

## Finding the Worker: Adult Education and Workers' Education

There has been a consistent tension between the generalists who focus on adult education and those involved in workers' education. On the one hand, Spencer (2010) maintains that modern adult education grew out of workers' education, at least partially. Others, however, see workers' education and adult education as distinct and substantially different. This tension also carries over into the more specialized area of union education. Worker educators have a specific end goal, the improvement of workers' lives. This can be broadly defined, but generally includes an emphasis on the workers as part of a movement larger than themselves. Union education is more specific, focused on union-based issues particular to organizing and collective bargaining (e.g., filing grievances, building solidarity). This kind of educational program is found exclusively within unions themselves.

The tension that resides between adult education and workers' education and union education lies in both the history of each and in their commitment to different ends. This tension is quite old and predates the beginnings of organized adult education. Jonathan D. Bloom (1990, p. 207) recounts an older version of this tension.

In December 1925 A. J. Muste, chairman of the faculty at Brookwood Labor College, received a letter from his friend Norman Thomas asking his opinion of "these conferences on adult education being promoted by the Carnegie Corporation." In his reply, Muste reported that he and Arthur Calhoun, Brookwood's Director of Studies, had just returned from one such meeting in New York City. "We here at Brookwood are very doubtful indeed whether we are going to go along with the American Association for Adult Education, which it is expected will spring out of these conferences." Those present at the gathering, Muste went on, "pretty definitely represent a point of view, whether conscious or unconsciously. That point of view is not the same as ours." A little more than a year later, Calhoun put it more sharply at Brookwood's annual conference of teachers in workers' education: "There can be nothing but war between the Adult Education movement, with its 'civic' aims, and the Workers' Education movement, with its class mission."

There were several reasons for this initial animus. Some had to do with the funding of the Association by the Carnegie Corporation. Andrew Carnegie had a definite anti-union, anti-worker reputation that made anything connected with his name suspect. In addition, there was a definite feeling that the aims of the Adult Education movement were not social change in the way that workers' education was. Additionally, for Muste, workers' education focused on workers learning among equals, whereas he equated adult education with a more top down approach (Bloom, 1990).

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Another part of the dichotomy between worker and adult education is the confusion over terminology. The education of workers has historically been covered by three terms, workers' education, labor education, and labor studies. According to Dwyer (1977), these terms were developed historically and cover specific chronological time periods. For example, workers' education was used during the first part of the twentieth century until the 1940s. Labor education began to be used in the 1930s and was used predominantly until the late 1960s, when the term labor studies came to pre-eminence.

Since the founding of the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE) there has been little connection between workers'/labor education and adult education. On the part of adult educators, there is an assumption that issues relating to workers fall broadly under the purview of adult education. Yet, labor educators, for the most part, maintain a distance and a basic distrust.

With this distancing in mind, this article looks at how administrators and teachers who consider themselves adult educators but who find themselves in a union environment come to think about their role and their context. This article is based on research conducted with administrators and teachers working in a joint union-employer sponsored program. Joint programs were developed in the steel industry to help steelworkers with the transition out of the steel industry. These career development programs (CDPs) grew out of the devastating retrenchment and downsizing of the steel industry beginning in the 1980s. Funded by both the unions and employers, they provided career and technical educational opportunities, classes to brush up on basic skills, and other classes that were more recreational. In addition, they made agreements with local colleges to offer on-site college programs and, in at least one case, a graduate degree. In short, these CDPs combined elements of a continuing education program with the career function of a career services program. These programs used a wide variety of teachers from many disciplines. They also utilized some full-time teachers and administrators who had an overview of the needs of the students and of the program. However, the CDPs tend

to defy a straightforward characterization in part due to their funding structure (combination of company and worker contribution), how each center is managed and operated, highly individualized approaches to assessing and advising the steelworker clients, and the many types of educational programs they offer.

Each class, in some way, is required to include opportunities for building on reading and math skills, whether it is taxidermy or preparing for a commercial driver's license. A key distinction is that classes offered through the CDPs are not job training for current jobs in the steel companies. The CDP learning opportunities are intended to help steelworkers build upon their existing skills so that

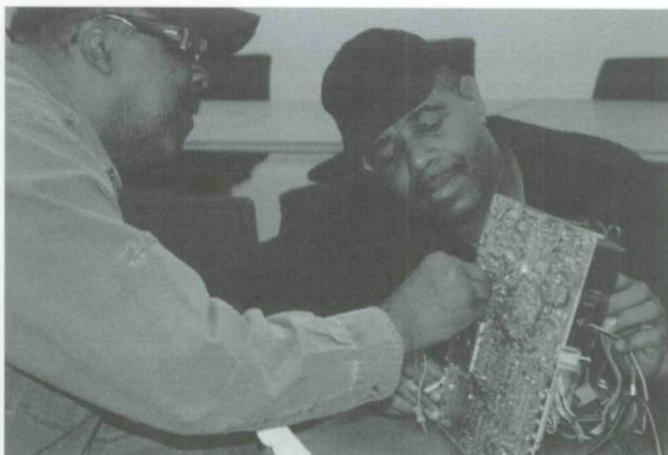
they remain employable in other economic sectors as jobs are lost in the steel industry. However, various types of classes (computer, math, communication) do offer skill enhancements that are useful for those seeking promotions or various types of certifications within the steel industry and need to build up their skill base in certain areas to be eligible for consideration.

This particular paper is a result of our broader study of these CDPs. Over

several years, we have interviewed a number of teachers in the CDPs, observed classes, talked with steelworkers, attended the annual conferences of the CDPs, and participated in several action research projects to gain a nuanced understanding of the identity development of adult educators in the CDPs (Rose, Jeris, & Smith, 2002 & 2005); and their views on the varied purposes of adult education (Rose, Jeris, & Smith, 2004). In this paper we look more closely at their views of the steelworkers as members of a union and as workers. What can we learn about the relationship between adult education and worker education through this examination?

Several issues came out of this study. First, for the most part, these educators were not from the steel industry. Some of them were teachers; others came to the CDP from an administrative background. There was sharp difference in perception between those with a steel background and those without such a background. Of the nine teachers and administrators we have worked with most closely (two men and seven women), only one man

**Figure 1.** *Instructor Jimmy Morson (left) teaches electronics in both steel and auto joint labor/management programs*



had actually worked in the mills and one woman had spent many years in the mills with long experience as a union griever. These two individuals saw steelworkers as, perhaps, lacking in understanding of what the CDP could provide and/or lacking in confidence largely as a result of being away from formal learning settings for a long time, as indicated by the following comment from a participant.

It [the CDP] opens the door because when a steel worker actually comes into our office, they think that the only thing that they have coming out of the steel industry for 25 years or so is a pension. They don't realize their previous experience with organizations, working with their kids. [They] cut themselves short all the time, and I think it opens their eyes a little bit as far as what they actually have done and basically, when we're done talking, I think they feel better about themselves.

Second, as they became more acclimated to the context, the outsiders took a direct interest in the steelworkers as individuals. They realized that their preconceptions were false. In a sense, they went through a transformation as they realized that steelworkers did not, in any way, fit their stereotypes. This point was made repeatedly and their remarks often brought to mind some of the basic assumptions of andragogy (Knowles, 1980). For example, one participant noted,

We know that steelworkers, they need to have a reason. These are people that work and this is not during their time; it's not during release time; they don't get compensated financially for coming to school. So why would they do it? Well, they'll do it if it has some meaning or some purpose in their lives. So taking home improvement classes, taking classes that were about themselves – time management, that had some value. And they came out in great numbers; computers, there's been a keen interest.

Similarly, another administrator with a background in elementary education noted that,

They [the steelworkers] have a lot of energy and motivation and it seems like they have a specific

reason, or they have things motivating them more than younger students because that's the thing to do and they know that they need to do it. The adult learner wants to be there.

Reflecting back on the early days of the CDPs, another administrator remarked,

Well, for one thing, we were led to believe that most of the people we'd be working with were probably functioning under a 6th grade level, that they would have minimal skills. So a great deal of our materials that we brought aboard and had planned on lessons for were their ABE materials or pre-GED or literacy materials. And when they first opened up the doors they screened people, like a pre-test or reading inventory, math inventory and we found that the majority of those readers were functioning at a 12th grade level, 11th grade level. Granted some were in that 7th or 8th, but we certainly did not see the population that we were expecting with these minimal skills.

Finally, though, these educators viewed their task as educating individuals. They were very much focused on this aspect of their work. Many of them came to hold a vision of what this education could look like, and the transformative aspects of this educational experience. Yet the transformation was individual not social. This problem was in many ways foreseen by the union members. Looking back over the last 15 years, one center director noted,

There was a lot of suspicion on the part of the local union members that this [CPD] was a tool of the company; why would the company pay for their education, let them do all this if there were no strings attached? The steelworkers to this day, 12 years later, most of them, I shouldn't say most, but a great percentage of them don't understand the funding. They're still thinking that the company pays for it or the state or local government pay for it or somehow the union. But they don't really understand how much money they're entitled to. So at that point there was none of this understanding back in 1990. So there was a lot of suspicion about who we were. Now you've got a center that talks about remediation and planning for your future, but remediate your skills. So are the people who have the lowest skills and the least confidence going to walk in and fail miserably in front of their peers? They don't know who's running the center, they don't know how they're gonna be treated.

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These educators recognize the individuality of the learners and try to address their needs. Learner confidence seems to be more of an issue than poor literacy skills combined with recollections of previous experiences with schooling that were not particularly good as another administrator noted, "Sometimes they're so lacking in confidence in themselves, you know. And. . . you can see that they could do it. But, they can't see it themselves."

What we see then is that these CDPs realize both the possibilities and the fears of the designers. Of course, these joint programs are by definition hybrids. They do not serve the union exclusively. As an adult education agency, they are focused on the steelworkers as individuals. While the educators who work with them do see the group, it is mostly disembodied, as having a stereotype to overcome. Their focus is on helping these individuals develop their potential. The deeper economic problems that led to the massive layoffs remain untouched and for the most part are not a central focus of these programs. Looking at these deeply innovative, well-designed adult education programs, we are struck by two things. The first is that Muste was correct. Adult education and workers' (or labor) education are two distinct areas. The second is that cooperative educational endeavors between management and labor do not and cannot challenge existing corporate interests and relationships.

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