

# **Tightrope Walkers and Solidarity Sisters: Critical Workplace Educators in the Garment Industry**

**by Tara Fenwick, University of Alberta**

## **Tightrope Walkers and Solidarity Sisters: Critical Workplace Educators in the Garment Industry**

**Tara Fenwic, University of Alberta, Canada**

**Abstract:** This article focuses on the complex negotiations of critical workplace educators positioned amongst contradictory agendas and discourses in the workplace. While philosophically aligned with critical pedagogical agendas of transformation and collective action for workplace change, these educators perform an array of pedagogic articulations in everyday practice to secure their continued presence in the workplace. What becomes evident in these seemingly opposing articulations are various strategic political positionings of educators alongside their juggling of demands, attachments and inter-identifications with both learners and managers. The pedagogy that emerges challenges conventional binaries of ‘transformative’ and ‘reproductive’ learning. Dynamics of transformation and liberation as well as reproduction and subjugation appear to be interlinked, along with expanding nets of social relations that blur power hierarchies and spatial boundaries, in a pedagogy that ultimately appears to mobilise hope and agency among workers. The workplace educator works a delicate balance of these dynamics to survive. The argument is based on a case study of a garment factory in Canada in which an adult education programme managed to thrive for 17 years: both workers and educators were interviewed in depth.

Some advocates for learning in work argue that spaces for critical education are possible in the workplace despite exploitive, alienating relations and colonisation by human capital ideologies yoking learning to ‘employability’, ‘skill deficits’, and productivity. Kincheloe (1999), Livingstone and Sawchuk (2004), Brookfield (2001) and Welton (1995) all hold out hope for learning that promotes more just, equitable, life-giving and sustainable work conditions. But just what is the nature of critical learning in work? What are its limitations and possibilities? What pedagogical entry points are available to adult educators to enhance critical learning in the workplace, and what specific purposes should guide their efforts?

These were the questions we were asking ourselves a year ago in the midst of a case study of JeansCo, a garment factory in western Canada (Fenwick and Schiebelbein 2005).

Garment work in Canada has shifted across regions and decades since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in its conditions of work, skill demands of workers, regulatory protection and income structures. These changes have been influenced by a variety of confluencing factors: changing technologies in both equipment and processes (such as time-task engineering); the extent and nature of union presence in factories; and globalisation. All of these factors were reflected powerfully in the workers' stories of conditions and experiences at JeansCo. Most were immigrant women who had labored in this plant for periods of 10-30 years, supporting extended families, and working through issues of cultural adjustment, health and family. The work itself was difficult: fragmented, highly regulated and high-pressure piecework reducing the body to a set of limited machinelike motions. Workers often introduced themselves according to their task: 'I'm front pocket', 'I'm inseam'.

The plant sponsored English language learning classes, conducted by externally contracted educators led by an adult educator who characterised them as 'change agents' interested in 'transformative learning' drawing from Freirian pedagogy<sup>1</sup>. As we progressed in the study and its analysis, certain internal contradictions became evident within both the educators' approaches to these classes, and the outcomes reported by the workers. We became interested in particular in the educators' complex negotiations of contradictory discourses and agendas in their conduct of the classes, and the educators' expanded roles in factory life. We also became interested in the emergent character of the curricula that, in the hands of these educators, expanded to something far beyond the remit of providing basic English training to workers, embracing elements of both critical liberatory education while reinforcing certain systemic structures of the plant. While there is nothing new about the fact that workplace educators must

---

<sup>1</sup> While many accounts now exist of just what comprises 'Freirian' pedagogy, typically this phrase refers to literacy pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire that emphasises dialogue as learners working with each other, praxis or informed action to make a difference in the world, conscientization or consciousness of having power to transform reality, and situating educational activity in the lived experience of participants (Taylor, 1993).

walk a fine line in profit-making organisations to ensure their continued presence and the survival of their programmes, it is useful to examine the nature of this tightrope walk as a pedagogical practice. This article examines two interrelated dynamics: (1) the negotiations of the adult educators in conducting workplace education; and (2) the complex character of the pedagogy and learning described by both educators and their students, the garment worker-learners. This educational approach is neither critical in the traditional sense of critical pedagogy nor reproductive of gendered, hierarchical relations as are some English workplace programmes (Harper 1996), yet appears to have promoted critical learning, voice and solidarity among the workers.

### **Critical Education and Language Learning in the Workplace**

Critical adult learning theorists aligned with Marxist perspectives (Allman 2001; Holst 2002) position education as a site for revolutionary social transformation, e.g. to abolish capitalism and liberate workers from exchange relations, through participatory dialogues in dialectic with collective action. In this view, critical learning *within* capitalist institutions such as the workplace is completely untenable, for what emerges would always be a domesticated shadow of critical struggles against oppression, exploitation and inequity. But others argue that greater equity and democracy can be wrought in the workplace itself through critical education. Brookfield's (2001:5) concern is 'to reconfigure the workplace as a site for the exercise of human creativity'; a project requiring a 'defensive flexibility' and 'a self-critical, self-referential stance'. Thus criticality remains flexible and responsive to its (workplace) circumstances, neither establishing a new orthodoxy nor neglecting reflexivity. Welton (1995) also promotes a vision for 'developmental' workplaces, though rooted somewhat differently in Habermasian ideals where learning is 'extension of communicative action into systemic domains' (Welton 1995: 144). Nonetheless Welton shares the belief that workplace education can foster three key objectives of critical learning that he borrows from Brian Fay: collective autonomy, self-clarity

and capacity to defend one's rights. In a similar vein, Livingstone and Sawchuk (2004:28) claim their conviction 'that learning should enhance working people's individual and collective agency in the social world and also in the process of representing that world'.

All of these articulations represent critical workplace learning as radical transformation among workers: empowerment purposed towards workplace reform. Transformation is positioned in opposition to reproduction, where learning accommodates workers to exploitive, hierarchical structures, subjugating people and reproducing existing (inequitable) power relations. However, this traditional dualism may be overly simplistic. In studying immigrant women garment workers learning ICT skills, Mirchandani and her colleagues (2002) show that learning can be simultaneously reproductive and transformative. Empowerment of workers needs to be understood from different standpoints, and needs to appreciate both how reproductive/transformational learnings are entwined, and what workers themselves want to learn. In this vein, critical workplace learning is understood to be multi-faceted and internally contradictory. Church and her collaborators (2000) draw attention to learning in work as combining 'organisational learning', 'reshaping the definition of self' and 'solidarity learning'. Solidarity in their findings is not necessarily confined to political learning, that is, workers engaging in social action to challenge their status. In fact, Church et al. argue that solidarity is visible when workers such as immigrant women learn to develop a collective identity, and share strategies for negotiating their lives as non-English-speaking immigrants.

English language education in the workplace appears to be a particularly important site where these contradictory dynamics are played out. Conventional approaches (e.g., Gillespie 1996) emphasise language training to shape immigrant workers for labour force needs, and focus on programme engineering and partnerships with employers. Others emphasise how various power relations, including company ownership, shape workplace learning and language practices (Gowan 1992; Yoong and Cervero 2005). Farrell (2000:3) asserts that a key function of

workplace language education, which she frames broadly as both formal and informal pedagogies, is ‘a strategic intervention in the social practices and social relationships of work and it is therefore implicated in the systematic formation of working identities’.

Traditional gendered identities and hierarchical workplace relations can actually be reinforced through the language practices workers learn, as Harper (1996) shows in her study of an English-in-the-Workplace programme for immigrant women employed as garment workers. Harper locates one problem in the ‘personal’ focus of the pedagogy, and calls for more critical pedagogical approaches to provoke workers’ sense of their rights and conditions. In contrast is Gallo’s study of a ‘learner centred workplace literacy programme’ based on learner-generated photos and stories to analyse their experiences in adapting to and changing their work environments. Gallo (2002) finds the programme ‘transformative’ for learners, and charges workplace educators to do more of this learner-centered work to raise critical awareness and empowerment, although just how this is to occur given the tensions is less clear. A comparison of these two studies reveals that what exactly is considered ‘critical’ in workplace education and language learning is less than consensual.

Possible ways through the contradictions can be glimpsed through the practices of those who are doing critical workplace education. Analyses of this difficult work have pointed to the tensions of exposing and challenging power structures within organisations focused on measurable outcomes, where those footing the bills for workplace education rarely appreciate such challenge. Nash (2001) describes her participatory approaches to workplace literacy education as a ‘delicate’ negotiation of liberatory activities within existing workplace and training structures. She writes, ‘Use every opportunity to inquire about how the workplace runs and how it affects our lives’ (2001: 190). Like Nash, Barndt (2001) recommends critical language education with workers that encourages people to work participatively to ‘name’ their conditions and to ‘make’ their worlds by reclaiming production. Tensions are inevitable but are

opportunities for learning, writes Barndt, that should be engaged directly and creatively with learners. A frequently referenced resource among these and other critical workplace educators is *Learning Work*, in which Simon, Diplo and Schenke (1991) describe specific approaches to critical education through work-based projects and internships rooted in Freirian pedagogy. Yet the inherent dilemmas of such practice within hierarchical, patriarchal, control-and-competence workplace structures such as garment factories are by now well-recognised (Fenwick 2004).

What also is well-acknowledged is that workplace education cannot be contained, as though it lives only in a formally designated class setting. Learning spaces flourish in and cross over all sorts of discursive and material practices in the work environment: there is no clear boundary between social, work and learning space (Solomon, Boud and Rooney, 2006). Arguably, this would be especially so for language learning in the workplace, which can be presumed to permeate work practices, social interactions, and the frequent overlap between them. And as for the critical intent within these intersecting spaces, Brookfield (2005) suggests that workplace pedagogy can fuse ideology critique with a pragmatism focused on flexible, experimental improvement of work conditions, which are unpredictable and open to continuous reformulation. This approach is a critical/pragmatism that Brookfield suggests will ensure responsiveness and reflexivity of the critical intent. The problem from critical educators' point of view is achieving this flexible pursuit while avoiding dilution or subversion of a core critical intent, a problem which begs the question: where is the line defining this critical intent, and at what point does pragmatic, flexible compromise erase this intent altogether?

The study helps illuminate the multiple dances workplace educators play inside and around this line. Indeed, to follow Farrell's (2001) argument, these workplace educators are 'discourse technologists' who help determine what counts as knowledge and what discursive practices become standardised in the workplace.

## Research Methods

The case study was precipitated by the impending closure of JeansCo in western Canada, valued as an historic site and largest employer of immigrants in the city. The findings reported in this article formed only part of a larger study involving several community partners<sup>2</sup> examining the history of working life and union activity in JeansCo from its inception in 1911 to closure in 2004. For the project portion reported here, four instructors of the English language programme and over 35 women (and some men) garment workers at JeansCo were interviewed in-depth, through open-ended conversations that explored their everyday work and learning experiences. Participants were recruited through both personal and open invitation in plant and community networks. Educators interviewed were all white Canadian-born women, including the original programme director who had taught at JeansCo for 17 years, the coordinator who had taught there for 15 years, and two educators had been involved for 10-12 years. All worker participants had lived in Canada for 15 years or more. Interviews were conducted in English and Cantonese at participants' homes or other sites (coffee shops, educators' offices) where possible, although some preferred to be interviewed onsite at JeansCo. We asked educators to describe the programme and its choices, as well as their personal challenges, strategies, and experiences at JeansCo. Worker participants were asked to describe their work activities and conditions as these changed over time, their relationships with other workers, and their experiences in union and educational activities. Most of the women interviewed had been employed as sewing machine operators, though some had also been supervisors or had taken roles in union activities: the men interviewed had worked as cutters. All interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed, then analysed inductively and interpretively to generate themes. In addition to the interviews, documents and artifacts were also collected: historical records, photos, advertisements and

---

<sup>2</sup> Partners included Catherine Cole Associates, Ground Zero Productions, Edmonton Community Foundation, Provincial Museum Archives, University of Alberta, and the Provincial Museum of Alberta.

garment products. Observation and film footage was recorded of the plants' operations before it shut down. While the overall project addressed a range of questions related to labor history, garment work and immigrant women's labour, the particular concerns of this article are restricted to adult educators' and workers' narratives related to the language programme.

### **JeansCo and the Garment Industry**

Arguments about work learning and education, as Edwards and Nicoll (2004) have emphasised, need to be carefully situated in particular workplaces to examine how pedagogies are embedded in particular space-time arrangements. Education in the garment industry is especially important to contextualise, because a range of historical processes and globalisation patterns have constructed labour conditions that rank among the most exploitive imaginable. Workers in Canada's garment industry traditionally have been mostly women (76%), about 50% being immigrants (Ng, 2002). Many argue that in the garment industry in particular, the category of 'immigrant women' has served to commodify them to employers, reinforcing their class position in providing cheap, docile labour to the state in exploitive conditions often permeated with racism and sexism (Gannage 1999; Ng 1996). Thus garment factories have relied on low wages and pools of cheap labour to ensure their competitive advantage. Women typically are relegated to the lowest-paying, supposedly unskilled jobs – as sewing machine operators and pressers. Yanz et al. (1999) show that many garment factories became unionised in the mid-twentieth century to offer stable employment, decent wages and working conditions. However globalisation brought a widespread closure of these plants in the 1990s, with a loss of 33,000 jobs in Canada 1989-1993. Studies conducted by Ng (2002), Mirchandani (2002) and others have raised urgent concern over the low wages, isolation, and exploitation of these women and the web of market relations that ensures their continued oppression: 'We will thus see the increasing use of sweatshops and homebased work, as manufacturers and jobbers compete in the international market for garment production.... Canadian garment workers will face increasingly



similar working and living conditions as their third world counterparts' (Ng 2002: 79). Even in those plants that remained open in the 1990s, Livingstone and Sawchuk (with Clara Morgan) (2004: 224) claim that the immigrant women laboring in them were among the most disadvantaged workers in Canada, in highly gendered division of labor in both the garment industry and in 'heavy' patriarchal domestic arrangements.

JeansCo was opened in 1911 to capitalise on the growing demand for durable workwear for miners and railway workers in western Canada. Unionised since its inception, its reputation throughout its history in fact was for benevolent management, progressive conditions, and decent wages. By 1961, JeansCo employed over 1,500 workers. Its success attracted the attention of the largest jeans manufacturer in the US at the time, which acquired a majority interest and subsequently became a multi-national garment firm. Wages at JeansCo until the late 1980s were structured by piecework, which encouraged a relentless pace and inevitable consequences: errors that affected workers' pay, accidents and repetitive strain injuries

The majority of workers were immigrant women operating sewing machines. Men could take jobs as cutters or equipment technicians, which were better paid, segregated in other rooms, and allowed more physical freedom of movement. The worker population reflected waves of immigrants to Canada that, during the period of the English programme 1987-2004, were mostly from Asia and particularly mainland China. Describing the plant as a 'united nations', women workers explained that ethnic groups tended to work and eat lunch together. While there wasn't outright tension, there was infrequent communication across groups and not a little stereotyping of one another's ethnic behaviours. Overall the women workers said that while work tasks and conditions were sometimes difficult, they felt grateful to be paid more than they could expect in any other job, given their lack of English. Workers also, almost unanimously, viewed the plant and instructors as a 'family': they valued the company social gatherings, charity work, and

described close friendships with co-workers. Most women had laboured at the plant for 15 to 35 years, some performing the same task (such as sewing a buttonhole) for years at a time.

JeansCo closed in December 2004, throwing 475 employees out of work with a small stipend as termination pay. Many workers left the plant with the same vocational skills they developed in their first three months at work, and had to turn to immigrant settlement agencies for assistance even after decades of working for the company. Operations were moved off shore to Haiti.

Thus in this brief history can be seen the effects on garment work of changing technologies in process and equipment to increase productivity, the rather flaccid union presence, and the vulnerability of Canadian garment plants first in proximity to the US market and then through globalisation of garment work. JeansCo managed to retain its reputation among the workers over the years as a benevolent employer maintaining relatively decent conditions and wages. Yet there was almost no compensation provided for workers' long-term service and little development of workers to enable their mobility outside the factory. The labour division and reward structures were clearly gendered. Little critical education was offered by the union, and no organised protest mounted when JeansCo shut down in 2004.

### **The Language Education Programme at JeansCo**

In 1987 JeansCo made available English-as-Second-Language programmes that continued until the plant closed in 2004. JeansCo contracted a workplace educator, who will be called Catherine in this discussion, to develop and direct the instruction. Catherine recruited other educators, subcontracted and supervised their work directly: they never became company employees. The programme was fully funded by federal and provincial governments for three years. When these funds stopped, the company agreed to continue funding the classes because, according to Catherine, communication with non-English speakers was perceived a major inhibitor to plant efficiency. According to the educators, JeansCo was exceptionally

accommodating, lending staff offices for classes and building cupboards for learning materials: however, physical space was the key limitation of the programme size. All educators claimed that the general manager was particularly supportive, treating them as ‘the experts’. Classes ran continuously Monday to Friday following workers’ shift ends and Saturday mornings. Students elected to remain in the programme anywhere from 2 to 17 years. At any given time, altogether an average of 50-60 worker-learners were enrolled with over 60% of JeansCo garment workers completing at least one class session. Most worker-learners were women, as were the majority of plant workers.

All of the educators professed a philosophy of English language education aligned with Freirian approaches, to the extent that they strove to develop a dialogic pedagogy based on events and objects derived from the learners’ own lives and work, from which not only language learning but also participatory action would be promoted. Topics in the programme included health, family and work problems brought by participants, and news and civic issues. As well, JeansCo staff requested that classes address new work policies (e.g. safety) or activities like completing repair cards and reporting accidents. The evaluation system was based on learner interviews to determine the impact of the classes on their lives. Catherine emphasised, ‘We weren’t a package. We were an organic thing that had a life of its own and all of us were affected by this thing’. The educators found themselves integrated into learners’ lives and company activities such as volunteer projects and picnics.

### **Outcomes of the Language Education Programme: Variations in Criticality**

According to the four educators Catherine, Joan, Marg and Hermione, these learner interviews and their own observations revealed a number of unanticipated benefits of the workplace English programme.

#### **Increased participation**

Impact on families was first, in that parents could understand their kids and began going to the schools for parent-teacher interviews, taking messages on the phone and making doctor's appointments. Joan tells a story of one woman's excitement when she was able to navigate the light-rail transit for the first time, asking the right questions to get to the right trains. Educators and workers frequently referred to the personal confidence that learners developed. Marg recalled 'One woman said her life had changed because of the classes, being more open, not being so narrow and .... caring about other people and that kind of thing... One woman said her husband had been told by different men at the plant, you have to be careful of those Levi women because they're very strong women'. Fu, a sewing machine operator who remained in the programme for over 5 years, said 'Since I went to learn English that I learned, I know a lot more things. It helped me to become more ambitious' (Fu). Along with confidence, learners accumulated health and civic information that enabled even broader participation:

They had questions about you know, what's this pap smear thing we're supposed to get every year and why should we get a mammogram? And they, they brought personal things about their families and their fears, their concerns, so ... there was a great deal of information giving about the community, about the country. When it was election time we bent over backwards trying to get all the information about the different parties and we had a mock election... (Catherine)

Catherine noted that when learners went to vote in the actual provincial election, most said they voted for the reigning conservative party that had cut so many social programmes directly impacting them. Why? Because it was the 'middle way', they explained: rocking the boat or resisting the dominant power is undesirable. So while the programme certainly encouraged learners to participate more widely in their communities and society, most did so to adapt to the prevailing structures.

### **Self-sufficiency and solidarity**

Because the programme integrated a wide range of practical information according to what emerged, worker-learners became more self-sufficient: 'They taught you about work things. Teach you how to talk, how to repair the sewing machine, how to write, they wanted you

to learn things' (Jia, garment worker). The worker-learners' increased participation affected social relations in the workplace, according a new status to those taking the language classes from other workers:

A lot of the people whose English got better they would interpret for problems at the plant and things like that. As so there was a respect of people in the English classes. They would be used by other employees to get the real message from union meetings....  
(Sushila, garment worker)

Educators believed, too, that the language programme helped foster solidarity among worker-learners. Ethnic groups which often did not mix on the plant floor or on lunch breaks were mixed together in language classes, where time was spent getting to know one another. Joan believed that because individual workers often had to miss classes to work overtime, a 'collaborative curriculum' developed where 'there was a cooperation among all the learners ... learners participated when they could, caught up when they had to miss, everyone took responsibility'. At the confluence of worker-learners' increased confidence, status, participation in everyday workplace communication and, for some, new participation in union activities, they began to challenge certain practices. Hermione recalled, 'One of the supervisors said, oh, they're getting lippy ... the workers, because they could talk now'. Magda, a garment worker, explained:

As people learned that they had more rights, they stand up more to their supervisors. – 'Listen, if you don't help me' - like talking to a supervisor – 'I can go and talk to management'. It was a learning process, and then they would teach their friends. They got more and more confident.

'Suggestion box' was a pedagogic activity where workers framed a workplace issue and proposed solution in written English. When they read and discussed these issues together, common problems would emerge. Then they would take a couple of classes to role play approaching a staff person about the issue. Once, Joan recalled, the issue was so important that the general manager wanted to meet the people who raised it. With coaching, those women did so: 'They were scared at first, but they had the courage . . . the whole class celebrated'. The workers' involvement in abolishing piecework pay was also considered an indirect outcome of the language learning programme. Catherine explained,

The workers had enough English to understand negotiating a process to get off piece work onto wage employment which was a hugely freeing thing for the women... I was told by the HR people that this change would not have come about if it weren't for the English classes.

### **Limited criticality**

So while the dialogic, emergent education programme appeared to play a substantial role in helping increase workers' overall understanding of and participation in workplace, community and family activities, the critical nature of this participation appears to be limited. Worker interviewees demonstrated an awareness of their rights, strength in cooperation, and sense of worth developed through the classes and the new forms of their workplace participation enabled by the classes. They challenged some local issues, although focused this challenge on their immediate supervisors, and they participated with union assistance to change wage policies. However, workers never criticised JeansCo management, even when the plant announced sudden closure. In fact, interviewees told us many workers were crying not at the loss of their jobs, but at the loss of their community, their 'family': 'that was my second home, you know' (Ling, garment worker). Workers defended management's decision to close, and asked researchers to delete from our report the critique of JeansCo's offshoring of their jobs to Haiti sweatshops. Yet assessment of the programme's criticality must consider the cultural issues and personal histories of persecution influencing some immigrant workers' learning and critical participation, such as those prescribing a 'middle way'. What surely can be considered as part of workers' critical learning influenced by the classes was their increased capacity to act, individually and collectively, on behalf of their own interests. When asked to summarise important programme outcomes, Hermione said, 'There's a tremendous sense of um, centeredness, you know, [workers'] know where they are, they know where they're going'.

### **Adult Educators Negotiating the Workplace**

That the language education programme survived for 17 years and for 14 years without any funding outside the company is notable. That it managed to do so as a wide-ranging adult

education programme in health and family issues, as well as helping learners develop confidence and strategies to confront supervisors, is remarkable.

### **Inside outsiders**

Educators seemed to be walking different lines separating workers from managers, learner needs from company demands, rule and role compliance from resistance, and inside from outside the company community. The educators insisted on remaining independent contractors to maintain ‘credibility in the eyes of the learners’: ‘our loyalties were ours to define’ (Marg, educator). But educators also were invited to, and eventually became organisers and volunteers in, company socials and community projects. The educators also became immersed in the workers’ lives, developing long friendships with families and attending weddings and family events. Catherine continued to meet monthly with worker-learners after the plant closure to discuss labour concerns and provide support in job-finding. In many ways the educators became inter-identified with the learners, as sisters in solidarity:

I feel that these women in some way live in me and I in some way live in them. And there’s a sisterhood . . . there is a sense that it’s not just about being a teacher and a student. We’re a group of women and life has brought us into different context but we honour and appreciate one another for who we are. (Catherine, educator)

### **Educators as company and union resources**

At the same time as they focused classes on learners’ stories and questions, the educators saw themselves as ‘definite resources for the company’, transmitting to the workers policies and information: ‘anything that the plant wanted communicated’ (Catherine). And, educators tried to ensure that they balanced the union’s needs, using the collective agreement as a resource and encouraging workers to attend union meetings. Juggling of materials was continuous, but it was in juggling interests that the educators entered trickier negotiations. For example, as worker-learners became emboldened to name problems in their workplace, they would bring to class particular conflicts with supervisors or grievances about unfair practices. Sometimes the educators would help learners problem-solve in ways to respect the hierarchy and maintain

peace, not confront problematic structures: ‘well, this is a better way to deal with it rather than getting angry and upset, you know’ (Hermione, educator). But at times, educators took up issues directly with managers that learners raised in class:

We had to be very, very careful about that ... because we could (a) get into a lot of trouble yourself and (b) you’re representing the company so you can’t sort of side with the, you know ‘these guys are bad’. Cause that just wasn’t tolerated, you just didn’t do that. (Hermione, educator)

### **Tensions**

One outfall was tension among supervisors concerned about ‘lippy’ workers: ‘some of them didn’t trust the English classes’ (Hermione). In fact, educators found some supervisors unhappy at worker-learners’ new abilities such as filling out repair cards. Joan claimed that ‘We were on both sides of the camp’, and that much of the educators’ success in negotiating these tensions was due to the program coordinator, Marg, who had ‘incredible, incredible skills ... manoeuvring those situations so that nobody is defensive’ and ‘was a large part of the activation of really good ideas’ (Joan, educator).

Overtime (OT) was one site of tension that illustrated the educators’ delicate negotiations. Supervisors’ evaluations depended on output measures, and when the plan went into high modes of production, supervisors would request OT from workers. Working OT would mean skipping English class, which at first created fragmentation in the pedagogy and brought management concern about program continuation with the attendance drop. Worried both about losing program continuity and about workers’ exhaustion, educators tried making rules about program attendance. This naturally prompted conflict with supervisors, and caught workers in difficult choices who wanted the extra income, good relations with supervisors, future opportunities for OT, as well as participation in the program. But rather than confront managers about OT and production structures, the educators decided to adopt a much more flexible pedagogic style allowing learners to come when they could. Joan claimed that what emerged was



a cooperative approach of mutual responsibility among the worker-learners looking after one another as they took turns accepting OT. Indeed, flexibility was a dominant approach of educators from finding and appropriating unconventional spaces for classes, to adjusting pedagogy to whatever learners turned up and whatever topics were most alive for learners: ‘the curriculum became the people in the moment’ (Catherine, educator). Marg emphasised that good relationships all round are vital to keep the workplace education program open and maintain its dynamic nature and transformative potential. For workplace educators, their optimal positioning in these relationships is far from clear, even in simple everyday interaction with company staff ‘where you come into the office area and if you’re too chatty then, well you see that’s a problem but if you just walk by and ignore people, that’s a problem too.’ Overall, Catherine described workplace education as being...

...like a tightrope walker and you try your best to serve the interests of the individuals that are in the class, the company and the union and you try to keep those things in balance and if you’re good you can and I - I can’t say that I’ve ever fallen off the tightrope. Well, come really close (laughs).

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this exploration of how educators negotiate different discourses and agendas in the workplace and the character of the pedagogy that emerges, some interesting contradictions are evident. The educators perceived themselves as change agents fostering critical, even transformative, learning. Notions of critical workplace education, as the earlier discussion showed, adopt varying hues and intensities. Summarising these, Antonacopoulou (1999) advocates providing voice for the repressed and marginalised, exposing assumptions and values, revealing the use of power and control, and challenging inequities and sacrifices made in the name of efficiency, effectiveness and profitability, through a self-reflexive critique of rhetoric, tradition, authority, objectivity. Against these criteria, the language education program at JeansCo perhaps falls short of challenging core structures and awakening workers to the

dynamics of labour process and globalisation that sustained their exploitation by and dependence on the employer they perceived so benevolently.

Yet over time, the workplace programme achieved important outcomes that arguably are foundational to more radical outcomes of exposing power and challenging inequities. According to both educators and workers the programme fostered worker-learners' sense of rights and self-worth, communicative capacities and confidence to express these, and cooperative links that cut across ethnic groupings. Some class participants exercised voice and found ways to challenge local unfair practices, supported by the language programme. Some collective solidarity formed, along with a strong sociality of friendship, interconnection, and mutual support. This sociality was critical for women confronting the daunting dilemmas of adapting to Canadian society as non-English speaking immigrants, many with limited formal education. The sociality existed alongside and in some ways offset the fragmentation of work tasks, isolation and competition induced with focus on speed of production. Worker-learners also developed a mutual dependence on one another, not just their employer, for broader learning about health, family, and everyday survival strategies. Perhaps most important, these sites offered a legitimate temporal and relational space of renewal and rest from the mechanised rush of machine work and the relentless after-hours domestic labour awaiting them:

a space where they could reclaim the natural abilities of the human being to think, to create, to laugh. ... So they loved it when something funny would happen. They loved to be able to vent when they were upset about something that had happened during the day and a lot of that went on. But it was a, it was a sharing time ... all during the day they were push, push, push, push, then they'd go home ... and cook dinner and do laundry ... and so they were tired. But that was precious time that they could sit down with one another and laugh and talk and be.

Overall, these results concur with Mirchandani et al. (2002), that there is not a clear *either-or* distinguishing transformative and reproductive learning, but unexpected continuities and disjunctures between them. While Mirchandani's study examines ICT learning of women immigrant garment workers, the language learning at JeansCo reflects similar blurring and

complexity. As Catherine suggests, ‘The real question was what difference are these classes making in people’s lives, how are their lives better because they’re participating in the English class?’ Worker-learners developed distinct identities, confidence, ambition and pride, while they learned subjugations like following company rules, respecting managerial hierarchies, and managing their anger over unfair practices. Yet they also learned to find spaces and strategies to confront and resist oppression to a limited extent with minimal cost to their livelihood and safety. Finally, they achieved recognition from supervisors, family members, themselves and one other as being actors in communities, not bodies welded to machines.

A key to this learning and, for some workers, development of full literacy, seemed to be the longevity of the programme and its continuing support by JeansCo. Material support was linked with varying degrees of emotional and relational support on the part of managers and union. To secure this critical support, workplace educators perform an array of pedagogic articulations in everyday practice. What becomes evident in these seemingly opposing articulations are various strategic political positionings of educators alongside their juggling of demands, pedagogic agendas, and attachments with both learners and managers. Sometimes tightrope walker and other times solidarity sister, the workplace educator juggles on a delicate balance of these dynamics to survive and sustain the programme. The pedagogy that emerges challenges conventional binaries of ‘transformative’ and ‘reproductive’ learning, for dynamics of transformation and liberation as well as reproduction and subjugation appear to be interlinked, along with expanding nets of social relations that blur power hierarchies and spatial boundaries, in a pedagogy that ultimately appears to mobilise hope and agency among workers.

## **References**

- Allman, P., (2001), *Critical Education Against Global Capitalism: Karl Marx and revolutionary critical education* (Westport, CT; London: Bergin & Garvey).
- Barndt, D., (2001), Naming, making and connecting—the pedagogical possibilities of photo-story production. In P. Campbell and B. Burnaby (eds.), *Participatory Practices in Adult Education* (Mahweh, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum), pp. 31-54.

- Belfiore, M.E., Defoe, T.A., Folinsbee, S., Hunter, J., and Jackson, N. S., (2004), *Reading Work: Literacies in the New Workplace* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates).
- Brookfield, S., (2001), Repositioning ideology critique in a critical theory of adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 52, 7-22.
- Brookfield, S. D., (2005), *The Power of Critical Theory: liberating adult learning* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons).
- Church, K., Shragge, E., Fontan, J.M., Ng., R., (2000), While no one is watching: 'social learning' among people who are excluded from the labour market. In P. Sawchuk (ed.), *Researching Work and Learning Conference Proceedings* (Calgary: University of Calgary), pp. 241-249.
- Edwards, E and Nicoll, K., (2004), Mobilizing workplaces: actors, discipline and governmentality. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 26: 159-173.
- Farrell, L., (2001), Negotiating knowledge in the knowledge economy: workplace educators and the politics of codification. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 23, 201–214.
- Farrell, L., (2000), Ways of being, ways of doing: language education and 'working' identities. *Language and Education*, 14, 18-36.
- Fenwick, T., (2004), Towards a critical HRD. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 54, 174-192.
- Fenwick, T. and Schiebelbein, S., (2005), Negotiating hope: learning among immigrant women in garment work. *Conference Proceedings for The Canadian Society for the Study of Adult Education* (London, ON: University of Western Ontario).
- Gallo, M.L., (2002), Picture this: immigrant workers use photography for communication and change. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 14, 49-57.
- Gannage, C., (1999), The health and safety concerns of immigrant women workers in the Toronto sportswear industry. *International Journal of Health Services*, 29, 409-429.
- Gaskell, J., (1995), Making it work: gender and vocational education. In J. Gaskell and J. Willinsky (eds.), *Gender In/forms Curriculum* (New York: Teachers College Press), pp. 59-76.
- Gillespie, M., (1996), *Learning To Work in a New Land: a review and sourcebook for vocational and workplace ESL* (Washington, NCLE).
- Gowen, S.G., (1992), *The Politics of Workplace Literacy : a case study* (New York : Teachers College Press).
- Gunning, J., Eaton, J., Ferrier, S., Kerr, M., King, A., and Maltby, J. , (2000), *Dealing with Work-Related Musculoskeletal Disorders in the Ontario Clothing Industry*, Report submitted to the Research Advisory Council of the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (Toronto: The Union of Needletrade and Industrial Textile Employees).
- Harper, H., (1996), English-in-the-workplace for garment workers: a feminist project? *Gender and Education*, 8, 5-20.
- Holst, J., (2001), *Social Movements, Civil Society and Radical Adult Education* (London: Bergin & Garvey).
- Jackson, N., (1991), *Skills Formation and Gender Relations: the politics of who knows what* (Geelong: Deakin University Press).
- Kincheloe, J. L., (1999), *How Do We Tell the Workers? the socioeconomic foundations of work and vocational education* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press).
- Lakes, R. D., (1994), *Critical Education for Work: multidisciplinary approaches* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex).
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E., (1991), *Situated Learning: legitimate peripheral participation* (New York: Cambridge Press).

- Livingstone, D.W. and Sawchuk, P.H., (2004), *Hidden Knowledge: organized labor in the information age* (Boston: Rowan and Littlefield).
- Maquilla Solidarity Network (2005).
- Mirchandani, K., Ng, R., Sangha, J., Rawlings, T., and Coloma-Moya, N., (2002), Ambivalent learning: racialized barriers to computer access for immigrant contingent workers. Working paper, NALL project, OISE/UT.
- Mirchandani, K. and Slade, B., (2005), 'You just have to be respectable to talk to': contingency, learning and definitions of skill in a call center. *Conference Proceedings for The Canadian Society for the Study of Adult Education* (London, ON: University of Western Ontario).
- Nash, A., (2001), Participatory workplace education. In P. Campbell and B. Burnaby (eds.), *Participatory Practices in Adult Education* (Mahweh, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum), pp. 185-196.
- Ng., R., (2002), Freedom for whom? globalization and trade from the standpoint of garment workers, *Canadian Women Studies*, 21, 74-82.
- Ng., R., (1999), Homeworking: dream realized or freedom constrained? the globalized reality of immigrant garment workers, *Canadian Woman Studies*, 19, 110-114.
- Simon, R. I., Diplo, D., and Schenke, A., (1991), *Learning Work: A critical pedagogy of work education* (Toronto: OISE Press).
- Solomon, N., Boud, D., and Rooney, D. (2006), The in-between: exposing everyday learning at work. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 25, 3-13.
- Taylor, P., (1993), *The Texts of Paulo Freire*, (Buckingham: Open University Press).
- Vosko, L. F., (1993), *The Last Threat: analysis of the apparel goods provisions in the North American Free Trade Agreement and the impact on women*, (Ottawa: The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives).
- Welton, M.R., (1995), In defense of the lifeworld: a Habermasian approach to adult learning. In M.R. Welton (ed.), *In Defense of the Lifeworld: Critical Perspectives on Adult Learning* (New York: State University of New York Press), pp.127-156.
- Yanz, L., Jeffcott, B., Ladd, D., and Atlin, J., (1999), *Policy Options to Improve Standards for Women Garment Workers in Canada and Internationally* (Ottawa: Status Women Canada).
- Yoong Ng, K. and Cervero, R., (2005), Learning the boss' way: ownership, power and learning in practice and in workplaces. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 24, 489-506.

### **Acknowledgments**

The assistance of Joan Schiebelbein, former University of Alberta graduate student, is gratefully acknowledged. I am also indebted to the anonymous reviewers whose comments helped to strengthen this article.