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This chapter describes a number of ethical dilemmas faced as a workplace literacy practitioner and researcher. Each issue is analyzed along with the lessons learned.

Workplace Literacy: Ethical Issues Through the Lens of Experience

Sue Folinsbee

Since the mid-1980s, my work as a practitioner and researcher has focused on education in the workplace, including literacy development. By “literacy development,” I refer to programs that focus on basic skills such as document use, writing, math, communications, and computers, usually but not always for those workers without a high school diploma or much postsecondary education. As a practitioner, I have worked with employers, unions, and other partners to plan and set up “workplace literacy programs” as well as mentoring and providing professional development for other workplace educators. As a researcher, I spent six months on the factory floor to conduct an ethnographic study of how workers and management use literacy (or not) in a textile factory.

As a novice workplace practitioner, my understanding that the workplace is a contested terrain was immediate, although how to work with its complexities was not. Over time, my understanding of how to work with the complexities of this contested terrain became much deeper, but it is still a work in progress. Even though principles to guide practice are crucial, there are no hard-and-fast rules for resolving ethical issues—dilemmas that are not easily resolvable because they present opposing values and outcomes that may do harm to certain groups of people if not properly considered.

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When I enter a workplace, I have a code of conduct in my head, a set of principles that I hope to follow. In the beginning, I developed this code from reading about the work of colleagues, reading academic literature, talking to peers, reflecting, and mulling things over. The principles help me make decisions that are consistent and thoughtful and that set limits about when to say no (Steel, Johnston, Folinsbee, and Belfiore, 1997). They are worker-centered, having at their core a respect for workers, the jobs they do, how they learn, and what might or might not be in their interests.

My main principles are ensuring worker and management commitment to a workplace education initiative, confidentiality, joint planning to get a clear understanding of the differing interests throughout the context, a holistic, asset-based approach, and voluntary participation. Over time, this code has become seasoned and nuanced with experience, but the basic tenets remain the same, if not stronger. I also rely on my intuition to warn me about potential ethical issues: when I have a “pit” in my stomach I know there is a dilemma that I need to pay attention to and resolve. When I avoid paying attention, negative consequences arise. Sork (1988) stresses the importance of having a personal philosophy so that one has a basis for resolving the ethical dilemmas of practice. While indicating that practitioners make evaluative judgments all the time, he stresses the importance of the ethics of practice so that decisions are made consciously—recognizing their value base and their consequences.

Encountering and grappling with ethical dilemmas is a necessary component of workplace literacy practice. However, such dilemmas, especially when they are not resolved successfully, are not usually discussed in the professional literature or public presentations. In my own work, I usually reserve these conversations for debriefings with my most trusted colleagues. I’ve learned that the most important teachers for my colleagues were not only the successful initiatives but also the ones that were not so successful (Folinsbee, 2000). One model has helped me think about my own praxis.

The Spiral Model

Arnold and others (1991) developed the Spiral Model to help practitioners work with the tensions between practice and theory in workshops and educational programs. The model begins with the experience of participants, moves to looking for patterns in that experience, and then generates new information or theory on the basis of these patterns. Next, participants practice skills and devise strategies for action, leading to actual applied action. Using this model as a framework for an analysis of my own learning, I start with my own experience and that of trusted peers. I work with what I know to be true from that collective, my own individual experience, and the body of professional literature. With each new personal experience, peers insights, and reading, I add new information and theory and adjust and expand my

repertoire of how to work with all the conflicting ethical factors and dynamics in workplace literacy development.

For example, I used to think that conducting a formal organizational needs assessment was *de rigueur* (Folinsbee and Jurmo, 1994). It would be imperative to understand the perspectives of all stakeholders in order to properly understand the organizational context and its real needs. Otherwise how could I determine any levels of support for a workplace literacy program? or define program policy and parameters? Belfiore (2002), for example, found that in all the statements of good program planning practice she reviewed, an organizational or workplace needs assessment was seen as a necessary step in the planning process for a workplace basic skills program; it enabled the voices from all levels of the workforce to be heard regarding their views on a possible program.

However, I have learned from practice that there is the odd case when conducting a formal organizational needs assessment may not be the most expedient or effective strategy. For example, in one municipal workplace, a new, mandatory certification test had been legislated for certain job classifications. All employees in the designated job classifications had to pass different provincially mandated exams. Some workers had been unable to pass the exam, even though they knew how to do the job well and had worked in it for years. As a result of the exam failure, they were at risk of losing their jobs. Both the union and management recognized that these workers needed some support in document use, math, and test taking to prepare to retake the test. All agreed on the organizational need, and time was of the essence. Assessing the organizational context meant, for me, talking to management and labor representatives and then going straight into a confidential, individual needs assessment process to understand where these workers needed specific upgrading support for taking the test again and passing. I found that this was a viable strategy for this kind of situation. On the basis of this experience, I adjusted my thinking to consider the occasional situations when a formal organizational needs analysis might not be required. These kinds of experiences—where one must adjust one’s thinking about what principles mean in practice—remind us that even though principles remain steadfast, the practice we engage in needs to be flexible.

So join me on a journey through three of the most difficult ethical dilemmas I have faced over the past twenty or so years. Some details are changed to protect the confidentiality of those involved. The first case takes place within a financial institution, the second at a newspaper, and the third in a plastics factory.

Financial Institution: Writing Not the Issue

I was invited into a financial institution by a manager who told me that he knew the five employees who needed a literacy program and that he also knew exactly what they needed: Could I, immediately, develop a writing

program for these employees so they could improve their spelling and grammar and write better reports? Now, I felt an ethical dilemma because the needs were entirely employer-defined. I convinced the manager that I should do a small organizational analysis to understand the issue better and make sure I was “offering the best solution” to the company. He agreed, so I interviewed the five workers, their co-workers, supervisors, and managers in the relevant department.

The workers in fact did not need a writing course; their highest priority issue was improved communication between the workers and their supervisors. The company scrapped the idea of the writing program and instead concentrated on strategies to improve relations between supervisors and workers in the department. Had I listened to only one slice of the pie and offered a strategy based on one manager’s perspective, I would have given a solution in no one’s best interests, and certainly not the workers facing enforced participation in what to them was an irrelevant program. The more pressing problems identified by the workers would have kept bubbling away under the surface despite any quick fix program. After all this action, on reflection, where were the ethical issues?

Serving Interests. This case raises the first issue. Who is the client? Whose interests do we serve as workplace educators? We may have to work with all the interests held by the levels of management and workers, along with funders’ and educators’ own institutional interests. For me, at the heart of working with and balancing these interests lies a worker-centered approach: maintaining consistent respect for workers and their needs (Folinsbee, 2000). In this scenario, conducting a needs analysis served to uncover the perspectives of all the stakeholders and get to the heart of how they defined the real issue. I agree with Fiona Frank, a UK-based workplace educator, when she points out that it is “nice to think it’s just the learners but someone else is paying the bill—the company, a local or national agency. We have to serve a lot of masters *and* keep our integrity” (Folinsbee, 2000, p. 6). Paul Jurmo also agrees with Frank when he argues, “Hard to say. As an adult educator I say the learner . . . but other people are investing money. Management and the union are interested stakeholders. Is a stakeholder a client? It is important to try to understand and serve all interests . . . find a focus of mutual interest” (p. 6). Tamara Levine, however, working in a Canadian labor organization, holds another view: “My role is to serve workers and their unions, although I don’t think of them as clients. Sometimes I work with joint committees, but I am accountable to the union” (p. 6).

Power Relationships. How do I work with those uneven workplace power relationships? How do I work to even out those power relationships—a task inherent in my role as workplace educator? One way to even them out in planning is to work with a joint management-worker committee and conduct an organizational needs analysis to determine all the perceived needs, whether or not an education program is even the right solution, and how or where literacy fits. In this scenario, there was no

committee but there was a needs analysis. On reflection, I am not sure that a committee would have been the best idea because there a certain urgency applied to the situation. It is imperative to contextualize our responses to a particular situation while staying grounded in our principles.

Understandings of Literacy. This situation also points to how I define literacy. Do I see literacy as a set of skills or tasks, or do I see literacy as embedded in social and cultural practices that are part of institutionalized systems (Belfiore and others, 2004; Connon-Unda, 2001)? That manager in the financial institution perceived literacy as a set of skills and tasks to “fix a problem.” My own understandings of literacy—as social practice, as a thread in the workplace weave—and the idea of multiple literacies did not crystallize until I conducted research in a textile factory (Belfiore and others, 2004) to find out people’s literacy practices within the cultural practices of their workplace. What dilemmas does defining literacy pose? A definition that focuses on discrete tasks and skills, especially those that just focus on the job, may suit what employers and funders want in a program and see as easily measurable in terms of accountability frameworks and measurable outcomes. However, focusing on isolated tasks and skills and leaving out the social context from the definition may address on-the-ground identified worker needs and management objectives only partially, if at all. On the other hand, how do I gain agreement and support from management and funders using a deeper, more holistic, more critical approach? Jean Connon-Unda (2001) therefore encourages me to answer the question “Literacy for what?” as fully as possible in relation to all aspects of workers’ lives.

Mandatory Participation. Ideally, all participation in any kind of workplace education program is voluntary, not mandated by the employer (Belfiore, 2002). Applying mandatory participation in a workplace literacy program can create resistance and additional barriers for workers who may already have experienced education-based failure and marginalization. Initially, in this first scenario, certain workers had been singled out for mandatory participation by management. Fortunately, the organizational needs analysis shifted the focus from the skills of five employees to larger issues at play.

Curriculum. The organizational needs assessment, with individual goal setting with learners, determines what kinds of programs are desired by workers and management, as well as the circumstances under which they should occur. Workers may be interested in broader educational goals that go beyond their present jobs. Management may be interested in a program that focuses specifically on a job-related issue (as in this financial institution). For a successful outcome in workplace program offering and participation, program goals and content need to be carefully negotiated so that they meet workers’ identified needs but also carry the overt commitment of management. Belfiore (2002) argues that workplace educators are responsible for clarifying to our stakeholders which kinds of programs can serve differing educational needs, interests, and expected outcomes.

Promising Too Much. Overpromising the benefits and outcomes of a workplace literacy programs may get me into ethical trouble. If I had given a literacy program as requested by the manager and without an organizational needs analysis, both workers and management would have been frustrated with the outcomes. Either the program or the workers might then have been scapegoats when the program was not perceived as a success by management.

Education Institutional Expectations Versus Real Workplace Needs.

The first scenario does not explicitly raise the issue of certain organizational demands on programming decisions, but I raise it here because you may already have encountered this problem. What happens to ethical decision making when the workplace educator's employer demands an annual revenue stream from a certain number of workplace programs? Some workplace educators live under constant pressure to get the numbers and run programs, as opposed to first doing an organizational scan, which may indicate need for a program the educator cannot fulfill, or conversely it may indicate no need at all for a revenue-generating program. Some workplace educators might have developed a program based on management's original assessment just to get the program and meet their own educational institution's expectations and interests. Similarly, independent contractors would be expecting to get the much needed program work. Others who work as workplace coordinators for government might feel pressure to implement a program whether it was feasible or not, just to get the numbers.

Basic Skills at a Newspaper: Employee Jobs at Risk

In a small city newspaper office, workers in proof reading were required to take a test by their employer "to determine their skills and their accuracy." As a result of this company-mandated test, fourteen workers passed and four failed. Those who failed became at risk of losing their jobs, unless they could improve their skills and their accuracy. A prominent board member connected to the newspaper called me into this very tense situation to help the four workers. I was working for a nonprofit literacy organization at the time. This particular board member was an employer who was a public champion for literacy and had worked for many years to support and advocate for adult literacy. I wanted to honor her request because her intentions were to support the workers in question and find a solution that would help them keep their jobs. In initial conversations with the newspaper's Human Resources Department, I was asked to individually test the workers' basic skills. I convinced the manager that the situation called for a small-scale organizational analysis and an interview with each of the four workers.

The organizational analysis showed us that anxiety and frustrations ran high for these workers, and that a large gap existed between union and management perspectives on the situation. The union was heartily opposed to the original test, its results, and the consequences of failing it. My discussions

with the union revealed its nonnegotiable need to keep confidential any assessment results for an upgrading program; a principle with which I totally agreed. The HR manager reluctantly agreed to aggregate assessment results, not produce individual results. However, once the nine-week test program was put in motion, the HR manager reneged and put pressure on me and my co-worker (who conducted the needs analysis and designed the program) to produce individual results. My colleague and I remained firm that the program could not and should not produce individually identifiable results. Because the organization we were working for did not actually deliver workplace literacy programs, the newspaper hired a local literacy organization to deliver the program as based on our analysis and program recommendations. It began on a rocky road, with issues of attendee frustration and resentment, but the instructor built trust with the four workers and they progressed well enough to keep their jobs. So what were, for me, the key ethically related issues in this second scenario?

Along with the pressure of meeting our board member's request, we faced a high-risk situation. The rocky relationship between management and the union was all too evident, the threat of job loss imminent, the pressure for individualized test results intense, the mandatory nature of the program unchangeable, and the distinct possibility of my loss of professional reputation existed if we failed. Allow me some elaborations before ending.

Institutional Pressure. We faced real pressure to take on a workplace program under very unfavorable conditions. It is possible that had this prominent board member not asked for assistance, we would not have accepted a situation that presented so many possibilities for failure and contradictions with our professional principles. On the other hand, not to try to resolve the problems (as we defined them) and thus help these four workers keep their jobs would have made us very ethically challenged and psychologically stressed. On further reflection, this situation also raises the issue of promising too much through a workplace literacy program and thinking (without justification) that our intervention can address long-standing organizational issues.

I am not sure what we would do differently in any future scenario. Presented with a similar situation, but without the pressure-laden request of a board member, I may not say no; I would always want to see how far I could maneuver until the breaking point. However, if the HR manager had insisted on individual progress reports or the results of individual assessments, and with no intervention from a powerful board member, I absolutely would have said no.

Confidentiality. Belfiore (2002) reports that confidentiality of any kind of assessments or progress is high on good practice principles and that the confidentiality of individual assessments and learner progress is the most contentious area between employers and educators. Even though we indeed established that all results would be confidential, management agreed only with reluctance; they were denied the chance to fire workers.

I do not see *any* circumstances that would warrant making such risk-inducing personalized results available to management, or the union for that matter.

Testing. Testing of employees and the handover of individual test results are common requests from employers, in my experience. To guide my decision making, I ask: Is a test the assessment tool that will be most meaningful and useful in determining individual goals along with ways to build a program and learner confidence and participation? In almost every instance, my answer would be no. I would be ready with some alternatives, including an individual interview with potential program participants as to their needs and interests along with their own perceptions of where they want to focus, what they do well, and where they want to do better.

Management and Worker Cooperation. Although we consulted with both management and the union, they lacked any effective cooperation with each other. The union agreed to the program separately under certain conditions, but management and the union were not working in concert. In most workplace learning scenarios, this lack of cooperation would have been judged as a negative factor—indeed as a highly unusual context for establishing any learning program.

Joint Committee at a Plastics Factory: Not So Equal Participation

The third scenario focuses on the collaborative program planning process between workers and management. It presents a significant ethical issue that I still have not entirely resolved. For my colleagues and me, conducting ethnographic research in our respective workplaces cemented our understanding of the difficulty of collaborative planning mostly because of power differences between workers and management (Belfiore and others, 2004). We always knew that it was not easy to come to an understanding or common agreement on a policy and plan for a workplace literacy initiative because of such power differences. Belfiore (2002) notes, “The aim is to have people representing different perspectives working together with equal voices” (p. 24). She describes the committee role as planning, implementing, and monitoring workplace literacy initiatives. Committees are seen as a place where workers have a voice around their needs, all voices can be heard, and conflicting goals resolved. Though not a perfect decision mechanism, Belfiore notes that the committee at least is a forum where conflicts may be resolved.

Once upon a time, I worked with a joint committee of workers and management in a nonunionized plastics factory. We went through what I thought was a model joint planning process. The committee (with equal numbers of workers from different parts of the floor, and equal numbers of supervisors and managers) determined working principles and terms of reference, planned and conducted an organizational needs assessment, set priorities for programs, offered them, and planned the evaluation. When

I interviewed the workers on the committee (as part of the evaluation process), I was surprised to find out that many had not been pleased with the committee process. They felt that decisions had been made without their input by the HR manager; that he had deliberately worked outside the committee process. They also believed that some of those decisions by the manager were brought to the committee only for rubber stamping.

Here I saw the results of how power differences in the workplace shape a collaborative planning process. It shows that equal participation is difficult, despite the democracy rhetoric, and that there may be a tendency to fall back on the usual procedures based on the usual power differentials operating in the workplace. To make matters worse, workers usually have not had the experience in, or training for, participation in such committees. But management personnel have. Some unions offer mentoring and training for union representatives on how to participate in these committees, but for a nonunionized workplace such training would be unusual. So, to adhere to my principle of inclusion of workers in decision making about their development, I must be more vigilant for seeing (1) covert signs of decisions already having been made outside the committee and (2) the threats and risks inherent in workers' participation in decision making.

To summarize, what does it mean for me to be an ethical literacy educator? My first thought is to always remember that the workplace is a complex, contested terrain where workers and managers have different and competing interests. As a workplace practitioner, I come back to the idea of staying grounded in my principles but adjusting my practice on the basis of new information and experience that makes sense but is still in line with these principles. I come back to the Spiral Model as a framework for deepening my ethical practice through an ongoing cycle of reflection on action and new ways of moving forward based on this reflection.

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SUE FOLINSBEE is president of Tri En Communications in Toronto, Canada, and a long-time workplace learning practitioner and researcher.