Online Learning for Union Activists?
Findings from a Canadian study

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ABSTRACT  This article reports on the findings of research seeking to understand the informal dimensions of online learning in the labour movement. It draws on analysis of online learning workshop participation in specially initiated sessions amongst labour activists/educators from across Canada. Findings are based on the analysis of original interview data and survey data as well as content and interaction analysis of online postings. Barriers to effective participation are discussed, as are possible functions of online learning/communication in the labour movement. I argue that there is strong evidence to suggest that online learning can be a valuable addition to the education capacity of the labour movement, and that an important part of this contribution revolves around a recognition of informal learning, the linkages between the online and the offline world, and the unique goals of the labour movement.

Introduction

It’s the old think globally act locally. You’re working collaboratively in your community with people on issues ... [With online learning] you can link with other people who are doing work, look at their strategy see if there’s something you can learn, access information. You know, when you’re trying to research a campaign, if you can make a link with someone else who’s been working on privatization in Australia or the UK for example, it’s enormously useful and powerful ... (Activist—Edmonton, Alberta)

The lessons of collective action by workers have traditionally been learned on the job and in the streets. ... Any non-formal, structured education programs remain, even today, secondary to the learning that members gain through voluntary engagement in action. (Martin, 1998, p. 72)

These two quotations, each from Canadian labour movement activists, help introduce and ground several of the central themes of this article. That is, they introduce the potential of computer technologies to aid in the activity and development of the labour movement, and they remind us that the heart of labour movement learning has always been rooted in the “informal” and the everyday forms of collective action and participation. Online learning is conceptualised as having many variant dimensions including formalised and informal structures; individual and collective plan-
ning; cognitive and social, cultural and material dimensions. The quotations provide a suitable introduction to a study of online learning amongst Canadian labour activists that I report upon here. This study posed several broad questions. How did activists’ broader life and labour movement activity affect their participation and informal learning online? What is the nature of the mix of formalised and emergent (or informal) goals that could be achieved in online learning environments? Can online learning be used to facilitate the goals of the labour movement generally in the context of this mix of more formalised structure, informal online and informal offline learning? Before discussing the findings of this study, however, it is important that the project be situated broadly in terms of a “social learning” analysis as well as a more fundamental question: how are the labour movement’s interests in online learning unique? Answering these questions helps to situate this study in a rapidly expanding body of literature in the area of online learning and distance education.

While its roots are arguably over a quarter of a century deep, it is over the last decade, with the development and flourishing of the World Wide Web, that serious discussions of online learning amongst educators and researchers have exploded. Recently, reports from European, British, Australian and South African trade union educators (see Sawchuk and contributors, 2000; Spencer, 2002) suggest the need for greater understanding of the relationship between labour education, online learning and informal networks of activity. In Canada, rank-and-file workers, and unionised workers in particular, have shown significant interest in, as well as an often underestimated capacity to make use of, computer technologies with a variety of communication and educational purposes in mind (Sawchuk, 2003a; Taylor, 2002). And, rooted in their own social perspectives and goals, discussions of online learning have spread to Canadian labour educators, and indeed to many labour educators around the globe.

As Briton and Taylor (2000) tell us, labour educators in Canada have had a long and intense interest in the use of educational technology that can be traced back to the 1930s with the use of radio and film strip. By the 1970s the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) had developed a substantial audio-visual department within its Labour Education and Studies Centre. According to Taylor, in Canada the most successful and expansive use of educational technology prior to the computer age was the labour-based radio programming and Trade Union Film circuit produced by the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) in the 1940s. By the 1980s and 1990s Canadian labour’s experience in drawing on educational technology resulted in a Canadian union (the Canadian Union of Public Employees, CUPE) being the first in the world to develop a union-based computer communications, and later online learning, system called “Solinet”. Characteristically, with the explosion of the World Wide Web, CUPE again led the way for unions in Canada with the linkage of its Solinet network to what was known as the “Virtual-U” conferencing system. It was in fact the Virtual-U system that was utilised to examine the linkages between online learning, activists’ informal learning and the Canadian labour movement in this research (see earlier reflections on this project in Sawchuk, 2001; Taylor, 2002).
A Study of Online Learning in the Canadian Labour Movement

It is in this context that the “Informal Learning Practices within Union-based Telelearning” project was initiated. It sought to investigate the informal learning practices amongst Canadian trade union activists surrounding the trial use of new online learning technologies as part of the CLC’s labour education and training activities. Two computer-mediated workshops were used as a basis for generating the project’s data. While the ultimate purpose of the workshops was to generate critical understanding of online learning, it was felt that to do this the workshop had to have a content focus other than this. We used the topic of “Organizing May Day Activities” for this focus, and thus discussion was largely centred around, but certainly not exclusive to, this topic. In practice, labour activists/educators volunteered to participate in non-formal, online workshops, and we depended on their experiences and perspectives for findings.

Specifically, the data included transcripts of these online learning workshops, the administration of an online survey, interaction analysis of online behaviour as well as telephone interviews with a sample of participants. The e-workshops involved 49 labour activist/educator participants as well as two facilitators. The response rate for the survey was over 30% (n = 17) and interview sample was 12. Purposive sampling was used to select the interviewees based on key social variables: participation level during workshop; gender; region of Canada; and large city versus small urban or rural settings. I conducted the telephone interviews myself. On average these interviews lasted just over an hour per person. Taken as a whole the data allowed for both depth and breadth of analysis as well as a form of triangulation that allowed opportunity to verify emergent themes and conclusions. This analysis was linked to a larger, related research initiative entitled the “Union-based Telelearning project”.

The analysis allows a fairly detailed understanding of the range of informal practices that accompany the more formalised (non-formal) online course delivery. In particular, I wished to understand the relationship that this mix of learning practices had with the educational principles and cultural values espoused by trade unions such as mutuality, collective action and solidarity. The analysis of the data drew on critical reflection on a variety of bodies of literature including computer-mediated learning (e.g. Nardi, 1996), online facilitation (e.g. Feenberg, 1989; James & Rykert, 1997; Palloff & Pratt, 1999), theories of Human–Computer Interface (e.g. Bodker, 1991), and the “Collective Resource Approach” (CRA) (e.g. Bansler, 1989; Ehn, 1988; Ehn & Kyng, 1987; Kraft, 1991) and “Democratic Rationalism” (Feenberg, 1999) approaches to technological development as well as labour and adult education research. The project built specifically on previous online, labour-based educational research by Taylor (e.g. 1996a, b), Briton and Taylor (e.g. 2000), as well as Sawchuk (2001, 2002, 2003a). In general, the project provided important information to labour educators but also contributed to more general adult education and online learning literatures. As I outline below in the summary of findings, the project provided important new information on informal computer-mediated learning within the context of trade union education.

One of the basic arguments underlying this research is that the labour movement
P. H. Sawchuk has a unique interest in online learning, how it functions, its outcomes and its future development. As Briton and Taylor put it:

From the outset, the communication and education-telelearning tools we were interested in developing were those that not only enhanced individual learning opportunities but also fostered collaboration, cooperation and contributed to community—in particular, the learning opportunities of workers’ and the global community of organized labour. (2000, pp. 3–4)

Some of the dimensions of this unique interest include the fact that, for the labour movement, explorations of online learning require a firm grasp of its own roots and traditions in the area of education, learning and social action. In addition, unlike the formal schooling or even most non-formal learning, the labour movement’s interest in online learning is not governed by a concern for credentialisation. Rather, the labour movement looks at online learning in a way similar to that expressed by distant education writers Henri and Kaye as “the development of ‘knowing how to do’ and ‘knowing how to share’ [that] is not restricted to the simple transmission of knowledge” (1993, p. 29). As other, earlier online learning scholars have noted, learning in this context cannot be understood as knowledge transfer but rather as “engagement in practice, in which people deal with dilemmas and problems, make use of tools, share ways of doing things, and utilize previous knowledge …” (Calvani et al., 1997, p. 272). Again, for the labour movement, this type of learning includes a process in which workers make meaning of their lives as workers, and thus the labour movement is interested in the ways in which online learning can contribute to an expansive proletarian narrative in the context of local, regional, national and now globalised capitalism. In this sense, the labour movement has always been up against the problem of “distance”, whether by serving remote memberships or, more generally, building solidarity across space. Online learning can form a part of the labour movement’s capacity to meet this challenge, as it may serve the purposes of democratising communication and ultimately building forms of dynamic collective action. Moreover, online learning in the labour movement heightens the need to consider inequities of computer access, though at the same time it may also provide important opportunities for working-class people to solve this problem by distributing knowledge and skill. In this way, an analysis of online learning amongst subordinated groups (such as the working class) must always begin with a firm understanding of the material barriers endemic to educational as well as technological participation.

Adding some detail to the issue of computer access and use in Canada specifically, I point out that according to Statistics Canada’s General Social Survey dealing with Internet use (Statistics Canada, 2000), with an estimated 13 million people (53% of those aged 15 and over) using the Internet in 1999 (over three times the 1994 rate), and a further 27% of non-users expressing an interest in becoming users, the interest in electronic communication and online learning in Canada is remarkably high. However, the labour movement is extremely diverse. Key constituencies central to the invigoration of unions include those with lower income, those with lower formal education, and women—all groups that experience consistently lower levels of
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computer access and use. For example, among individuals aged 20 or older, 13% of those with less than a high school diploma used the Internet, compared with 79% with university education (Statistics Canada, 2000).

In the study I present here, the notion of “computer access and use” was not limited simply to home computer ownership (as it is in most access and use research). As we will learn more about below, computer use occurred across work, union hall, district labour council as well as households. In terms of computer access and use in the workplace in Canada generally, Statistics Canada reports that one-quarter of all workplaces made major investments in new computer technology (> $2,500/worker) affecting more than one-third of all workers in Canada in 1999, though “formal training comprised only a small part of the overall computer learning activities” (p. 6). Workers are increasingly encountering computer technology in the workplace, though it is unclear how exactly they gain the skills and knowledge to use it or how this fact affects their discretionary access and use generally (cf. Sawchuk, 2003a). Further, reports indicate that there remains a “digital divide” with recognizable class dimensions. Reddick et al. (2000) report:

From 1997 through 1999, higher income households were three times more likely than lower-income households to have home access. … [B]arriers and obstacles to access are aggravated for those in the lower social classes who have less resources or skills available to overcome them. (pp. 1–2)

Turning to discussion of online learning specifically, in their review of online learning research Briton and Taylor (2000) indicate the need to move beyond basic frequency and use statistics: “What we needed was not more data, but an analytical model that would help us understand the relationship between context and [online learning] …” (p. 20). Moving towards a sound analytical model in these terms requires an explicitly social analysis. The communities that make up the labour movement as well as individual workplace communities, both virtually invisible in the context of mainstream computer access and use literature, are central to developing a clear understanding of online learning amongst workers. Recent findings reported in Canada (Sawchuk, 2003a), the United Kingdom (Hakken, 1993) and the United States (Schön et al., 1999) indicate that the effective use of computer technology by working-class groups is intimately related to the relationship of practice to culturally and materially stable community spheres. The findings I report here add some depth to the statistical data above by recognising the unique social standpoints, goals and meanings that define the cultural life of subordinated class groups.

Highlights from the Electronic Survey

The key themes that emerged from the survey data provide important suggestions for the future development of online learning in the Canadian labour movement, though the small sample size makes them only lightly warranted. Nevertheless, they have value and, in turn, responses to the survey helped to orient the telephone
First, while the self-selection bias (i.e. who chose to be involved in the workshops) should not be ignored, the labour activist/educators sampled reported levels of computer literacy (understood as previous experience using computer-based communications) that exceeded the general population in Canada. Prior to the online workshop, the use of computer communication was not new to any respondents, and the vast majority had well over 2 years’ experience. There were no gender differences in this regard, nor were there differences related to participants living in rural areas, small cities and large city centres.

In terms of the technical features of the hardware and software, though all participants found that the inclusion of video and sound clips added to the experience, interestingly the majority felt that these features did not necessarily add to the educational value of the workshop. At the same time, graphics (i.e. still pictures) were thought to add to the online communication and were consistently rated as an important element of the process that should be maintained and expanded if possible. For example, respondents felt that pictures of each participant, still pictures of events discussed, and so on, helped to concretise the communication process (see interaction analysis below). Finally, the inclusion of additional Web links was rated as very important. The links allowed participants to easily expand their knowledge on relevant planned and emergent topics; in particular it perhaps aided in online discussion of emergent topics.

One of the most important themes to emerge from the survey data related to issues of computer access and use. Both home and workplace computers were used by participating respondents (see Fig. 1), putting to rest the notion that it is only home computers that are relevant to the learning process.

The majority had access to a home computer, but significant numbers had access to both home and workplace computers for the purposes of workshop participation, while just under a fifth (17%) had access to workplace computers only. Importantly, factors that significantly affected a respondent’s ability to participate in the workshop included family life, work, and union activism. Work and activism were thought of as the most significant barriers to participation. Part of the informal learning process associated with the workshop, then, involved strategising around when and where online learning could take place. Of course, these factors were anticipated to be even more relevant were the workshop to be of longer duration.
and/or were people to engage in online workshops regularly. In other words, these material factors would become increasingly important if online learning were to be used as an ongoing educational activity within the labour movement.

The other major theme to emerge from the survey data dealt with the forms of participation and communication that occurred in the workshops. As people do in most non-formal union courses, participants indicated the crucial role played by communication with other participants as well as non-participants beyond the more formalised structure and facilitation within the workshop. The workshop provided about half the participants with an introduction to people they did not know, but communication amongst these “new comrades” often moved beyond the confines of the workshop. Respondents to the survey also indicated that informal learning on their own, both offline and online, was important in order to keep up (see Fig. 2).

Overall, respondents ranked the most important factors in their learning as follows:

(1) responses of other participants;
(2) responses of facilitators;
(3) trial and error (technical matters);
(4) offline communication with someone not in the workshop;
(5) online information not from the workshop;
(6) unplanned communication with someone not online and not in the workshop;
(7) online communication with someone not in the workshop.

According to the survey data, with one exception, all respondents indicated the experience as valuable both for its knowledge development in terms of May Day activities around the country, and for its ability to add to an understanding of the potential of online learning for the Canadian labour movement more generally.

**Highlights from Interviews**

Of course, understanding the potential and pitfalls of online learning from the perspective of unions requires a firm grasp of the roots and traditions of the movement more broadly. In reviewing existing labour education literature and then in listening closely to interviewees, it became apparent that the most productive use
of online learning should seek to integrate forms of technology with the progressive face-to-face pedagogy and oral culture of the labour movement. The heart of labour education today, let alone labour education historically, is rooted in *viva voce*, literally by the living voice of participants. This, at once, seems to suggest potential problems related to the largely textual character of current online learning technologies, few of which will find immediate resolution via emerging broadband technical capacities.

The interviews with labour activist/educators allowed several important theme areas initiated in the survey analysis to be clarified and probed. It also allowed several new themes to emerge. Below I illustrate key findings in these data that focus on: (a) the role of informal learning; (b) barriers within online learning amongst activist/educators; (c) the need to understand the interaction dimensions of online learning for the labour movement; (d) the full range of functions toward which online learning may contribute; and (e) the importance of linking online learning with offline action.

The Role of Informal Learning

Informal learning has always been a necessary mainstay of educational practice for subordinated groups such as the working class. Groups such as these have consistently lost out in the realm of schooling, systematically experiencing less schooling and poorer outcomes for a variety of reasons (Curtis et al., 1992; Hatcher, 2000; Livingstone & Sawchuk, 2000, 2003; Luttrell, 1997). Traditionally, as today, the vast majority of working-class people have had to turn to their own organisations as well as to their own informal learning networks to meet their learning needs. More specifically, while non-formal educational activities are widely 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 (e.g. Foley, 1998; Heron, 1996; Martin, 1995; Newman, 1993; Sawchuk, 2003a; Spencer, 1994, 2002; Taylor, 2001). The shifting composition of the labour movement, which includes rising, relative levels of formal education, has hardly changed this fact.

In research interviews, activists/educators highlighted the importance of informal learning in the labour movement and suggested a potential misconnect between the learning culture of unions and the virtual communication space provided by online 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 “Geez 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 online learning could be a useful tool if it was explicitly designed and used to complement rather than replace existing informal and non-formal educational traditions in the labour movement. Thus activists/educators also suggested that traditions of learning in the labour movement will not transfer to online learning environments without the careful attention of both workshop designers and participants themselves. The critique of the labour movement online learning experience in comments such as those above highlights the need for a better understanding of the dynamics of informal learning in virtual space, as well as within related activity offline.

Critiques aside, while the workshops were intentionally designed with adult education principles in mind—such as beginning from the participants’ own experiences and the development of emergent learning themes—collective, participatory forms of informal learning and knowledge construction were said to have occurred online as well, for example:

[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 on-line 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 this were more or less typical. They describe how patterns of information sharing that emerged in unplanned ways in the online learning environment resulted in some of the most useful learning experiences for people. Equally interesting was the finding that people were uncomfortable with any presumed division between informal learning and the non-formal learning in relation to the online workshop. Stimulated by the knowledge and experience of online learning, there was an interest in seeing these two areas more tightly interwoven in order to link everyday and informal learning with the stream of information available in the online workshop as well as other labour education initiatives.

Key Barriers within Online Learning amongst Activists/Educators

Participants also helped to identify the kinds of barriers that shape the online learning process amongst labour activists/educators, building on the types of findings
figured in the survey. In combining these two sets of data we see an even clearer picture of the effects of scarce resources of time, space and human energy amongst labour activists/educators. As one interviewee said:

I just think it’s a big, endemic problem with the labor movement, people are already overworked and over-stressed, and I don’t think there’s any technological things for that, you know, you’d end up just spending more time over the keyboard, and, I mean already doing stuff by email certainly facilitates all that work already, but you know, all of us come in the morning, to minimally a dozen messages, if not twenty or thirty of them, so by the nature of your day if you say maximum I could do an hour of emailing a day, loads of things drop of the bottom of it, and I don’t see anyway anybody else can help fix that problem. (Activist—Edmonton, Alberta)

As I also discuss below, online learning can be streamlined with explicit training in effective means of participation/communication. More importantly for this section I note that, somewhat predictably, online learning opportunities were viewed most positively by activists who faced the greatest barriers of time and distance. These were participants in more isolated locations such as northern Ontario, rural Saskatchewan, the more isolated island communities of British Columbia, and so on. Working outside major urban centres made online learning seem very positive indeed, but it also became clear that most of the women activists interviewed, whether working in urban centres or not, were very positive about the potential for online learning. These were activists/educators with prime responsibility for child care, who were also juggling the responsibility for paid work as well as their union commitments. An activist from a small, northern Ontario town reflected on these barriers:

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 be 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 recognised that activists, in general, remain as they have historically: over-burdened and over-extended with responsibilities. As this female survey respondent (from a large urban centre) noted, “there are not 76 hours in a day. Haven’t figured out the solution yet” (Activist—Toronto, Ontario). In this way, the broader structure of people’s everyday lives as a whole deeply affected how well educational and communication tools worked. It was clear that as a substitute for traditional labour movement learning, online learning is a poor one. However, where the traditions of face-to-face educational activity and direct action are more difficult
to organise due to the (often gendered) lack of time, space and other resources, the addition of online learning was felt to have the potential to make a particularly important contribution to the work and life of the union activist/educator.

Recognising the current online learning technology for what it is, that is asynchronous textual communication, raised a number of basic but important questions amongst interviewees. In a variety of direct and indirect ways, echoing basic literature in the field of online learning, activist indicated that reading, writing, typing and functional levels of computer literacy were essential to the success of the medium. The absence of any of these produced significant barriers to effective participation, though at the same time participation could also be seen as a productive way to developing these skills. To this core list of barriers we can add the effects of people having access to widely varied types and levels of computer hardware. Paralleling the survey findings that advanced video or sound capabilities were not essential to the educational value of online learning, most interviewees recommended the use of “lowest common denominator” technologies. Organisations such as the International Labour Organisation in Europe have been quick to seek a remedy to this latter barrier with development initiatives such as their recent “Course Reader” software (Bélanger, 2001); however, in general it can be said that any progressive program of online learning must be aware of these types of issues. Interviewees felt that this issue needed to be addressed head-on in order to avoid simply reproducing (indeed accelerating) patterns of exclusion which run in opposition to the social purposes of the labour movement, and obviously affect the most vulnerable, most deeply.

Beyond the specific computer literacy requirements for participation, the extensive reading and writing requirements of this form of online learning were also discussed as something of a barrier. Most interviewees talked about being “blown away” by the density and mass of the discussion, and having to develop “survival skills” to deal with the amount of material to read and respond to:

Although there’s some people now that are super technologists, they send you an email with a page clipped out, and I admire them for their ability to do that, but not everybody can do that kind of thing. … Well, you can sort of make a comparison here between a live conference and a virtual conference, where in a live conference they would hand out material, they would give you lots of resource material to read on your own, and some stuff they want to draw your attention to that would be part of their package, and some stuff was, you know here’s an article or a series of articles that you may want to check out. That’s very difficult to do by computer … There was an awful lot of reading that didn’t make a lot of sense, but there was an awful lot of reading to be done. So people take the time to write in their opinions, and some of them were short and to the point … [but] some people just got keyboard diarrhea. (Activist—Winnipeg, Manitoba)

In this context, skilled forms of participation and explicit guidelines for communication could be seen as important means of getting through online material.
Practically speaking, limits to the length of electronic messages, often advocated in the “how to” online learning literature, are vitally important.

Interaction Analysis of Participation

A less obvious barrier to participation concerned the notion of “online communication literacy”. Interaction analysis of informal learning, drawing on the tradition of micro-sociology, and specifically Conversation Analysis (e.g. Sawchuk, 2003b), shows how informal learning is a unique type of “speech-exchange system” combining properties of everyday conversation as well as structured pedagogy. Thus, while it’s been said that “education floats on a sea of learning” (Thomas, 1991), findings from this research suggest taking this one step further by recognising that learning floats on a sea of communication. Indeed, what micro-sociology shows about informal learning is that it depends on a pattern of communication that is both contingent and complex, despite its taken-for-granted, mundane character. In the realm of online interaction specifically, as authors like Winiecki (2001, 2002), Feenberg (1989) and Bakardjieva and Feenberg (2000) have noted, participants in online learning interaction are quick to feel significant discomfort and confusion in these environments because these taken-for-granted forms of communicative machinery are interrupted. Participants in this and other studies flag this as a relative absence of communicative cues. Issues such as “topic continuity” (i.e. negotiation of a shared focus of communication) and the development of shared understanding of the situation more generally may be particularly problematic in online learning. Moreover, the literature tells us that these problems cannot be fully addressed strictly by better facilitation, clear expectations and conventional workshop planning. The practical point here is not that this is understood in some literature, though; it is that participants themselves understand the barriers incumbent with asynchronous, text-based communication. Specifically, participants need to learn to transfer (and modify) the skills of face-to-face interaction such as openings and closings, turn-taking, repair, framing and reframing techniques, and so on, so that they can be used in the online environment. Researchers in the tradition of Conversation Analysis, beginning with Sacks et al. (1974) and now extended to online communications (e.g. Winiecki, 2001, 2002), specifically demonstrate this taken-for-granted complexity and the ways in which breakdowns can occur. Feenberg explains it this way:

Engaging in face-to-face conversation involves complex forms of behaviour called “phatic” functions by semiologists. When we say “Hey, how’s it going?” we signify our availability for communication. We usually close the conversation with another set of rituals, such as, “I’ve gotta go. See you later.” Throughout our talk, we are continually sending phatic signs back and forth to keep the line open and to make sure messages are getting through. For example, we say such things as, “How about that!” or reply, “Yes, go on.” Looks and facial expressions tacitly reassure interlocutors that they are still in touch, or on the contrary carry a warning if the
communication link is threatened by technical difficulties or improprieties. All such phatic signs are bypassed in computer conferencing. Even standard codes for opening and closing conversations are discarded. (Feenberg, 1989, p. 23)

The absence of so many of the tacit signals and the inability amongst participants to reinvent the machinery of interaction result in a significant barrier to effective participation. Face-to-face interaction is extremely fragile and online interaction is much more so. But more than this, as the original work of Garfinkel (1967) demonstrates so well, breakdowns in fact will often involve a crisis of “interpretive trust”, producing a sense of “moral violation” amongst participants as they sense the vulnerability of communication, and indeed the meaning-making, with others. Taking this further, however, we should recognise that this meaning-making is not universal, but culturally bound. Hence, cultures of communications, including the unique culture of the labour movement, must be taken into account when seeking to understand how effective communication and interpretive trust can be established on an ongoing basis.

Building on this theme of an appreciation for the fragility of online communication, in the interviews as well as in examinations of the workshop postings within this research it became clear that participants who had expectations of something more than a basic information exchange consistently responded that they needed “to know” the other person, have a sense of “where they were coming from”, and “trust” that there were shared expectations for things to proceed smoothly. Participants showed a great deal of tolerance for ambiguity but, nevertheless, analysis of postings revealed barriers in the course of interaction online. Bakardjieva and Feenberg (2000) suggest that the problem of the missing cues can be partially resolved through the use of priority indicators, notifications, reminders, feedback mechanisms, tools for participation tracking and statistics, and so on, but they go on to indicate the importance of stable identities for “authentic communication” as well. Taken together with the explanations above, such recommendations fit fairly well with the kinds of comments provided by the labour activists/educators in the workshops:

Well I find that it’s a barrier because, I don’t mind the on-line thing … I find that being an interactive person, I like to interact with other humans, you don’t get the same feel of the individual … I’m not a pen-pal type person anyway, and so it’s kind of nice, even later on, if you did get together with people for a workshop, then, even after, we know each other, we know what we look like, there’s something important to that, to me anyway, and you can then maybe communicate better on a course with people that you know afterward. (Activist—Peterborough, Ontario)

Beyond attention to software design that recognises the informal, communicative dimensions of the online learning process, practically speaking what is required is that participants be given tools to understand and maintain interpretive trust. These
issues should be seen as having important practical value for the use of online learning in the labour movement and elsewhere.

Building on my earlier point regarding recognising the unique dimensions of the labour movement, we can pose the question: how does this model fit union culture? As many writers have noted in the context of both historical and contemporary analysis (e.g. Heron, 1996; Martin, 1995; Montgomery, 1987; Palmer, 1992; Stephan-Norris & Zeitlin, 1996; Thompson, 1963), the establishment, reproduction and development of the labour movement has always been rooted in a predominantly oral culture. While written documents can and do play important roles in organisational life of trade unionists, in North America and elsewhere, the heart and soul of the labour movement still seems to remain dependent upon oral exchange.

Expanding on this theme, we can look more closely at the differences between oral and written communication in the context of online learning in the work of Feenberg. He discusses oral and written traditions in terms of repeatable and retrievable texts, respectively. For Feenberg, the key distinction between them is not whether something is typed or spoken, but rather the nature of the use of the “texts” that are produced. For example, “retrievable texts” (such as a book or a diskette) allow for individual control, whereas “repeatable texts” require the presence of other human beings:

> Texts “stored” in human memory, however, are “accessed” through “repetition” or performance. In cultures which rely heavily on repetition of basic texts, the function of performance is frequently assigned to special individuals, and access to the text is not under individual control but regulated socially through participation in public functions and audiences. (Feenberg, 1989, p. 24)

Both forms of communication culture (retrievable and repeatable) have strengths, and of course it is a mistake to see them as completely distinct. Nevertheless, it can be noted that written culture based on retrievable texts offers individual choice and broad, albeit largely one-way, dissemination of information. Oral cultures and reliance on repeatable texts are associated with the socialisation of information use, the potential to develop solidaristic or communal relations of information exchange and collective forms of informal learning. Feenberg goes on to suggest that online learning straddles the line between these oral and written cultures to, potentially, offer the best of both worlds in a certain way. As interviewees seemed to suggest as well, online learning fits with the spontaneous, collective and even emergent nature of oral exchanges that is the heart of the labour movement. While this is not to argue that exchanging e-mails has the texture of face-to-face talk (although it can be highly “textured” when participants take care in their presentation), this unplanned, informal aspect is in fact one of the things they liked most about the online workshops. At the same time, it provides a potentially retrievable record for future reference while possibly helping to overcome the barriers of space and time in many ways.
Functions of Online Learning and Communication in the Labour Movement

Under this broad heading, the first theme to be noted arises directly from the previous discussion of the labour movement's unique interest in online learning technologies. I cannot provide an exhaustive review, in part because new uses of online technologies emerge weekly in the international labour movement. There are a few uses, however, that must be considered, if only briefly. As Canadian labour historian Craig Heron (1996) describes, the labour movement has always had an interest in class consciousness as both a “resource” and a “project”; that is, consciousness of class processes and one’s position in them are a resource upon which solidarity and collective action is based, and the building and spreading of a critical consciousness of class relationships is also an ongoing goal or project within the labour movement’s development. In exploring online learning, then, it makes sense to examine the degree to which the medium has the capacity to contribute to this core phenomenon. One way of thinking about class consciousness is to consider the development of what could be called “proletarian narratives”. This involves thinking about social class vis-à-vis storytelling and oral culture, which in turn shape our future participation in society.

As with labour education generally, online learning is not organised around the need to accredit individual skill or knowledge. It is a voluntary social-movement-based learning which consistently faces the pressure of relevance in the context of the jam-packed schedules of activists/educators, and the limited resources of the labour movement as a whole. Relevance, however, can come in several forms: relevance to direct action and organising; but also relevance to the development of meaning and understanding about one’s own life and its relationship to a broader narrative of class struggle. What becomes clear in speaking with activists, as in this research, is that this type of development energises them beyond the immediate context. Interviewees consistently spoke of this process of meaning-making. Virtually every union activist has a “story” to tell about how they first saw themselves as part of a long tradition of social action. One activist put it 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 activist/educators to stay engaged in their work as activists and to find and create relevance through this engagement is generally rooted in their commitment to trade unionism as a social movement. What we see for the purposes of this article, however, is that this meaning-making can be carried out through the use of online learning environments. A recent article by Garrison (2001) suggests that online learning can contribute to this “affective” interpretive side of educational and communicative processes, and thus applied to the context of labour movement activism we can begin to see that online learning can play an important role in the development of class consciousness. The production of a proletarian narrative is
central to this process. It helps to create a type of mental “distance” from one’s life that is necessary not only to understand it critically but to give it greater positive meaning denied in mainstream culture (Livingstone & Sawchuk, 2000).

Beyond the use of online learning to contribute to the development of class consciousness, interviewees indicated that the medium could be vitally important to furthering the principles of union democracy as well. Making use of Websites, online communication and online learning in close connection with more traditional organisational and educational activities in the labour movement could be a powerful force for informing members and leadership alike. This, in turn, promotes open and informed debate and a more participatory form of union democracy. Likewise, online learning and communication were thought to be relevant tools for organising the unorganised. Comments by interviewees paralleled issues raised recently by Joseph (1999). Drawing on key labour law cases in the United States (“E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Co., 311 NLRB 893” and “Timekeeping Systems Inc. v. Lawrence Lein Weber, 323 NLRB 30”) the author states:

[w]ith unions increasingly using the internet to strengthen their hand in organizing, it is not surprising that employers are seeking legal roadblocks to limit these efforts. Indeed, employees’ use of company e-mail for union activities has created new questions and legal challenges for unions, employers and workers alike. The use of e-mail in organizing campaigns offers many advantages—especially the ability to quickly reach a large number of people … While so far the NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] has not directly addressed the issue of a union’s right to organize through company e-mail, the related rulings are encouraging, in part because they have shown that an employer’s attempt to exclusively restrict an employee’s use of company e-mail for union-related activities is a violation of the employee’s rights under the NLRA [National Labor Relations Act]. (pp. 1–2)

Though pushing somewhat beyond the scope of the workshop activities and the focus of this research project, clearly online organising, particularly with the new use of “electronic signatures”, directly addresses the informal dimensions of action-oriented online learning. Such issues represent the next generation of the study of informal learning in the online world, as well as the problematisation of the distinction between communication and learning processes per se.

As mentioned above, when asked directly, interviewees in the research largely rejected any clear distinction between online learning and online communication. Indeed, this type of debate may even parallel those over the distinction between formal, non-formal and informal learning in many ways. Several went so far as to say that the separation between the two was unproductive for the purposes of learning in the labour movement:

Interviewer: Can I ask you, did you draw a distinction between educational initiatives and broad communication, like labour communication initia-
tives?
Online Learning for Union Activists?

Respondent: I don’t philosophically and personally. I think the labor movement draws an incredible distinction, and it’s not one I’m terribly fond of, it’s basically the difference between education and propaganda. (Activist—Edmonton, Alberta)

Maintenance of a distinction between communication and educational policy should be seen as a barrier to understanding how learning, in all its forms, is implicated in the development of the labour movement. What activists such as the one above indicate is that the arbitrary separation of the two concepts narrows the potential of online learning and online communication to make a real contribution to development of unions into the twenty-first century.

Linking Informal Online Learning with Practical Action Offline

I have begun to outline the different ways in which informal dimensions of online activity can be conceptualised and studied, but in general terms we could say that online informal learning occurred in the “crevices” of the formalised structure provided in the workshop. To conclude my report on the research findings, in this section I want to return to a key theme identified at the start; namely, how can online activity be linked to real outcomes for the labour movement? In his response to barbs that computers cannot make a real contribution to outcomes, Eric Lee (2000) has written:

[T]he skeptics are right. All the thousands of pounds invested so far in fancy websites have not produced even a fraction of the promised results. That is absolutely true—and also absolutely wrong. It is wrong because it is a snapshot instead of a video. The important thing about understanding the net and the unions is that everything is in motion. Snapshots tell us nothing. (p. 1)

Interviewees themselves outlined that participation had to translate into practical action beyond cyberspace in order for online learning to be useful:

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 from the perspective of interviewees revolved around the creation of “tools” that could be
(formally or informally) created within online activity, and then transferred to the offline world. Workshop facilitators made important attempts to organise the creation of such tools in the form of summaries, but more and more creative means for developing this type of transfer need to be discovered. Participants themselves made attempts at moving their online learning into their local contexts, though with mixed results. Many created reports of ideas, news and tactics and took them to their local labour councils, workplaces and unions, for example:

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.” The ongoing challenge, however, remains: what are the full range of options for the development of more productive linkages between online learning and action in the labour movement?

Conclusions

The conclusions and recommendations of this research point to several key thematic areas. The study explicitly outlines a range of ways of conceptualising and reporting on the nature, barriers and opportunities offered by online learning. In particular, we saw how informal dimensions of learning mixed with the more formalised structure of the workshops. We saw, for example, how the unplanned and emergent online discussions were critical to the success of workshops. We saw how the use of resources from outside the workshops played a role in learning, and we also saw how the taken-for-granted tacit dimensions of communication were both part of the learning process and a source of considerable struggle for participants.

Though it was not discussed at length, features of the software architecture itself also plays an important role in successfully overcoming barriers of communication according to the literature, and this analysis largely confirmed this conclusion. In general terms, there is strong evidence to suggest that online learning can be a valuable addition to the education/communication capacity of the labour movement. Furthermore, there were equally strong grounds for concluding that an important part of this positive contribution revolves around recognition of informal learning, the tacit dimensions of participation, the broader context of participants’ lives, and the linkages between the online and the offline world.

Focusing on the different informal dimensions of the learning process helped us understand why it is that union activists/educators felt that online learning offered an experience that had features of both written (or “retrievable” texts) and oral learning cultures (i.e. “repeatable” texts) within the labour movement. And finally, as was indicated, this research provides relatively strong evidence that online learning
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Technologies can be an important addition to, though in no way a substitute for, existing educational and communication practices.

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Notes

[1] This paper is based on the “Informal Learning Practices within Union-based Telelearning” project and was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada’s New Approaches to Lifelong Learning Research Network. The research was conducted by the author, Zenon Gawron and Jeff Taylor. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Canadian Labour Congress and particularly the insight and energy of the labour movement activists and educators who participated.

[2] The Principal Investigator of this larger project was Jeff Taylor (Athabasca University, Alberta, Canada).

[3] CRA, sometimes called the Scandinavian approach, attempts to reconcile the development and use of specific technologies with the needs, perspectives and values of working people and their unions (see Kraft, 1991, for a discussion of CRA in the context of North America).


References


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