DOING DISABILITY AT THE BANK
Discovering the Work of Informal Learning/Teaching done by Disabled Bank Employees

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<u>Focus</u>

The study that we propose will explore the work-learning relations that shape and are shaped by disabled employees in a Canadian bank. How are disabled workers faring in an environment that has experienced rapid and extensive restructuring? What are their learning strategies? Specifically, is informal learning part of their strategy for doing disability at the bank?

Throughout this proposal, we use the term "disabled people," explicitly acknowledging as we do that it could mean many things, and take in people living with very different kinds of bodily and other experiences – visible and invisible. As we begin, we wish to relate to the term as what the Making Care Visible Working Group call an "empty category – one that does not impose a definition on particular lived realities but waits to be filled as we learn..." (2002: xvii). Thus, we do not presuppose that we know who "disabled people" are at the outset of this study but will come to know as we go along, even as we come to know what the work of informal learning is that they perform.

Our approach to a study of work-learning relations is strongly influenced by the work of sociologist Dorothy Smith (e.g. 1987, 1999). Her writing orients us toward disabled people as primary knowers of the local practices that shape their world. While encouraging us to explicate the knowledge that disabled people share as a result of their location low on the ladder of hierarchical social/economic relations, Smith presses us to look beyond their experience to the extra-local processes of management and administration that organize it. The social model of disability with which we also align ourselves is congruent with this grounding in feminist-materialist method. It holds that the causes of disability are the physical, economic and social "obstacles imposed on disabled people that limit their opportunity to participate in society" (Barnes et al, 1999: 30).

<u>Literature Review</u>

People with disabilities have been trying to do something about work since well before the emergence of the "new economy." They have been fighting to be considered viable workers since the industrial age and its establishment of the productive individual. Their problems have persisted to a present in which, despite multiple attempts at reform, disabled people experience extremely high rates of unemployment (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999). Disabled people who are employed are disproportionately represented in part-time, low-wage occupations (Berthoud, Lakey & McKay 1993; Kitchin, Shirlow & Shuttleworth, 1998; Payne, 2000), and discriminated against within

the workplace. Meanwhile, disabled people who are not formally employed have often been exploited through unpaid or underpaid contributions to the economy.

An entire service system has grown up around these difficulties, from charitable workhouses in the time of Charles Dickens to the state-sponsored vocational rehabilitation training programs and sheltered workshops of our own era. Today, in a post-industrial information age, many people remain locked into vestiges of these forms. The only (seemingly) new development is the emergence of the small business alternative, in which the disabled person attempts to sustain him/herself as a producer of goods and services for the marketplace. These then are the three grim options: exclusion from or marginalization within the labor market; service system domination and dependency; vulnerable self-sufficiency through entrepreneurial initiatives.

Within this overall scenario, a smattering of studies illuminate some pieces of our problematic. Recent exploratory ethnographic work in the Canadian banking sector (Livingstone and Mitchell, 1999) suggests that there has been a shift in management orientation from predominantly collective, informal strategies for workplace learning to a much more formal curriculum that employees are expected to carry out through self-study using written materials and/or computer software. With its appearance as involuntary and management-driven, this new curriculum has displaced voluntary and learner-driven learning strategies such as learning by watching, learning by doing, and working with a mentor. Bank employees continue to engage in informal learning in attempts to keep up with the rapid changes and new demands of their workplace but they engage in these activities on unpaid time and after-hours at significant cost of family and community life. What we do not know from this study is the effect of these changes on disabled bank employees.

To get some insight into work-learning relations among disabled people, we turn to a British study done by Baron, Wilson and Riddell (2000) of people with learning difficulties employed in open labor market settings with ad hoc support (i.e. supported employment). Baron et al saw these programs as introducing what Schutz (1976) called the "spontaneous stranger" into a workplace, a process that effectively revealed some of the deeply implicit rules of competent membership. After observing these interactions for some time, they concluded that "becoming a competent member of the workplace depends less on formally defined skills and their acquisition through training than on scarcely noticed processes of acculturation into social networks and their whole ways of life" (Baron et al, 2000: 50).

Of similar significance is a case study of a courier company called A-Way Express run by psychiatric survivors in Toronto, Canada (Church, 2001; Church et al, forthcoming). Part of a larger project sponsored by the Network for New Approaches to Lifelong Learning, it explored the informal learning done by survivor employees along three dimensions: the political "smarts" they acquired organizationally to keep their business afloat; the sense of connectedness and solidarity they achieved by working together; and, the rethinking of damaged identity that they achieved through inhabiting more socially valued roles. Acquired as "secondary" benefits within an entrepreneurial context, these

processes constitute for survivor employees what Baron et al discuss as cultural heritage. The advantage they have over people engaged in supportive employment is that they are building their own culture rather than adapting to one created by others.

As relevant as they are, these last two studies are limited to studying learning by disabled people in the context of "special" programs that facilitate their employment and not in the unmediated world of regular jobs. They leave us at the threshold of unexplored terrain.

Objectives

While researchers have some knowledge of disabled people as "clients" of rehabilitation professionals in various kinds of re/training programs, we do not know much about them as learners in the workplace. They are often portrayed as passive, able to be "trained" but not engaged in growth or change. Indeed, we tend not to think of them as learners at all – and certainly not as informal learners initiating and taking charge of what and how they want to learn. The over-riding objective of this research is to challenge this prejudice by creating research in which disabled people are present, both in content and process, as vibrant subjects who are active and vocal experts on their learning practices. Writing into giant holes in the literatures on both work and learning, we want to explicate knowledge of work-learning relations in a bank environment from the standpoint of disabled people. Our most pragmatic concern is to strengthen initiatives within the Royal Bank aimed at increasing the number of disabled people in its workforce.

Research Strategy and Methods

Using both qualitative (survey) and quantitative (case study) methods, this study seeks to outline the scope of informal learning at the bank while preserve the rich detail of employees' lived experience of it. Because all of our research seeks to amplify the collective voice of disabled people, our first priority is the case study.

1. Case Study

We have chose to create an institutional ethnography. Over the past decade, researchers have used this method to investigate a range of social phenomena. (For a comprehensive bibliography of IE research, see DeVault and McCoy, 2002). Issues of disability have been relatively untouched by this method with the exception of a study by Campbell (1998), and by Townsend's study of the work of professionals in the mental health system (1998). Much of this research has been conceptualized around Smith's notion of "work" as "the linchpin between the everyday experiences of people and larger institutional processes" (Luken & Vaughan, 1991: 41). So, for example, a recent community-based ethnography used the notion of "health work" as a central organizing concept for interviewing people with HIV/AIDS about the broad range of activities they engage in around their health (Making Care Visible Working Group, 2002).

Similarly, we conceptualize our case study as an investigation of the work of informal learning that people with disabilities do in order to get and keep a job. The purpose of the

study is to produce a careful description of this work as it is performed within the institutional relations of the bank during a time of global economic reorganization. Our description will textually map out the range of informal learning practices used by disabled people in a classed, raced and gendered workplace. For us, this logically includes some attention to informal teaching practices as well. We know from preliminary conversations that part of the work that disabled people learn to do is to re-establish and manage a sense of social comfort in these environments for the sake of business as usual. Using personal interaction and especially humor, they educate both co-workers and management about if, when, and how to be with them. Anticipating that we will hear more about this, we want to give our attention to the reciprocal relations of informal learning and teaching.

Like the Making Care Visible Working Group, we will use the dialogue created by focus groups to identify areas of experience that we wish to explore, and follow-up individual interviews to deepen our investigation. We will begin with a cross-disability focus group in Toronto comprised of people with substantial work histories in a variety of settings (six to eight people). These people and the pathways they carved to employment will prepare us for the rest of the study. We will then conduct two focus groups (one with disabled employees, one with non-disabled) in bank sites in three areas: East, Central and Western regions (roughly forty-eight people in total). We will conduct up to ten follow-up individual interviews in each site (maximum of thirty) with people who are identified through focus group or other means as key resource people on the issue of work-learning relations in these environments. We will use participant observation as needed, in response to situations described to us that require further exploration.

As we move through this process, our concern is to represent a range of experiences rather than select a representative sample. However, we estimate that we will talk to up to ninety people. Numbers may be more or less, or the groups differently comprised if we cannot locate enough disabled bank employees willing to take part.

2. Survey Methods

We propose to link with the survey methods that are already written into the larger CRI proposal. Members of our project team will consult with the co-investigators of the National Survey of Working Conditions and Learning Practices to facilitate its use with this particular population. Co-investigators may want to consider a special run of the WCLP survey targeted to disabled bank employees. This would generate a basic and rare profile of disabled workers in the financial sector and fill in the larger picture created by the national survey. Members of our project team will also consult on issues of disability with the team members of the case studies from the other key sectors operating under the grant.

<u>Team</u>

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<u>Steering Committee</u>

To be developed once funding is assured, this committee will include representatives from national and/or provincial disability organizations, from the Royal Bank, from the School of Disability Studies, along with individuals who are expert in the implementation of institutional ethnographic methods.

<u>Students</u>

We have made provision for one student to be fully integrated into organizing, managing and conducting this case study. However, as we plan to proceed with an arts-based dissemination strategy, it may be wise to split this position over the four years, with emphasis in the latter half of the project on those particular kinds of skills.

<u>Outputs and Dissemination</u>

While our final report will be directed towards a number of relevant academic literatures, we are also interested in creating materials in alternative formats that would meet the needs of both disability communities and the Bank. Specifically, we anticipate transforming the strongest anecdotes or stories that emerge through the talk of the research into dramatic vignettes; performances of these vignettes would be video-taped for wide use. They would be a valuable addition to existing bank training materials; or, they could function as the core around which new seminars and workshops would be developed. But the educative work would begin earlier than this as staging and filming the vignettes would open up collaborations with community theatre groups, and/or disability self-help groups (Gray and Sinding 2002). It would enable us to contribute to a growing body of work at the intersection of social sciences and the arts.