when I finally decided to go back. I'd always thought about getting my Grade 12, and I made sure the kids got theirs. I even got the GED books from time-to-time. I just never seemed to have the confidence to return to the classroom, and I didn't believe I could do it on my own. When the kids were grown, I thought about it more and more. By that time, though, I did shift work that made school virtually impossible. Then I was sitting in the cafeteria one day and saw a notice that the company was considering offering a GED program. I couldn't believe it.
>
> I was a little scared the day I went in for the first meeting. I didn't really know what to expect. I recall school being a place of disappointment . . . where what the students knew didn't count for much. I knew right away that the Learning Centre was different. The instructor involved us in the whole process. She learned with us and encouraged us to voice our feelings and opinions. She listened to what we said and worked to build our learning around it. We were set up for success. It even spills over into our work. We can't help but to feel better about our jobs and the company when we have these kinds of opportunities. It changes us all for the better.

Perry provides a final example:

> I couldn't tell you the number of times I was made to feel as though I was nothing. I knew where I came from and the teachers never let me forget it. We were pegged before we ever got to school. It didn't matter that I was too scared in school to open my mouth. My silence was read as indifference and stubbornness. I came to school everyday on time, was never in a fight, and never talked back to a teacher. I simply showed up, took my seat, and was either ignored or diminished almost every day. I guess when we came from nothing we were expected to amount to the same thing so they didn't want waste their time on us. Either way, I was written off long before I got to school, probably the day I went home from the hospital to the wrong side of the tracks. You hear so long that you're nothing, you start to believe it. The school at work was not like that at all. When I acted like I was doomed for failure, I was challenged to think differently. She wouldn't do it for us, though. We had to see it, want it, and work for it. She called it having agency. I think she believed in us so much it was contagious.

The Learning Centre had important benefits for all those involved. In addition to those articulated above by employee-participants, the organization itself experienced significant gains. Personnel managers reported improved morale, enhanced performance, and decreased absenteeism. The turnover rate in the learner population was 2% compared with 10% among non-learners. As the program gained regional, national, then global recognition for its contribution to workplace literacy, the company's public image even began to shift. Where previously it had been seen as strictly profit driven, it was now reputed to be a place of opportunity. There were also benefits for me: conceptualising and facilitating such a program and then having the opportunity to theorise it in my graduate work restored my

belief in the power of education to champion change. A previously disengaged learner myself, I, too, returned to school to find it deeply validating.

REFLECTIONS

The words of Adrienne Rich (1977) often echo in my mind: that we cannot afford to *receive* an education—that, in *receiving*, we are receptacles for a dominant discourse that continues to oppress, repress, and marginalise. Rather, we must be relentless in our pursuit of *claiming* an education. In *claiming*, we have agency; we mindfully determine to take ownership of that which we deserve.

Continuously seeking to position learning as an emancipatory act en route to social justice, I developed with the employee-participants a critical literacy program that honoured lived experiences and awakened critical consciousness. Before entering this space and learning with these adults, I had not recognized the extent to which literacy was a complex instrument of acculturation. My new wakefulness to the capacity of critical literacy to inform social change has made me a more conscious teacher and learner. I continue to interrogate the hidden curriculum and imagine more liberating practices, and I encourage students to do the same. Teaching for critical consciousness constitutes a "radical act of challenge against established authority" in favour of honouring human potential (Willinsky, 1990: 84). Ironically, these radical acts require the support of the established authority they aim to challenge. This is particularly evident in workplace contexts where, through emancipatory education, the lower-paid wage labourers can gain improved access to higher-paid positions. Historically, dominant groups have created practices and policies aimed at marginalising non-dominant groups. It is, therefore, particularly important that the empowered understand the benefits of more equitable ways of being. Among these benefits are improved employee morale, higher retention rates, reduced turnover, and improved performance. Because these factors markedly reduce the costs associated with recruitment and the training required to fill positions left vacant by employee exits, it is reasonable to advocate for critical literacy opportunities at the employers' expense. We can look to models like the one described here, or those on a much larger scale, as in McDonalds and Coca Cola, both of which have created universities for their employees and consistently reinvest portions of their revenue in employee learning and development. The reality, though, is that organizations that consistently and sustainably prioritize employee learning are in the minority. Yet the forces of globalization insist that cultures of learning are not only key in employee attraction and retention but also integral to optimal performance and competitive advantage. Creating a workplace that encourages continuous learning establishes a culture of opportunity and, through attrition, allows people to move up through the ranks. This model has the added advantage of knowledge and regard by mid- and senior-level employees for the less experienced. Given that both research and practice demonstrate the advantages of

continuous learning to employees and employers alike, ought not there be an avenue to guarantee such practices? The government has insisted on paid vacation time, employment insurance, and various types of benefits as basic employee rights. It is time for policy to push lifelong learning as an inherent right and hold workplaces accountable for the provision of such opportunities.

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