



Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 31

Issue 1 *September/October* 1990

Article 2

10-1-1990

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Patrick P. McCabe

Bernard M. Baruch College

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Recommended Citation

McCabe, P. P. (1990). The Reading Teacher as a Workplace Literacy Consultant. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 31 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol31/iss1/2

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The Reading Teacher as a Workplace Literacy Consultant

Patrick P. McCabe

A number of leaders in industry and government have asserted that many workers in this country lack the basic skills to perform adequately on the job; they claim that a wave of workplace illiteracy is sweeping this nation as never before. Whether the cause of this problem is perceived to be a deficit in the educational delivery system or a lag in skills due to the sudden technological explosion, it seems that there are many adults who need training in basic workplace skills in order to obtain and keep employment.

Elizabeth Dole, U. S. Secretary of Labor, has stated, "The gap between the skills of our workers and those required in the workplace results in billions of dollars in productivity and time being lost" (1989). According to Bill Wiggernhorn, Vice President of Training and Development at the Motorola Corporation, "It will cost about 35 million dollars over the next three years to bring the workforce up to the necessary sixth and seventh grade mathematics and reading level" (1989). Recently, seeking entry-level workers for jobs ranging from telephone operator to service representative, New York Telephone Company screened more than 22,000 applicants before finding 3,600 meeting

minimum standards for vocabulary, number relationships and problem solving (*Curriculum Update*, 1989).

This is a problem demanding a solution and directly or indirectly affecting all individuals in this country. The solution needs to be a unitary, national priority toward which the resources of both the public and private sectors will be directed. (While it may be simplistic to perceive this problem as unrelated to other social problems in this country, such as poverty, unequal opportunity, and disenfranchisement of whole sections of our national multicultural fabric, one part of the solution can be training programs with a goal of maintaining high employment.) According to Nancy Lynn Bernardon, "New and innovative adult teaching programs must be developed and implemented in order for us to remain competitive" (1989, p.29). Because of the changing world technology, skills which were once commonplace may be outdated; more sophisticated technology has created a demand for new workplace literacy skills. For example, in the robotics industry, reading instrument panels may replace the reading of text; in the automotive repair industry, reading a computer printout will replace reading an automobile manual.

Since "it is often more cost effective for an employer to have an external provider design a generalized curriculum for a particular workplace skill or to simply provide tuition reimbursement for basic workplace skills training that the employee selects from an outside provider" (Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer, 1988, p.27), one part of the solution to this problem has resulted in an evolving partnership between business and education. While there are many in-house programs offered by employers to ensure that employees possess a proficient level of communications skills, corporate in-house personnel proficient in workplace skills

may lack the ability and training to plan, implement, and evaluate the basic literacy skills of others. This has and will continue to create opportunities for outside consultants to become more and more involved in the problems of workplace literacy. Determining objectives, planning to implement strategies to teach mastery of those objectives, and assessing the degree to which the objectives have been learned are skills essential for good teaching. These generic skills, taught in teacher training colleges and programs throughout this country, can be applied to business and industry to help solve the problem of workplace illiteracy.

In a recent joint publication of the U. S. Departments of Labor and Education, a workplace literacy audit — a means of pinpointing a deficiency of workplace skills — was described (U. S. Department of Labor and Education, 1988). According to that document:

A literacy audit is an investigation that leads to definitions of jobs in terms of their basic skills requirements and then to an assessment of the workforce's proficiency in those skills. This procedure is not inexpensive; however, it will yield a detailed picture of job-specific basic skills requirements and should result in training that doesn't waste time or money in non-relevant areas. The tools of a literacy audit are observation, collection and analysis of materials, interviews, and customized tests (p. 13).

There is a striking parallel between the "tools" necessary to implement the steps of the workplace literacy audit (described below) and those skills which are essential to teaching. The educator, in particular an educator with an expertise in the teaching of reading, is the ideal individual to conduct a workplace literacy audit and to contribute to the

effort to upgrade the level of literacy in the workplace. The relationship between each of the steps in the workplace literacy audit and the skills involved in teaching are accomplished through a five-step process.

1) Observation of employees

Employees are observed in order to determine the basic skills they must use in order to perform their job effectively. This process occurs over a number of workdays to note the literacy (or other) skills required to complete a task related to the job.

As one example, this could include observation of cashiers as they perform assorted tasks related to check-out, such as reading coupons, reading inventory sheets, locating the price on an item, reading store sale brochures, reading to respond to questions about product warranties, reading to understand what price to charge for an individual item which is usually sold in larger quantities, and reading a weight scale.

The parallel in education is curriculum development, a task with which all teachers are familiar. A curriculum defines, describes, and prescribes what is to be taught. For example, acquiring knowledge of a given aspect of science or history may be one task that the student must accomplish in order to be successful at a certain grade level in school. This prescribes what the student must accomplish in order to perform a particular job effectively. The curriculum describes the intellectual environment in which the students must thrive in order to be successful in the grade. The curriculum dictates that which is to be taught just as the work environment dictates those skills necessary to complete a job task.

2) Collect materials

Collect all materials that are written and read on the job to determine the degree of skill proficiency an employee must have to do the job well. This can be an analysis of the reading skills necessary to comprehend memos, inventory forms, or requisition slips required for the job. This could also include a readability analysis to determine reading level of the material as well as an analysis of the style and organization of the written presentation.

The discovery that one worker must read cryptic material with many abbreviations while another worker must read lengthier material which has numerous details supplemented by charts and graphs suggests a differentiated approach to workplace literacy for these workers (who may be working in the same department).

There is a close parallel to the planning which social studies and science teachers do when they plan to use a given text with a group of students. A survey of the text reveals which reading skills or strategies may be necessary to comprehend the material successfully. Reading graphs, maps, political cartoons, following directions, or reading critically are some possible skills which might be used as the learner reads the social studies books.

3) Conduct interviews

Interview employees and supervisors to determine their perception of the basic skills needed to do the job. In this step of the literacy audit, top performing employees and supervisors are asked to identify those skills which are necessary to be successful on the job. In addition they are asked how such skills are used by them to complete the job.

This is similar to a teacher asking students about the process they follow in reading. Recent research in reading education suggests that students who have the ability to monitor their reading and thinking processes are better readers compared to readers who cannot do this. According to Frank May, an authority in the field of reading instruction, "A good reader tends to know what she knows and what she doesn't know" (1986, p. 39).

4) Assess skills

Determine if employees have the basic skills necessary to do the job. This involves assessing employees, both formally, through tests, and informally, through observation and interviews, to determine their level of proficiency in relation to a given job or task in the workplace.

The skills necessary to complete this step of the literacy audit are very familiar to the teacher. In the school setting, one way to determine students' levels of reading proficiency, for example, is to administer a teacher-made or commercially developed test. However, "testing," as Howell and Morehead (1987) noted in their discussion of educational assessment practices, "elicits behavior under what may be artificial conditions. All things being equal, observation is superior to testing because it supplies information about behavior that may be less strongly influenced by the evaluator or the evaluation process itself" (p. 16). Observing and monitoring a student reading content area material, such as a social studies or science text, and noting problems, is an additional way to determine if the student will be successful in comprehending the material, just as observing and monitoring employees in the workplace will help to determine who has a given skill and who lacks that skill.

5) Develop assessment measures

Build tests that ask questions relating specifically to the employees' job or job group. In this step the person conducting the literacy audit uses job-related language and style in situations and formats in which the skills being tested will occur. Also, the employee is asked to perform the tasks that simulate what he or she encounters on the job.

The ability to ask the correct questions is a crucial skill which teachers possess. Designing questions to determine mastery of specific skills is critical to a valid interpretation of the success of instruction. For example, responding correctly to a question which requires a "yes" or "no" answer will not reveal a depth of understanding which may be critical to the completion of a given task whether it is in the workplace or in the classroom in an elementary, middle, or high school.

In summary, those skills which teachers possess and which are outlined above are generic and can be applied to any teaching-learning situation. Working closely with a content expert from the particular business, the professional educator can make a major contribution to the workplace literacy effort in this country. The professional educator's strength is in the process of designing, implementing, and evaluating a program; the businessperson's strength is in knowledge of the content of the workplace literacy program. Both working together can develop a program tailored to the needs of the particular business or company involved. Since the skills which educators and businesspeople possess regarding workplace literacy are complementary, one model describing an educational program for the improvement of workplace literacy skills calls for a team effort involving professionals from different segments of our society working cooperatively toward a common goal.

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Patrick P. McCabe is a faculty member in the Department of Education at Bernard M. Baruch College, City College of New York, in New York City.

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