The Pitfalls and Possibilities of Labour Movement-Based E-Learning

Peter H. Sawchuk
University of Calgary, Canada

Abstract: This paper presents findings on informal learning and labour movement-based e-learning. It examines the participation of 40 labour activists from across Canada during a six week, online workshop, and focuses on the relations between online and offline activity. It suggests that e-learning can be used to support the goals of collective action and solidarity, and that the medium can contribute to the development of a working-class narrative that makes meaning in and energizes the lives of labour activists.


Introduction
The labour movement has always made use of distance learning technology from cultural tools of dance and song and traditional mail service, to radio, film and telephonic media. Such tools were used to consciously inform and mediate ongoing activity in distant locations. As Taylor (2001) notes, in countries like Canada and Australia where populations are relatively sparse such technologies have been particularly important. Since the development of the most recent generation of web-based technologies, however, ‘e-learning’ has begun to be considered as a possible tool for the labour movement.

In this paper I outline some of the findings from a recently completed research project on labour movement e-learning. In this project I looked at the everyday issues, structures and practices that defined the participation of 40 labour activists from across Canada during a six week, online workshop entitled ‘May Day 2000’. I asked, how did
activist’s broader life and labour movement activity affect their participation and informal learning? Are there less formalized goals that were or could be achieved in e-learning environments? Can e-learning be used to facilitate the goals of the labour movement generally in the context of informal online and offline learning? While there is plenty of research on e-learning per se, this project was unique in its focus on both informal learning and the issues and problematics of e-learning unique to working people and the labour movement.

Relevant issues for labour movement based e-learning considered in the research included the following. The interest of the labour movement in supporting direct action as well as skill and knowledge development means that it is important to examine the informal and formal relationships between online and offline learning. Explorations of e-learning amongst subordinate groups such as a diverse working-class must include discussion of the barriers of technological access and use. Also unique is the labour movement’s interest in overcoming barriers of distance as a concern for national as well as international solidarity. Of course, the labour movement’s interest in e-learning is not governed by a concern for credentialization, but rather “the development of ‘knowing how to do’ and ‘knowing how to share’ [that] is not restricted to the simply transmission of knowledge” (Henri and Kaye, 1993:29). More than this however the labour movement will also want to contribute to an expansive ‘working-class narrative’ in the context of local, regional, national and now globalized capitalism. This narrative helps people make meaning of their activity and from this they draw energy to engage in the extremely busy life of a labour activist. Finally, explorations of e-learning from the standpoint of the labour movement require a firm grasp of our roots and traditions in the area of education, learning and action. In particular it requires an appreciation for the oral culture of the labour movement. As Martin has commented:

Part of the reason that the wider public knows so little about unions is that so little of the internal wisdom is written down…. On paper, union input tends to be precise and defensive; in verbal communications, off the record, unionists are more eloquent and spontaneous. (Martin, 1995: 39-40)

The heart of labour education has always been rooted in viva voce, literally by the living voice of participants. Beyond a concern for (computer and written) literacy amongst rank-and-file workers, this fact may suggests specific ‘cultural’ challenges associated with the textual character of current e-learning technologies within the labour movement.

**Informal Learning, the Labour Movement & E-Learning**

Informal learning has always been a necessary mainstay of educational practice for subordinate groups such as the working-class. While organized forms of educational activity are available within the labour movement, it remains an understood truism that the heart of labour and working-class learning is in the union meetings, union events, struggles on the street, picket-line, in the community and workplace (Spencer, 1994; Taylor, 2001; Sawchuk, forthcoming). Rising levels of formal education in the labour movement along with the Canadian population have hardly changed this fact.

In research interviews, activist involved in the online workshop highlighted the importance of informal learning and suggested a possible misconnect between the
learning culture of the labour movement and the virtual, communication space provided by e-learning.

It will not serve a useful purpose if people are just sitting there staring at screens and they don’t know who they’re talking to… The traditional way of doing things, getting together, getting in the room, feeling the tension, feeling everything, what people, you know you’ve been to conventions yourself, you can see the emotion and everything, you don’t see that on-line. You don’t see people’s faces, and I know that’s important to me, you know? Computers are a tool, they have a place, just like the tools that came before, [but] they’re not to be substituted for what we really need. (Activist – Peterborough, Ontario)

Being in a group to learn, for me that’s better… because even if you go for coffee with three or four people participating, you talk about ‘Oh I did this’ or ‘I did that’ or ‘I found this screen.’ You know that kind of thing is where you get a chance to say ‘Jeez I really had trouble this way’ and somebody else says, ‘Well why don’t you do this.’ That’s what I found lacking in this workshop. It was not so much the national nature of it, but the disconnection from the people. (Activist – Winnipeg, Manitoba)

Activists consistently felt that e-learning could be a useful tool which complimented, rather than replaced existing traditions in the labour movement. Comments from activist also suggested that traditions of learning in the labour movement will not transfer to e-learning environments without the careful attention of both workshop designers and participants themselves. The critique of labour movement e-learning experience in comments such as the ones above, in fact, highlights the need for a better understanding of the dynamics of informal learning in virtual space as well as the relationship between this learning and practical activity offline.

Critiques aside, while the workshops were intentionally designed with adult education principles in mind – such as beginning from participant’s own experience and the development upon emergent learning themes – collective, participatory forms of informal learning and knowledge constructions were said to have occurred through online participation, e.g.

[This] guy from BC was thirsty for information and people started providing it to him, and that gave us all the resources. To me, that’s an example of where these online workshops really do work. Someone has an interest or concern and they’re learning about something and other people contribute to it, and then the rest of us participate in that process by seeing how those answers work. (Activist - Edmonton, Alberta)

Examples such as these were more or less typical. They describe how the sharing of information in the e-learning environment resulted in useful learning experiences.

**Linking Informal E-Learning with Practical Action Offline**

Informal learning online occurred in the ‘crevices’ of the formal structure provided in the workshop. For these experiences to be useful however, interviewees claimed that learning online had to be translated into practical action beyond cyber-space.
You know, and you don’t have to learn a ton of things, although I have to admit I learned quite a few things, but you know [it] was good because then I shared it with my fellow activists. (Activist – Peterborough, Ontario)

I got some interesting information but there was a major failure in the fact that I couldn’t share it with the other activists in Sudbury and I saw that as very important. I mean you’re going back to the core value of the labor movement. You’re in a meeting, you’re talking with other activists, you’re sharing information with them, you know you’re trying to get it out to people and use that as a tactic for organizing… (Activist – Sudbury, Ontario)

The insertion of experience and information gleaned from the workshop needed to be easily transferred to the offline world. The solution that emerged revolved around the creation of ‘tools’ that could be (formally or informally) created within online activity, and then transferred to the offline world. The importance of this for labour movement learning was not as well appreciated as it could’ve been at the outset of the workshop. Nevertheless activists created their own opportunities for this transference in a variety of ways. Many created reports and summaries of ideas, news and tactics from other activists for use at their local labour councils or workplace, e.g.

You’d see an article [in the workshop] and then you’d bring it up, say at work or something, mention this article and then people expand from that on what things or experiences they have heard about and so conversation gets going. (Activist – Prince Albert, Saskatchewan)

Others, such as one activist from Eliot Lake (in Northern Ontario), transformed these ideas into tools to educate during a local strike support barbecue commenting, “I think basically my ideas came from the ideas that were floating around out there through the workshop itself.”

E-Learning and Barriers of Time, Space and Energy in Labour Movement Learning

In keeping with one of the core rationales behind e-learning, much of the most valuable learning occurred amongst activists who faced the greatest barriers of time and distance. These were participants in more isolated locations such as Northern Ontario, the Vancouver Islands and so on, who operated away from the major urban centres, however, they were also women activists, particularly those with children in the home, e.g.

I think for the smaller cities it’s an issue because of the fact that those who want to participate are not able to as the courses aren’t available in their towns. If enough people aren’t taking them then the course doesn’t go on… I didn’t find [the workshop] isolated you at all, if anything it made you feel less alone… Well the best possible scenario would be to in a classroom setting, but because of the fact that all of these commitments are there and you’ve got your kids going to school and stuff for me it’s better to do it on-line like the way that we did it. (Activist – Eliot Lake, Ontario)
In addition to these substantial barriers to participation in labour education, it should be recognized that activists in general remain, as they have been historically, over-burdened. As one person put it, “there are not 76 hours in a day. Haven’t figured out the solution yet” (Activist – Toronto, Ontario). The everyday lives of people structure how well certain educational and communication tools will work for them, as well as the quality of the overall experience. As a substitute for traditional labour movement learning, e-learning is a poor one. However, where the traditions of face-to-face educational activity and direct action are more difficult to organize, the addition of e-learning can make a particularly important contribution.

**The Capacity of E-Learning to Contribute to an Working-Class Narrative**

In a recent paper examining e-learning in the labour movement, Briton and Taylor argue against the notion that e-learning be used simply to deliver more information and more educational programmes to union members. Rather they discuss the potential for e-learning technologies to actually contribute to the core principles and values of the labour movement as a whole.

> The question, then, is not simply one of identifying the [e-learning] technologies that result in high participation levels, but of identifying the set of minimal beliefs that provide the foundation for learning and [the technologies] that best facilitate the cooperative and collaborative ideals of that learning community. (Briton and Taylor, 2000: 14)

As with union education generally, e-learning is not credit-based. It is voluntary, social-movement based learning, and its practical relevance to activists is challenged by their jam-packed schedules and the limited resources of the labour movement. However, this research suggests that the relevance of e-learning can come in several forms: knowledge and skill building; direct action and organizing; as well as the production of the kind of meaning and understanding in people’s lives that energizes beyond the immediate context. Labour activists in this research spoke of a process of meaning-making which I’ve referred to as the development of a broad working-class narrative. One activist captures the notion this way.

> When people suddenly discover that there are some roots to [the labour movement], because of course it’s never taught in school, they really find that fascinating… It’s a funny sustaining kind of thing, it’s less that it helps your activism instantly, but it does I think help in the long-term as people find the energy to keep going. (Activist – Edmonton, Alberta)

The ability of activists to stay engaged, and to find and create relevance in their activism is rooted in their commitment to issues like social justice and equity. However, it is also true that contributions to this meaning-making process can be found in e-learning environments where people can see their lives as part of a larger social struggle with deep historical roots and more than its share of success.
Conclusions and Future steps
Activists felt that for the labour movement to make use of e-learning it had to be linked with existing face-to-face connections and the best traditions of informal and more formalized labour movement education. E-learning was neither a substitute for existing labour education nor labour’s organizational activities. Rather, it was said to have the potential to enhance these core practices, and several activists linked the potential of e-learning with the achievement of greater forms of participatory democracy in their own unions.

Expectations of the technology among activists were critical to understanding their assessments of their own experiences in the workshop. The technology supports threaded, asynchronous, text-based messaging and is a ‘less-than-mature’ educational medium (Feenberg, 1999). Those who expected something more were, inevitably, disappointed. While communication practices can be improved, at this juncture in e-learning technology, we clearly are not able to produce the kinds of deeply satisfying human experiences that activists have come to associate with learning in the labour movement. Those who considered e-learning as a tool rather than as an infrastructure or replacement for current educational and/or communication frameworks consistently evaluated the experience positively.

Finally, an emergent discussion among activist in the research also centred around the distinction between ‘communications’ and ‘education’ in the labour movement. Removing the artificial barriers between the two in the context of computer mediated communication, in fact, affirms a belief that the roots of labour education must continue to lie in the ongoing, informal learning of unionists.

References


