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Chapter 5 – Unions and Workplace Learning

The trade union of the future will be a creating, not merely a fighting organization.¹

Learning isn't icing on the cake or an optional extra for trade unions. It's our business. It underpins our member's well-being and future prosperity... (British Trade Union Congress President John Monks)²

The paid workplace is one of the most important spheres of learning in society today. However, the learning that goes on this sphere can be understood from at least two different perspectives: that of management and owners on the one hand, and that of workers and their organizations on the other. In fact, workplace learning represents a contested terrain of social, political and economic struggle. The purpose of trade unions is to represent the interests and worldview of the diversity of workers, and its goals in terms of workplace learning can be seen as overlapping as well as in opposition to those of management. Unions represent these interests by providing organizational, and, in most liberal democracies, legal frameworks for workers to mobilize around issues they themselves deem important. The labour movement, more generally, is comprised of the trade union movement, the co-operative movement and workers' political parties. Within this stream of movements, trade unions in particular have incredible capacity to shape the character and experience of learning at work through course provision, collective bargaining and other forms of intervention. Unions also play an important role in shaping training and vocational education policy at various sectoral, national and, more recently, international levels (in many cases with the help of established workers' political parties). Perhaps most pervasively of all, however, unions can and frequently do play an important role in shaping the everyday experiences of workers within the labour process, through specific information and action campaigns, as well as through their effects on learning through mass media, literature, drama and art.

¹ Lindeman, 1926, p. 27

² Quoted in Forrester, K. (2002) "Unions and Workplace Learning: The British Experience" in B. Spencer (ed) Unions and Learning in a Global Economy: International and Comparative Perspectives. Toronto: Thompson.

Chapter objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Understand the full range of means through which unions affects skills and knowledge in the workplace.
2. Explain the alternative perspectives and purposes of unions, as opposed to management, in terms of workplace learning including the historical, contemporary and possible future issues over which these alternative standpoints play themselves out.
3. Critically evaluate an array of international research literatures that bear on issues of workplace learning from a worker/union standpoint.

Introduction

Although frequently touted as dead or dying, the union movement remains, arguably, *the* most important form of working-class representation in the world today. In terms of education and training specifically, a variety of scholars (e.g. Schneider, 1941; Linton, 1965; Hopkins, 1985; Simon, 1990; Kett, 1994) generally date the emergence of an organized and explicit array of worker educational offerings in North America at the close of the 19th century, while in countries such as the UK rooted in activities of philanthropists, Mechanics Institutes, Corresponding and Mutual Improvement Societies, Chartist Reading Rooms as well as early trade unions, the start date can be placed about a hundred years earlier. In either example, forms of worker or labour education represent organized practice that far pre-dates comparative levels of organized human resource practice and even mass, compulsory schooling. All this, and yet union-based education, training and learning still barely registers in the minds of most trainers, researchers, and students when they think of workplace learning.

This chapter will cover current literature which fills an important gap in earlier discussions in the book. Conventional labour education literature is not all that new. It has a relatively rich heritage of treatment in historical as well as policy and practice documents issued by various unions and related organizations. As a form of social science or humanity-based scholarship, however, it is composed of relatively small, insular sets of discussions, only recently entering into broader debates in the research field of workplace learning. In fact, we can say that union education and union-based workplace learning is far more often the subject of practical use and development than they are the subject of academic writing. Thus, we find ourselves in a discussion that is quite different from those dealing with, for example, the 'learning organization' where much more is written about the concept than may be actually put into practice. Nevertheless, when we read broadly across education and training literatures as well as many others (e.g. sociology, industrial relations, economic and social history, international development, economics, feminist studies, communications and cultural studies to name the ones we discuss below), we see a rich tapestry of theories,

approaches, research and reports on existing practice that constitute a broad view of union movement learning as it relates to and directly shapes the processes of work.

The discussion offered in this chapter is, in terms of general workplace learning literature, quite focused in that it deals exclusively with the role of unions. At the same time, in terms of previous analyses of unions, learning and labour education it is comparatively broad. It has an international scope, and explores the union educational programming, but is not limited to this. It looks at union influences on labour process, firm, national and even international training policy. It explores everyday learning, include the way that strikes, campaigns and labour art influence workers, and ultimately, the workplace.

This broad approach will provoke the question: how are we defining union-based workplace learning? For the purposes of this chapter, it is defined as whenever and wherever labour unions affect paid work vis-à-vis their myriad effects on the skill and knowledge capacities of workers. This broad approach not only seeks to expand notions of learning, but in fact calls for the expansion of our sense of how work is interrelated with a variety of political and community spheres as well. For example, is the learning that goes into developing union activists, and effective representative at firm, national or international levels to be understood as a form of workplace learning? We would say, yes. Particularly when the effects are aggregated, this learning directly and indirectly affects workers, the way work is organized and the way work is carried out.

Closely linked with this notion of expanding our conception of work, we need also to recognize that labour's 'agenda' is different from management's in the workplace. While productivity, efficiency and quality are tops on the list for managers, for workers and their organizations these matters are not only lower on the list, but they take on a different (sometimes fundamentally different) twist. 'Productivity' and 'efficiency', for example, may be understood from a working-class standpoint as productive, efficient *and* satisfying work, fairly compensated, over the entire life course. Likewise, 'quality' may mean a consistent and predictable standard of product or service for management, but from a working-class standpoint it can also mean good health and safety, the opportunity for humane and creative work, and so on. Indeed, one of the foremost purposes of union-based workplace learning against which any notions of productivity, efficiency or quality may be measured, concerns building democratic workplaces. Similar to the liberatory tradition discussed in the previous chapter, union's want to contribute to meeting the material needs of society, but in a way that contributes to greater equity for all participants, at work and beyond.

To conclude this introductory portion, we think it is advisable to make some basic, orienting statements with regard to a general understanding of unions. Are there 'theories' of the union movement out there? The answer is yes. There are several systematic attempts to clarify its different forms, purposes and motives (Perlman, 1958; Crouch, 1982; Lyman, 1995; Hyman, 1973, 1997, 2001a; and see related work in Tilly and Tilly, 1981; Kok, 2002). Larson and Nissen (1987) comment it is most appropriate to think of a theory of the labour movement in terms of 'overall social roles'. For these authors, the different aspects of the labour movement could be understood as follows: 1)

an agent of revolution; 2) a business institution for economic protection of its members; 3) an agent for extending industrial democracy; 4) an instrument for achieving the psychological aims of groups of workers; 5) an agent for moral and spiritual reform; 6) an antisocial, destructive monopoly; and 7) a subordinate mechanism with 'special interest' functions in a pluralist industrial society (p.4).

Reflective Question

In a policy paper adopted by the Ontario Federation of Labour (Canada) there is included an addendum that lists the eight 'myths' of training. Similar statements on training have been made by national labour movements around the world. This particular list is a good summary of the type of approach to training that emerges when one takes a 'labour standpoint' on the matter. To test your ability to understand this standpoint in relation to training, review the following statements and think about how and why they can be considered 'myths': 1) More training is necessary because we are moving to a high tech future; 2) Highly-trained high-technology jobs mean higher wages; 3) A more highly trained workforce will mean jobs in Canada; 4) A lack of training has hindered the development of the Canadian economy; 5) Good planning for specific skill shortages is a priority; 6) Training is not a controversial issue; 7) Training is a good thing; and 8) Multi-skilling will provide greater job security.

Now compare your responses to the American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organization's perspectives at the following website:

Across the theories of these and many other authors, social class and/or occupational features are central. For the purposes of this chapter, we begin with the basic model explained by Bernard (1998). In particularly accessible form, she highlights the danger of the false dichotomies of 'social and political' unionism (i.e. broad concerns over equity and democracy in society) versus so-called 'bread and butter' unionism (i.e. focused on issues such as pay and conditions of work amongst members only). Clawson and Clawson (1999), Carter (2000), but in particular the collective work of Richard Hyman (e.g. 1997), offer more elaborated theoretical frameworks which point toward a typology of trade unionisms, but for our purposes we begin from three basic forms of unionism that each play out differently across the different policies, politics and practices of

workplace learning: company unionism (workers' organizations that accommodate the prerogatives of management); service unionism (workers' organizations that seek to improve the 'bread and butter' conditions of their members only); and social movement unionism (workers' organizations that seek to build equity throughout society (see related discussion in Heery, 1998; Wets, 2000; Cohen, 2000; Grevatt, 2001; Munro, 2001; Greene and Kirton, 2002). The rest of this chapter expands and clarifies worker perspectives and action with this basic model as a backdrop testing it against the specifics of union interventions into the broad world of workplace learning.

Union-Based Education and Work

We should talk about the role played by labor unions in democratizing work relations by giving voice to the less powerful, within a critical evaluation of union activity... The changing questions for workplace learning researchers are to be found in education for workplace democracy. How does educational opportunity benefit workers? Is the claim that workers are empowered real? To what extent are so-called empowered workers given meaningful influence in a corporation's affairs? (Spencer, 2002:38)

For their own part, unions provide (or partner with other organizations in providing) a great many educational services that affect the workplace and the experience of it by workers. It has become a convention in recent discussions of labour education to use a three category model: 'tools' courses, 'issues' courses, and broad 'labour studies' courses. There is considerable variation in terms of specific topics and curriculum and these programs may be provided by an individual union local (United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 175), a union organization (e.g. the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers), a union federation (e.g. the British Trade Union Congress), a specialized public institution created to serve union members (e.g. South Africa's Development Institute for Training, Support and Education of Labour), or these courses may even be delivered through union/school partnerships (e.g. the McMaster University/Canadian Autoworkers Labour Studies Program in Canada, or the Harvard Trade Union Program in the USA).

More specifically, tools courses are designed to prepare members for an active role in the unions and through this in their workplace through the representation of the needs, interests and perspectives of workers as a whole. Mostly, these courses are targeted to current or future activists and thus represent education for a minority of members. They include such subject areas as effective leadership, grievance procedures or collective bargaining. These subjects teach skills and knowledge that relate directly to the way that work is organized, the way that workers' perspectives are represented as well as the way that tensions within the work process are resolved on a day-to-day basis. Issues courses are more broad. They include subjects such as workplace reorganization strategies, racism or sexism in the workplace, technological change, and even training or apprenticeship development policy. Like tool courses the

skills and knowledge developed in these courses relate directly to how work is organized, but unlike tools courses they provide a more general framework for understanding the issues that affect the workplace environment. Labour studies courses provide the broadest framework of all for union member's learning. These courses are often taught by university professors, and in many cases, lead to a state-recognized diploma or post-secondary school degree. Subjects include sociology, political economy and history with a focus on organized labour and its role in society. These courses have general effects on the way work is accomplished in organizations, but it would be a mistake to say they do not play an important role, particularly when aggregated across whole groups of workers, in shaping the what goes on at work. Newly educated workers often understand their role in the workplace in a new way leading to changes in the way they, for example, participate with their union, deal with supervisors, talk to other workers, imagine their occupational career, and so on.

At the same time, it is worth noting that there have been other models of labour education which have thought more expansively. For example, in the 1970's and 80's many writings on labour education reported on worker education including 5, rather than 3, basic categories: i) basic skills; ii) union role skills; iii) social, economic and political; iv) technical and vocational; v) cultural and artistic (p.20). Hopkins (1985) elaborated on this with comments on how the distribution of union educational resources differed from country to country. That is, 'developed' countries tend to invest the most resources in the union role skills with commitments to cultural and artistic activity varying by nation and many of the other categories being taken up by various governmental and private bodies; and, in 'developing' countries (with lower resource levels generally) the focus tends to be on role skills as well as social economic and political education with much less attention to technical and vocational issues, and an absence of any formal cultural programming. Interestingly despite the fact that time has eroded their influence, Hopkins (1985) points to the relatively substantial investments that unions in communist countries tended to make in cultural and artistic programming. In general, we would say that it is important to draw on a more, rather than a less, expansive model of labour education when attempting to assess the complete range of effects that unions have on workers and work.

Before proceeding farther, it is important to briefly move beyond curricular matters to address new practices of labour education delivery. The use of Information Technology and 'E-learning' (computer-mediate distance education) within the union movement has grown significantly over the past decade. In 1995, for example, unions scarcely had a 'cyber' presence, while at the beginning of the new millennium the internet has become a standard organizational feature. Though tangible gains are difficult to document at this early stage and there are skeptics, as Lee (1997, 2000) notes, the internet may allow organized labour to share information and increase communication within and between organizations. He continues on to say,

[T]he skeptics are right. All the thousands of pounds invested so far in fancy websites have not produced even a fraction of the promised results. That is

absolutely true – and also absolutely wrong. It is wrong because it is a snapshot instead of a video. The important thing about understanding the net and the unions is that everything is in motion. Snapshots tell us nothing. (p.1)

Skepticism aside, through the use of 'digital signatures' the internet has allowed some online union recruiting as well as balloting (which has been done on a limited basis in the USA). In Canada, unions like the CAW have been quick to adopt policies and educational programs related to the Internet. Interestingly, it may be in the area of learning and education that cyber-technologies are realizing some of their potential most quickly. This can be seen in the International Labor Organizations development of the 'Union Course Reader' software (Belanger, 2001), while one of the best summaries of the brief history of e-learning in the union movement can be found in the collected work of Taylor (e.g. 1996a, 1996b, 2002; Briton and Taylor, 2000) and Shostak (1999). Supplementing these programs and general reviews are research initiatives as seen in Briton and Taylor (2000), Sawchuk (1998; 2002). More directly related to technology and the labour process, in places like Sweden (e.g. Ehn and Kyng, 1987; Ehn, 1988) and Canada (e.g. Hennessey and Sawchuk, 2003), pro-labour scholarship has directly sought to contribute to soft- and hard-ware development and re-development cycles adding yet another layer to the way that unions affect work and learning in relation to computers. More generally, however, as in discussions of internal union education efforts above, e-learning affects change in workers including the ability to actively and effectively participate in the workplace and to represent labour interests across the many dimensions of work.

No matter what the type of training offered, traditional distance education, learning circles, e-learning or face-to-face courses, the goal of the training is the same: to increase the ability of unions to represent workers and shape work and learning from the standpoint of labour. To be clear, the union movement doesn't just teach *about* work and the role of unions, all courses, even those as seemingly self-contained as 'Effective Stewarding' or as abstract as 'Political Economy for Trade Unionists' are meant to develop workplace union leaders or cadres and to mobilize workers *to affect change* in the workplace and beyond as well. Toward this end, all union education is undertaken with collective rather than strictly individualistic purposes in mind. This is expressed in the expectation that all course participants upon completion return to their workplace and share their new found skill and knowledge with others. To the degree this is a major distinction between learning in schools or in traditional employer-based training, this exemplifies the importance of informal learning processes for union-based workplace learning (an area we first discussed in chapter 3 and to which we shall return below).

Work by Stirling (2002) and Gereluk and Royer (2001) provide useful reviews of the education delivered by unions in Europe and around the world. Stirling (2002) draws on earlier work (e.g. Bridgford and Stirling, 1988; Bridgford and Sterling, 2000) and reports from the European Trade Union College, all sources worth visiting in their own right, to offer an excellent summary of the different political economic contexts pre and post European Union for 15 different countries. He characterizes union education in

Europe as having “suffered two decades of hostile attacks and increasing pressures for change”, and adds, “It is now emerging from this gloom with greater self-reliance and professionalism...” (p.26). At the same time Stirling problematizes the ‘professionalism’ taking root in the 1970’s as a possible subversion of the traditional orienting principles of trade unionism based in solidarity and collective action (cf. Heery and Kelly, 1994). Sterling’s approach adds context but is, overall, a conventional report on programs focused on the development of unions as organizations each in their unique, though also shared, situation in the western European context. Development of (oral and written) communication, team building, ‘management’ and leadership skills within unions clearly shapes, though indirectly, the way learning is carried out by workers. However, Stirling specifically identifies workplace learning issues such as ‘skills-based competencies’ development and understanding the organization of the labour process as two of the most dominant educational themes for unions. These themes play themselves out in different forms and with different foci in different countries. Across Europe, as we’ll learn more about in the next section, we see the development and co-sponsorship by unions of ‘European Works Councils’ (EWC’s) mediate such things as time-off for training and funding. And, drawing on various national reports we see workplace learning themes emerging in such forms as negotiations over industrial relations regimes (e.g. in Greece; Kouzis, 2000), ‘Codes of Practice’ regarding training (e.g. in Ireland; O’Brien, 2000), understanding and shaping the labour process (e.g. in Norway; Birkeland, 2000), computer literacy initiatives (e.g. in Germany; Romer-Karrasch, Gehrmann and Hanns, 2000), the development of workplace ‘training representatives’ (e.g. in the U.K.; Ross, 2000; Munro and Rainbird, 2000) and so on. Wills (2001) and Miller (2002) add considerable depth to the discussion of EWC’s specifically providing the background of their emergence in the mid-1990’s as a means for unions (though officially employees *not* unions are participants) to mediate work as well as learning practices across multi-national corporations (see also Hall, 1992). He reports that by 1999, works councils had been initiated in 700 of the 1200 multi-national companies operating in Europe. Effective training for representative participation in these councils is supported by the European Trade Union College³ and, in an indirect way, is an important means through which the learning of workers (as representatives) comes to shape the practices and agendas of workplaces. Specifically, EWC’s offer a forum for negotiation of, among other matters, health and safety, vocational training, technological change and labour standards which *directly* shape the learning of workers at the firm level.

Before moving on, it is worth mentioning particularly inventive and expansive approaches to understanding union-based workplace learning in Gereluk and Royer (2000; 2001) as well as work carried out through the combined efforts of the International Labor Organization (ILO), the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), and the Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development’s Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC)(organizations which together represent over 155 million

³ As Miller indicates, see www.etuco.org/etuco/en/projects for a sense of how this has been accomplished.

workers worldwide). What is unique is that these approaches combine analyses of 'sustainable workplace and environmental development' and issues of learning and effective change initiatives under a basic, but important, rationale:

[t]he origins of the union movement itself can be traced to collective action that was taken against unsustainable forms of production that appeared during the First Industrial Revolution. By unionizing, workers gained protection, integrated with a limited right to participate in workplace governance, giving birth to the field of occupational health and safety... [unions] are contributing to a cultural shift towards sustainable development, which increasingly affecting decision-making by workers, community groups and business. (Gereluk and Royer, 2001:536)

Gereluk and Royer go on to say that the principle informing this type of union-based work and learning framework is that, as the ICFTU argues, "union-led activity in the workplace... is the training ground for the democratic leadership which is needed in our society" (p.537). This work-based educational world-view is possibly best represented in the ILO's "Workers' Education and Environment Programme" (ILO/ACTRAV, 1996) launched in 1991. In this program participants from around the world learned to respond to the needs of their fellow workers and communities through workplace action. In many ways, the expansiveness of this type of approach represents the next generation of critical, integrated theories of workplace learning in a global context with respect to the role of workers and their organizations.

Reflective Question

At different periods around the globe particular union struggles are instructive for what they have to tell us about the complex relationship between work, learning and political change. Currently two very different instances present themselves in the form of the South African labour movement and the labour movement in Los Angeles (USA). Explore literature on these two contexts and consider the following: What factors explain the contrast between these two situations? What is the role of union education as well as informal learning amongst union members?

Training and Vocational Education

Training is clearly on the agenda of public policy and political life. The reasons are many. Training is central to current management initiatives for the restructuring of work. It is also critical for politicians, as a substitute for a coherent industrial strategy. Most important, training has a powerful impact on the lives of working people, but it can be either friend or foe, depending on how it is done. (Beckerman, Davis and Jackson, 1992: iii).

Training is a tool of political struggle in the workplace (Dunk, McBride and Nelson, 1996; Kincheloe, 1999). And, unions, such as those in the UK for example, have undertaken enthusiastic attempts to build a union agenda in terms of training and lifelong learning (Trade Union Congress, 1996; Monks, 1999; Munro and Rainbird, 2000). Indeed, workplace learning today is enmeshed within a range of programs, slogans and initiatives that revolve around the apparent belief in the need to develop a learning organization, and a knowledge-based, information economy. Moreover, the dominant view says that the barriers to achieving this type of 21st century workplace is to found in workers themselves rather than the workplaces in which they labour. However, scholars beginning with Berg (1972), Carnoy and Levin (1985) and more recently Livingstone (1999), Lowe (2000) and Wolf (2001), all offer devastating critiques of the basic logic of this view. In different ways, they each suggest that the problem is not workers, but rather the irrationality of laissez faire labour markets and the hierarchical as opposed to democratic organization of work and society.

Study Tip

Like many subjects, a variety of useful resources for understanding the labour movement and workplace learning can be found online. For example, the International Labor Organization's Training Centre in Italy (<http://www.itcilo.it/english/bureau/turin/index.htm>) offers a range of valuable resources that represent a labour standpoint on training issues. Foremost among them is the publication "Design, Management and Evaluation of Open/Flexible Training". The world's first survey of 'informal learning' was done in Canada by the New Approaches to Lifelong Learning Research Network. This is also an important empirical source. A summary of this publication can be found at <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/~dlivingstone/iage/index.html>. To better understand the research of informal learning try out the online survey on which this research was based at <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/sese/csew/nall/learn4.htm>. And finally, one of the most intensive studies of 'union learning' in North America has recently been completed by Jeff Taylor at Athabasca University (Taylor, 2001). The website that accompanies this book is full of useful information as well as audio visual resources (see <http://unionlearning.athabascau.ca>).

Union involvement in forms of training policy debates has a significant tradition around the world. One of the most insightful, personal accounts of this role is offered by Canadian union educator D'Arcy Martin (1998). It described in colourful detail the challenges of this process with an emphasis on the difficulties that many union movements have in dealing with what is called 'open-field bargaining'; an approach in which unions, government and business come together to negotiate training policy. In broader terms, however, we see that organized labour is playing a key role in mediating training and various forms of vocational education through their influence on their respective national industrial relations regimes and through direct collective bargaining at the firm, sectoral, national and international levels. We see unions playing a key role in the establishment of normative, institutional and financial infrastructure that shapes training frameworks which, in turn, define organized, pro-democratic positions on vocational and apprenticeship education.

Conventional wisdom, particularly in North America and Australia for example, has it that employers and the state are responsible for vocational training. However in other parts of the globe, in distinct ways, organized labour has played a more active role in these matters. Some of the most progressive discussions in this area are to be found in northern and western Europe where, particularly since the late 1980's with the establishment of the "Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers" and related elements of the European Union's (EU) charter of rights framework. In this policy framework it is stated explicitly that 'every worker of the European Community must be able to have access to vocational training and to benefit there from throughout his [*sic*] working life,' and this basic element has been interpreted as requiring the involvement of the competent public authorities, companies and trade unions as key participating partners. Though situations vary according to national contexts, at the present time Australia (despite its progressive history), the UK (despite recent changes), and North America do not have comparable, labour-inclusive structures. Of course, some recent analyses (e.g. Hyman, 2001c) are skeptical of the real transformative value of these developments, nevertheless the EU's 1997 "Employment Summit" gave shape to these principles by urging partners to actively establish formal agreements to enhance training, traineeships, work-based experiential learning and lifelong learning capacity. Driving the process, as mentioned above, was the apparent need to develop a genuine knowledge economy, and despite contention over what this term might actually mean, it seems a truism that 'training' is one of the few areas where employer and worker interest seem to converge. Public policy supportive of this shared interest quickly emerged in relation to the construction of the EU political framework and at its center were forms of collective bargaining.

The establishment of the EU, however, was not the beginning of these types of progressive training structures. ILO reports document that, for example, in the 1970's employer and union federations in France entered into a central inter-sectoral agreements (which would become law in France) that institutionalized the rights of

workers to ongoing training during working hours, financed through an employer levy system, and regulated by bipartite (labour/employer) bodies. Other countries, such as Belgium and Spain offer similar examples of negotiated employer levy systems, while still others such as Finland, Austria, and Germany have ongoing traditions of offering rights for worker representation on firm, sector or inter-sectoral level bodies. These latter examples are important to mention because there the negotiation of the actual content and specific access to training took place. All of these initiatives laid the groundwork in many ways, along with firm-based collective bargaining, for the emergence of the European Works Council system (see Miller, 2002) in its current form, over time creating a significant example of the way that organized labour influences workplace learning overall.

As alluded to earlier, contrasting situation exists in Australia, according to Ewer (2000), where after promising activities in the late 1980's the union movement has found its national training reform strategy in tatters under the pressures of steady 'marketization of vocational training' through which business has gained ever increasing control over design, delivery, access and assessment. Indeed, writers like Abraham and T'Zannos (2000) confirm a general trend in Australia to break union involvement in vocational as well as apprenticeship learning. Also contrasting with most EU countries, through a review of research we see that in the UK employer intransigence still seems particularly strong (cf. Millward et al., 1992; Claydon and Green, 1994; Steedman, 1998). This despite the fact that research in the UK demonstrated that where unions are most active, better training and wider access to training for workers exists (Green and Wilkinson, 1996). These types of conclusions support the classic 'exit/voice' research as well as analysis of union participation in 'high performance' and 'Quality' workplaces generally (e.g. Freeman and Medoff, 1984; Mishel and Voos, 1992; Osterman, 1995; Turner, Bertelli, and Kaminski, 1996; Shaiken, Lopez and Mankita, 1997; Bender and Sloane, 1998; Kincheloe, 1999).⁴ This research convincingly argues that unions help establish better management practices in organizations including better communication patterns between workers and management as well as more relevant and more effective workplace programs including those involving training. Moreover, as Elias (1994) has established, lower worker turnover (i.e. greater 'voice' / fewer 'exits') conform to the idea that knowledge can be accumulated better in unionized workplaces as well. Overall, there is good evidence for these indirect, as well as more direct roles (Wies, 1985; Heyes, 1993; Stuart, 1994) that unions play in issues of the character of and access to workplace training and organizational learning.

A model very different from the EU, however, has emerged in South America, and in particular, in Brazil where the historical development of political and economic institutions as well as labour processes make the region distinct from Europe, Australia or North America. According to Posthuma (1998) and Lopes (2002), through the 1990's

⁴ The 'exit/voice' thesis (Freeman and Medoff, 1984) refers to the choices business make to either encourage more 'voice' for workers in the workplace (through unions, or some other representational structure) or see higher worker 'turnover' (i.e. exit) resulting in lower productivity, higher training costs, etc.

and into the new millennium the Brazilian vocational training system has undergone important changes as a result of direct popular and union pressure from below. While direct union involvement in occupational training dates back to the 1970's in Brazil (particularly in the steel, metal trades, and manufacturing), new momentum for popular and union mediation of vocational and apprenticeship learning has surfaced. As Lopes outlines, the Third National Confederation of Metalworkers of the Unified Central Labour Union Congress held in 1995 marked an important turning point in which occupational training took center stage in the union agenda. 'New institutionalities' in regard to participatory governance of vocational training structures have begun to be put in place, and will, in all likelihood continue to develop under the governance of the recently elected Workers' Party leadership.

Apprenticeships and Learning

A discussion that can be linked closely with formal vocational education is, of course, apprenticeship training. It has been said that the earliest forms of the labour movement can be traced to the organization of journey men craftworkers. Such groups formed to protect their skills against erosion, to protect wages as well as to acquire the situated experience and sociocultural knowledge on which they built their craft (Wright, 1908; Unwin and Fuller, 2001; Schön, 1987; Taylor, 2001). Carpenters, shoemakers, stonemasons, cabinetmakers and a range of both older and more contemporary trades people took tremendous pride in their work. As Wren (2002) outlines,

The development of apprenticeship in any regulated form during the 19th century was closely related to the development and strength of the trade unions and collective bargaining. Construction Unions in Britain proposed reforms that included the attachment of apprentice to industry rather than to an individual employer... (p.7)

Overall, contemporary analyses have shown that unions continue to play a positive role in shaping apprenticeship-based workplace learning. For example, according to recent research in the USA (e.g. Castellano, 1997; Berik and Bilginsoy, 2000), unions are also playing an important role in facilitating greater gender equity in terms of retention and attrition probabilities in joint union-management apprenticeship training programs. Indeed, these studies indicate that union involvement raises women's graduation rates above those of both women *and* men in employer-only sponsored apprenticeships.

Key analyses of apprenticeship systems in Finland (e.g. Kivinen and Peltomaki, 1999), Germany (Streek and Hilbert, 1987; Culpepper, 1999) and the UK (Gospel, 1997) are instructive for understanding the tensions and dynamics of change as regards the role of unions as well. In general terms, apprenticeship systems and the strategies of unions in relation to them are undergoing change in the face of global capitalism. It is relevant to comment on the case of Germany specifically, a traditional strong-hold of union-mediated apprenticeship system, and it's been suggested that the 'long-term' view of skills development that has marked such sustained productivity gains

there is in jeopardy, and with it the relative levels of equity experienced in the German labour market. Moreover, as Hyman (2001a, 2001b) discusses in his review of the post re-unification German trade union scene, a complex form of union politics has emerged. At the center of this scene are discussions of the need for renewed union mobilization in the context of rising unemployment and a general disruption of the traditional industrial training system. This has led to, among other things, a new 'jobs alliance' strategy which should be reviewed carefully for its implications for understanding of models of union tactics in relation to vocational and apprenticeship learning.

Adult Basic Education

An additional element not mentioned thus far concerns labour's role in issues of literacy, numeracy and language development (i.e. work-based 'basic education'). All over the world unions have traditionally been interested in the need to increase these types of core skills among workers, though it has not been until that last two decades that major public policy and employer interest has emerged in a sustained way. From a labour perspective, basic education not only increases the portability of worker's skills and knowledge and aids them in finding and sustaining employment, but it also contributes to their ability to individually and collectively defend their economic and political interests through their unions. In sum, basic education is thought of as central to increasing equity in the workplace, the labour market and beyond.

Reflecting on the Canadian context, labour educators like Ian Thorne (2001) point out that issues of labour adjustment (i.e. workers being laid-off and having to relocate/retrain for new jobs) as well as immigration patterns associated with global trade agreements have helped spike concerns by unions over the issue of basic education. In response, since the 1980's the labour movement in Canada has developed a range of programs at all levels: Basic Education for Skills Training (BEST) in Ontario and Workers' Education for Skills Training (WEST) in Saskatchewan, run by provincial federations; basic skills programs run by the Canadian Steel Trade and Employment Congress, a sectoral council; and, innovative programs run by large local unions such as the United Brotherhood of Carpenters, the United Food and Commercial Workers among others.

One of the most relevant, general summaries in regard to basic education and unions can be found in Holland and Castleton (2002). These authors set the stage for a comparative understanding of initiatives around the world while providing a detailed analysis of the UK and Australian contexts. They note the prevalence of a narrow, economic/functionalist perspective that prevails in the area of most government and employer-based perspectives, programs and policies. Inherent in these, they say, is the presumption that workers, not funding, access and program content, are the problems. An important example they outline is an initiative in Australia in the early 1990's called the 'Workplace Language and Literacy' program (WELL), that like so many progressive attempts, was activated only to collapse in subsequent years under the pressure of sustained attack and the dismantling of progressive industrial relations laws by the government of the day. WELL was a policy plan through which trade union councils as well as individual trade unions were able to influence basic education programs through

various forms of tripartite committees. An alternative and more recent initiative, the UK government's 'Adult Basic Skills Strategy', also makes room for union involvement. This occurred through the establishment of the 'Union Learning Fund' involving the central labour federation (the Trade Union Congress (TUC)) (see Monks, 1999). Importantly, however, Holland and Castleton (2002) note that this basic education agenda is inseparable from contemporary employer agendas for workplace restructuring:

It is the impact of the Total Quality Management discourse and accompanying changing work practices and accountability requirements that have provided the greater impetus for workplace literacy programs, rather than equipping members to cope with the demands of industrial relations issues and enterprise bargaining.
(p.94)

Indeed, the TUC, like other labour bodies before them, finds itself treading an increasingly fine line over which, encouraged by the trust it places in the labour government, it must balance the needs of members and employers. What these and other examples and analyses show, is that labour has played an important role in work-based, basic education, but that this role has important political implications.

PEL and PLAR

One final extension of this discussion of union involvement in training and continuous vocational education is the matter of initiatives to allow workers to both take time from work to become more educated (e.g. Paid Educational Leave (PEL)) as well as initiatives that allow workers to get formal credit for the everyday learning they develop informally (e.g. Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)). PEL operates in the realm of formalized learning. Union-negotiated PEL (as distinct from forms of PEL offered by the governments such as the innovative policies of Sweden) links a great deal of the discussion of vocational education with the workplace directly. In the USA, the United Autoworkers have been leaders in this regard, where currently the PEL program is under the direction of the committees at the UAW-GM Center for Human Resources. Importantly, this educational programs is broad including courses in economics, politics and technological studies relevant both to work as well as the collective bargaining process in which the content as well as access has been actively negotiated. Participants travel to various parts of the country to meet with experts in all areas, and programs are delivered by both union and employer representatives. In the UK, a coalition of unions, labour federations (as well as other progressive social groups) have come together to establish the "Paid Educational Leave Campaign".⁵ In practical terms, unions have negotiated the inclusion into their collective agreements elements such as, in Canada, the Canadian Autoworkers' "Tuition Refund Plan for General Motors Hourly-Rate Employees", the Ontario Public Service Employees Union's "Work Related Tuition

⁵ www.paid-educational-leave.org.uk

Reimbursement” clause, or the Canadian Union of Postal Employee’s “Educational Leave” clause (see specific contract language in Beckerman et al., 1992: Appendices).

In the realm of informal work-based learning unions have been actively considering the potential uses of PLAR (alternatively called Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) in the UK; Prior Learning Validation (PLV) in France; Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Australia and so on) as a means of influencing patterns of (and credit for) workplace learning as well. The Canadian Labour Congress’s Training and Technology Committee, for example, produced one of the world’s first ‘Statement of Labour Values’ regarding PLAR (2000). The potential of PLAR is that it will provide workers with recognition of their skills as well as support for entering into further educational opportunities. However, PLAR comes with some dangers from the perspective of unions as well. A labour perspective on PLAR is summed up nicely by Laurell Ritchie (1999) (an official of the CAW) where she articulates several core concerns revolving around issues of confidentiality (e.g. who controls the information gathered in PLAR?); privatisation of educational work (e.g. will educational workers be downsized as result of PLAR); erosion of apprenticeships; punitive results for workers not participating; the downloading of training costs onto the backs of workers; and so on. Likewise, in Sawchuk (1998a; 1998b) these same concerns are expressed by rank-and-file union manufacturing workers in the Canadian chemical industry. Hence, as with vocational education, training and apprenticeships, from the perspective of organized labour, PEL as well as PLAR represent highly politicized and contentious workplace learning issues.

Union Effects on Everyday Learning at Work

...the organization of work settings and work processes has always represented a - if not the - dominant influence in the formation of re-formation of knowledge, skills, abilities and psycho-social characteristics of working adults. This influence extends beyond the adult workers themselves to their families and socio-cultural life contexts. Thus the organization of work can be regarded, in the broadest sense of the term education, as playing an educative role vis-à-vis workers... Despite the widespread acceptance of the old adage that ‘experience is the best teacher’, little attention has been paid to what the experience of work is teaching workers. (Schrumman, 1989:42-43)

Whether unionized or not, workers learn a great deal informally through the course of the everyday experience of the labour process. As we discussed in chapter 3, the way paid work is designed (task variety, flexibility, decision-making, etc.) represents a type of informal ‘pedagogy’ complete with overt as well as hidden forms of curriculum. This learning can be understood at the instrumental or even the existential level: that is, work can teach workers practical skills of communication, technical competence, managerial resistance, grievance handling and collective mobilization; and, work also teaches workers about their place in the world as an individual and as a solidaristic group, complete with lived experiences of deeply felt pride, joy, shame or despair. Unions,

through their varying levels of involvement in control over the production system, thus influence this learning experience and shape its curriculum, and in many cases generate a curriculum of their own.

Schurman's comments emphasize that little research paid attention to the everyday experience of work as a form of 'education', but now, over a decade later, the issue is emerging as an important theme of the workplace learning literature. At the same time, one of the most important schools of analysis of work processes known as 'labour process theory' (see Chapter 3) has been slow to theorize everyday learning and the way that unions shape this process, and thus careful research that combines a solid understanding of social and economic dimensions of work, learning, control and resistance have suffered. Recently, however, informed by the classic work of Harry Braverman (1974), Sawchuk (2002; 2003) offers insight into how the union movement does play an educational role vis-à-vis the labour process. In some cases (see Sawchuk, 2001a), we see examples of unions constituting a parallel working-class 'learning organization' at the local level complete with its own unique modes of knowledge production. Indeed, unionization can provide workers with a fundamentally different foundation for interpreting their experiences of work, and through this it can give them greater sense of agency concerning their involvement in work. Of course, given that, in the final instance, workers still may not have much meaningful control over how work is formally organized the sense of agency that unions can provide may be directed toward forms of active disengagement and so on. We should remember that the basic 'curriculum' of the labour process under capitalism is not a particularly positive one for the vast majority of workers. In the absence of formal union intervention and/or informal forms of resistance, workers everyday participation in work teaches them that they do not have control, and in the worst cases scenarios that they've only their sweat or tolerance to 'dumbed down' tasks to offer.

In general, understanding how unions shape workers' everyday learning can be difficult. Luckily, however, there is a set of literature that provides some important clues. One critical point of relevance for unions concerns whether or not work teaches workers to act in individualist or collective ways, and whether or not unionization can affect these patterns (see Peters, 2001 for a provocative theoretical discussion of unions, management systems and personal autonomy). The labour movement, founded on collective action, obviously sees the development of the capacity for collective action as vital. We can note that only rarely are these studies framed in terms of collective and individual learning processes per se; but, nevertheless, the evidence is international, richly documented and, when viewed through a 'workplace learning lens', quite relevant for our purposes here.

To summarize the recent research in the area, we can begin with work by Madsen (1997) as well as Bild, Jorgensen, Lassen and Madsen (1998), both in the Danish context, which show that the organization of work does shape workers' sense of agency and willingness to engage in collective behaviour. Indeed, the later study specifically adds that forms of collective bargaining also seem to have important effects in these terms. Research with Finnish (e.g. Jokivuori, Ilmonen, and Kevatsalo, 1997;

Ilmonen, 1998) and Swedish trade unions (e.g. Allvin and Sverke, 2000) suggests that the type of work (white collar vs. blue collar) as well as gender, age and prior education mediate this type of learning. Likewise biographical research from Australia (e.g. Western, 1998) confirms similar relationships between the organization of work and individual behaviours and beliefs in terms of collective action. Studies of the UK financial services (unionized call center workers) show the inter-linkages of unionization and resistance in the face of new forms of work intensification. A particularly interesting analysis of union activity in the UK provides a detailed taxonomy of practices including “trade union collectivism,” “workplace collectivism” as well as a more diffuse “social collectivism of everyday life” (Stephenson and Stewart, 2001) citing the mediating role of work organization. Comparative research in the banking sectors in the UK and France (Thornley, Contrepolis and Jefferys, 1997) and the manufacturing sector in the UK and Spain (Ortiz, 1999) show stubbornly intact worker attitudes towards collective action despite new forms of work organization. In the USA, interesting analyses of unionized workers actively constructing their own cultural/economic environments (and the progressive and less progressive results of this; see Herod, 1997) also demonstrates the relations of everyday life and its effect on workers’ behaviour/learning. Even the effects of fledgling, post-communist trade unions in the Russian mining industry (Ashwin, 1997) show how unions can and do mediate everyday conflict resulting in changes in worker attitudes and practice. What is clearly documented in these studies is the fact that the way work is organized can have important ‘learning’ effects for workers. Thus, to the degree unions influence this organization of work, they simultaneously influence the learning lives of workers. Throughout each of these studies (and many others), however, we should recognize that few studies have used ‘learning processes’ (as opposed to ‘skill’, ‘behaviour change’, ‘resistance’, etc.) as the unit of analysis. Thus, there are enormous opportunities for workplace learning scholars and practitioners to engage in secondary analysis.

Reflective Question

In a book on union perspectives on training (from Beckerman et al., 1992, p.2), Canadian union activist/educator Jim Turk provides useful exercise. He writes, “Surprisingly, when you ask workers if they can do their jobs well, you get an almost uniform answer – ‘Yes’. When you then ask whether they were trained by their employer to do the jobs – the most common answer is ‘No.’ Try this out yourself on your friends.” If Turk is correct, what does this say about future strategies for workplace learning? If the majority of training takes place informally, what kind of strategies does this suggest for unions, management and policy-makers? What kind of factors contribute to quality informal learning at work?

Campaigns, Culture and Communication: Their Affects on Workers and Work

One of the seminal writers on working-class culture, Raymond Williams, once remarked that the greatest cultural achievement of the working-class is the creation of the labour movement. As we addressed in Chapter 3, strikes are a powerful form of learning for union members, and this learning reverberates throughout the workplace, often long after the strike itself is over. A workplace is never the same after a strike, and this is the result of more than simply a collective agreement won or lost, the financial damage sustained by workers, their unions as well as companies. It affects the workplace through the lessons, both large and small, that it teaches workers. A solid, recent example of a union and strike analysis that looks explicitly at the learning implications and changes in the workplace can be found in the work of Mikkelsen (1998) who analyzes public sector workers in Denmark. However, a variety of social science literatures provide detailed examinations of strikes to which a range of learning analyses can be applied: from analyses of Poland's solidarity strikes (Barker, 2001), the UK's 1984–85 miner's strike (e.g. Allen, 2001) and the strike of South African Sarmcol workers (Bonnin, 1999); to a variety of detailed analyses on strikes, both old (e.g. Johnson, 2000) and more recent (e.g. Beckwith, 2000) in the USA. Studies such as these all show how strikes create intense learning opportunities for workers with long-term effects on the workplace, the sector and even a nation. Likewise, union campaigns also teach workers a great deal, indeed increasingly they are thought of by union intellectuals as an effective form of active, direct learning for members (Cooper, 1997; Mantsios, 1998; Wong, 2002). In all cases, workers can learn any number of practical and existential lessons: the role of solidarity, the skills of participating in or organizing workplace action, the power of government and business in our society, and so on.

However, among the elements of union life most often ignored in terms of their educational value, and even more so in terms their contribution toward the representation of the interests of workers in the workplace, are mass communications and labour arts. In terms of the former, trade unions have had some limited involvement in television and radio productions. In Canada, for example, we see recent attempts such as "Working TV" (British Columbia) or the Canadian Labour Congress's 'Union Wave' radio broadcasts. Elsewhere, we see how the garment workers in New York, at one time, fought to establish radio programming (e.g. Godfried, 2001), and in Australia there has been attempts to establish internet radio telecasts (e.g. 'Wobbly Radio'). An excellent example of a study of mass media and its direct effects on workers' union learning, work organization and strike activity is by Roscigno and Danaher (2001). The authors analyze the effects of radio on textile workers in the southern USA between 1929 and 1934, and clearly demonstrate how such learning contexts emerge. Learning analyses focussing on the effects of mass media and unions on the workplace remain rare, however, and in this sense the area is an untapped focus of systematic research.

The labour arts, broadly conceived, provides some of the most engaging sources of learning for workers. Hansome, writing in 1931, commented on importance of “festivities, theatricals, choral societies, sports and recreational events under labor auspices... which conduce to morale, group loyalty, [and] solidarity” (p.62). However, Michael Denning, an American cultural historian, wrote “[w]ork itself resists representation... Stories, after all, come from travels, adventures, romances, holidays, events: interruptions of the daily grind” (1998, p. 244). Taylor (1988) writes that the complex of ‘work’ seems to defy analysis in many ways with the “[n]ovelists and imaginative writers have done rather better than psychologists and sociologists in describing what has [been] sacrificed (p.206). And, it is perhaps these facts that make the arts so relevant to the workplace learning process for workers. The connections between workplace learning and the arts can be thought of in terms of a number key categories, though many overlap and few seek to address issues of the labour process in isolation from the more general sensibilities and experiences of workers’ lives. Art, and particularly visual and performance art, by its very nature can represent the complex and contradictory reality of work from a working-class standpoint. Internationally there is long history of great artists associated with radical politics and unions; some of the most prominent being the Spanish painter Pablo Picasso, the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, the African-American singer Paul Robeson, the German playwright Berholt Brecht. Important international examples of labour arts initiatives that address issues of work include the ‘Art and Working Life’ program (Australia), the ‘Bread and Roses’ program (USA), ‘Mayfest’ events in Glasgow (UK) as well as the formalized governmental/union cultural programs in countries such as Sweden. In the past, initiatives such the Federal Theatre Project in the USA (O’Connor, 1973; O’Connor and Brown, 1978), interwoven with the largest strike wave in American history and powerful international events including the Spanish Civil and the rise of fascism, were at the center of one of the most progressive and energetic periods of union activity in North America (1930-40’s).

Historically in Canada, Beveridge and Johnston (1999) note that Frederick Taylor was one of the first painters to exhibit in a union hall, showing at the International Association of Machinists hall in Montreal in 1944. The works of many Canadian writers addressed themes of work and working-class life and politics directly including those of Gabrielle Roy, Ted Allen, Irene Baird, Donald Durkin and more. According to Beveridge and Johnston (1999), one of the most important, early instances of arts, labour action and, we could add learning was seen in the 1950’s in Sudbury (Ontario, Canada). There a union tradition emerging from the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and expressed through the radical International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, led by Weir Reid (hired as recreational director of for Mine Mill in 1952), produced a remarkable cultural microcosm of theatre, festivals, art and resistance that taught and mobilized workers in the 14,000 member union local 598. Later, unions such as the United Steelworkers of America, with their ‘Going Public: The Steelworkers Communication Policy’ (1985), adopted arts policies explicitly. In all cases, though these activities are not *only* educational, their educational value for workers understanding of work and society are un-disputable. Indeed, the fact that some of the most progressive reforms of work

were initiated by locals such as Mine Mill 598 and others who developed these sophisticated cultural/educational programs is no coincidence.

Again using Canada as an example, the union movement has continued to offers a full range of artistic forms directed at helping workers cope with and even transform the workplace. Written work such as novels, short-stories and poetry (e.g. the work of Canadian Auto Worker activist/writer Ron Dickson or the recitations presented at the Mayworks Festival's 'Woman Talk' events) put the labour perspective and key issues for worker at work into words. Visual arts including sculpture, photography and videography, for example those organized by the 'Working Image' exhibit in Canada's Mayworks festival, embodies the experience of and contradictions within the workplace and help workers better understand a complex reality. Of course, painting, such as those of United Steelworker activist Charlie Stimac or Carl Wesley Jean (Canadian Union of Public Employees), educate on a similar level as does dance (e.g. the work of dancer/choreographer and International Brotherhood of Boilermakers activist Tom Brouillette), and drama (e.g. the work of the Queer Artists Union Collective). Finally, it should be obvious that music has been and continues to be central to the way that worker perspectives on work and life are shared with the 'Music in the Workplace' program of the Mayworks festival being one of the most obvious and important examples.

In educational terms, there are few more powerful and more immediate means of building awareness and understanding of a complex social reality than those offered by visual art. And, though it is not conventionally thought of as either 'labour education' or 'workplace learning', anyone would be hard pressed to argue that the consumption of art that expresses workers' perspectives on work is not a vital form of learning practice with unique powers to mobilize and inform.

'Hearts starve as well as bodies, Give us bread, but give us roses.' When workers develop collective strength, many outsiders assume that the driving force is wages – bread...To the degree that the labour movement has survived and thrived, it has been on issues of equity, dignity, fairness, the broader social vision – the roses. Without that vision, it is harder to imagine an alternative..." (Beveridge and Johnston, 1999, p.ix)

Summary

In this chapter we have provided an overview of many ways through which unions shape learning associated with paid work. To return for a moment to where we began, it was emphasized that the purpose of the union movement is to represent the interests and worldview of workers. In this sense, the goals of workers and their unions may overlap as well as run in opposition to those of management. For the union movement, managerial notions of productivity and cost-cutting run second place to the development of skills and knowledge at work. Unions seek to shape learning for the purposes of building a quality workplace in terms of fuller participation in work and work planning, more creative, humane and physically healthy conditions, and so on.

It was important to begin our discussion of how labour unions develop themselves internally through various types of tools courses, issue courses as well as broad 'labour studies' education. This development is the union movement's most organized expression of what it believes are the skills and knowledge its members need most in order to effectively intervene and affect life within the world of work; a world in which bosses formally control how work is organized and carried out.

From here we turned our attention to literature that offered analyses of the roles that unions have played in the realms of vocational education, training, apprenticeship, basic education, PEL and PLAR programs. Central to this was discussion of the many past and currently emerging organizational structures at the workplace, sectoral, national and international level. Collective bargaining as well as forms of 'open-field bargaining' are important means by which unions shape the patterns of learning we see in workplaces around the globe.

The last third of this chapter drew on a diverse array of literatures other than those that explicitly reference learning, training or education for work. First, we drew on industrial relations, history and sociology research where we saw that not only does the organization of work shape the everyday learning experiences of workers, but that unions play an important role in mediating these effects as well. Second, we explored cultural studies, history, media and arts research to discuss the role of mass media, communications, and labour-based arts. Each of these was seen to have unique powers to shape agency, understanding and learning related to work and workers lives.

Understanding workplace learning fully requires a critical awareness of the social perspective of workers and the functions of their organizations. The union movement, broadly conceived, does have incredible capacity to shape the character and experience of learning at work. Unions function in many different ways (e.g. business, service and social movement unionism), they deliver courses, they help create training structures and policies at all levels of society, they negotiate with governments and employers, but perhaps most importantly, unions help workers sustain a cultural life in the workplace and beyond that positively expresses, throughout its diversity, the unique economic and political standpoint of workers.

Reflective Question

This chapter has dealt with research on learning and the labour movement, but little has been said about how one goes about doing this research. There are of course a variety of ways, but in the book Hidden Knowledge: Organized Labour in the Information Age (Livingstone and Sawchuk, 2003 – Garamond Press) the authors comment that there is an 'easy way' and a 'hard way' to carry out educational research in partnership with labour unions. The hard way involves careful consultation and involvement of both individual union members in the research process but also integration with the union's organizational structure. Review this text and ask yourself: How might the 'hard way' contribute to the types of learning purposes and goals of the labour movement as described at the outset of this chapter?

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