

Computer networks and labour education: A joint presentation by Jeff Taylor (Athabasca University) and Derek Briton (University of Alberta)

This portion of the symposium involves an ongoing research project funded by the TeleLearning Network of Centres of Excellence. The TeleLearning Project is a Canada-wide study that brings together a diverse group of researchers and educators to develop innovative instructional platforms and techniques educators can use to foster knowledge building and collaborative learning. One aspect of this nationwide study will then be focussed upon: Developing Successful TeleLearning Strategies for Adult Educators. The research project in question brings together educators and learners to develop and test innovative pedagogical strategies educators can use to deliver online labour education courses. The goal of the project is to provide educators with effective computer-mediated communication strategies. Research conducted after the recent delivery of two labour education courses on the Internet will provide the basis for a discussion wherein, among other things, tentative responses to some the research questions that inform this labour education portion of the TeleLearning project will be advanced.

The discussion will address a number of issues of particular concern to educators investigating the possibility of using computer-mediated communication to deliver labour education courses. A range of issues will be addressed during this segment of the symposium. For example, the relationship between labour education, distance education, and computer-based education will be explored, as will the effects of computer-based delivery on labour education courses traditionally delivered at a distance. The preparation of learning materials for computer-mediated delivery modes will be addressed, along with the impact of hypermedia on the preparation of learning materials. The effects of hypermedia-based course materials on individual learning processes will be taken up, as will the possible use of computer-based forms of delivery to foster the development of community and solidarity in an electronic environment. The relationship between computer-mediated interaction and pre-existing solidarities will be investigated, and the quality of interaction computer-mediated communication fosters among conference participants will be discussed. Issues of time—both on- and off-line—will be addressed, from the point of view of participants and moderators/instructors. In addition, the amount of technical support computer-mediated communication courses require will also be discussed. Online discussions, survey responses, and observational data gathered during the delivery of an eight-week “Labour Education on the Internet” course will be drawn upon to offer insights into the kinds of issues educators must be sensitive to when employing computer-mediated forms of delivery.

The course in question comprises of two main units. The first unit provides course participants with the opportunity to enter into a discussion regarding the relationship between labour education, distance education, and computer-based education. The first four weeks (the first half) of the course, is designed to provide participants with a general introduction to the relationship between labour education, distance education and computer-mediated education. This unit is divided into four sections: the first provides a brief overview of the purpose and practice of labour education—what is it? how do we do it? is it a special form of education?—the second introduces course participants to the field of distance education—what is it? how do we do it? is it different than other forms of education?—the third section examines the relationship between labour education and distance education—is it possible to deliver labour education via distance education? if not, why not? if so, how do we do it?—and the fourth and final section investigates the special case of computer-mediated distance education—is this a special form of distance education? how might this medium be used for labour education? does

it change how we do labour education? By the end of the first unit, participants are expected to have a better understanding of the relationship between these three phenomena.

The second four weeks (the second half) of the course, is designed to provide participants with an introduction to how labour-oriented material can be offered via an electronic medium. In this unit, discussion is structured around the topic of “Labour and the Global Economy.” This is a subject that is often taught in union and labour studies courses. This unit is also divided into four sections that take participants through the main issues in the area and show them how to use internet-based tools and resources can be use to teach this topic: the first provides a brief overview of the global economy—What are the forces that and events that helped shape the postwar economy? What are the interests and motivations of those who are promoting the establishment of a new world order?—the second introduces course participants to various ways labour groups around the world are organizing to resist neoliberal, micro- and macro-economic policies—Are such policies helping to stimulate or further suppress economic performance?—section three examines alternative economic strategies that have been proposed by labour groups around the world—Are such solutions valid and viable?—the fourth and final section investigates several labour-supported alternatives to neoliberal micro- and macro-economic policies of restructuring, deregulation, and retrenchment. By the end of the second unit, participants are expected to have a better understanding of the differences between neoliberal micro- and macro-economic policies of restructuring, deregulation, and retrenchment and; and alternative economic policies that reflect the interests of labour.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is an integral component of this course. The CMC system the course uses incorporates electronic mail, computer conferencing, and electronic file transfers. Consequently, communication among course participants and the moderator on a one-to-one and on a group basis is possible on a daily basis. This method allows for interaction at mutually convenient times and it promotes discussion of the course material. The course moderator leads and facilitates group discussions around the course topics. Each week the moderator broadcasts messages in the computer conference, outlining various tasks and posing questions for discussion. Participants do not have to work online at prescribed times, but are expected to make contributions to the conference discussion every week. Access to the computer system is provided twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.