

# **Exploring the role of Australian trade unions in the education of workers**

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## **Abstract**

There are two main elements to this paper. Firstly, we critically examine the current literacy and numeracy ‘crisis’ in Australian workplaces in which loss of productivity, lack of take-up in education and training, and skills shortages are being blamed on workers’ lack of literacy and numeracy skills (Australian Industry Group [AiG] 2010a&b, DEEWR 2010, Skills Australia 2010). We indicate that the issues of literacy and numeracy in workplaces are more complex and require alternative understandings of literacy and numeracy (as social practices), and the additional perspectives of the workers themselves. The second main element to this paper is the opportunity for unions to demonstrate their stake in the education and training of workers. We ask: what possibilities are there for this to happen; what models exist from which Australian trade unions can draw? In the UK the Trade Union Congress (TUC) successfully negotiated with the Labour Government, to establish a Union Learning Fund (ULF), and give recognition to union learning representatives (ULRs), to facilitate learning for workers. Evaluations show that literacy and numeracy learning is one of the areas most positively impacted by union learning representatives. Based on a critical analysis of the current policy discourses around adult literacy and numeracy, review of the current overseas literature on the role of union learning representatives in workplaces, and research on the history of the involvement of Australian trade unions in shaping the VET agenda, this paper reviews the role unions played in recent VET policy formation and considers what new directions they might explore in the emerging policy environment.

## **Introduction**

The Australian trade union movement is currently presented with an opportunity - we argue an imperative - to influence the country's workforce development policies. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) (2008), Skills Australia (2010) and the Australian Industry Group (AiG 2010a&b) all decry the low levels of education and training qualifications achieved by Australian workers, and are particularly concerned that low literacy and numeracy levels are to be blamed for much of this malaise. The Government signalled in its May 2010 Budget (DEEWR 2010) its intention to develop a new national strategy on adult literacy and numeracy to address these concerns. While there has been additional funding in this last budget for the Language Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP) for unemployed Australians, and the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program for workers, statistics show that take up of these programs have been declining (NCVER 2010). The 2006 Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS) showing almost fifty percent of Australians having less than the minimal level of literacy, and over fifty percent of Australians having less than the minimal level of numeracy (ABS 2008), have been taken as sufficient evidence by the Government to grant the AiG half a million dollars in 2009 to further investigate employer views on this issue, and to pilot some work-

based literacy and numeracy courses (AiG 2010a). As far as the Government and the AiG are concerned there is a 'crisis' in adult literacy and numeracy in Australia.

We argue that the notion of 'crisis' requires some examination. It is not clear, for example that workers share the notion that there is a crisis attributable to their 'deficiencies' in skills. Framing the issue of skills in terms of 'shortages' and 'crisis', and especially as a crisis in literacy and numeracy, poses the question in such a way that invites a narrow answer (we need more skills and tighter control of curriculum and teachers to ensure they are produced). It positions workers as being deficient and education providers as being inadequate, and misses very important wider issues related to the organisation of work itself. These other issues include: the way work is organised within workplaces and across industries; levels of pay and security; the balance between work and family or other aspects of life; control and autonomy at work; and the quality of, or satisfaction at, work are all important contributors to the supply and retention of workers and their skills.

Research in Australia suggests that three-quarters of Australian workers are in jobs that 'appear to be appropriate for their educational qualifications' or 'are over-educated' where the educational requirements of their jobs are less than their own educational attainment (Miller 2007, Voon & Miller 2005 cited in Ryan & Sinning 2010). Ryan and Sinning in their discussion of skill mismatches show that the relationship between over and under-education and over and under-skilling is more complicated than usually canvassed. Similarly, large-scale Canadian research by Livingstone (1999, Livingstone & Wilson 2009) shows that it is not a question of skill shortages but an under-utilisation of existing skills that needs more attention.

Although there has been research that examines workplace literacy and numeracy needs from the workers' perspective, little of the findings are reflected in the dominant discourses. Unions, while welcoming recent policy debates on skills (e.g. AMWU 2008, ETU 2008, AWU 2010, CFMEU 2010<sup>1</sup>), have emphasised the need to understand the relationship between training, jobs and labour conditions more closely. For example, the AWU (2010:4) calls for a 'discussion around what constitutes a skill shortage and what constitutes a labour shortage' while the AMWU (2008:11) contends that:

Workforce development and skills upgrading schemes which are based on "employer" demands and intelligence are bound to fail. The real sources of intelligence here are to be found in the workforce itself. This is why a network of workplace assessors and workplace learning representatives should be developed.

The AMWU expresses caution about an uncritical investment in literacy and numeracy training, '[t]here are risks associated with opening the program up for 'foundation' and 'enabling' training which bears little direct connection with the skills required for effective performance in a job and which may become an end in itself'. Apart from this AMWU statement, union analysis that critically engages with the link between the 'literacy and numeracy crisis' and the kinds of challenges faced by

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<sup>1</sup>Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU); Electrical Trades Union (ETU); Australian Workers Union (AWU); and Construction, Forestry, Mining Employees Union (CFMEU)

workers in relation to employment opportunities and patterns are difficult to locate.

This paper contemplates some possible roles that the trade union movement can take in formulating and implementing a response to the current crisis discourse in adult literacy and numeracy, and the implications of each for unions' current concern for their own renewal. Drawing on overseas research as well as our own, we examine these possibilities through two lenses, firstly, models of literacy and numeracy, and secondly, models of trade union renewal, and analyse what these offer for the ways unions can be involved in the worker literacy and numeracy debate, and what these might mean for the interests of trade unions.

### **Whose literacy and numeracy?**

According to the AiG (2010a:1), over 75% of employers reported that poor literacy and numeracy were affecting their business. The AiG claims that low levels of literacy and numeracy have wide implications in their businesses including problems in: productivity levels; safety; team effectiveness; the value gained from any training; and levels of skills shortages (AiG 2010b:27). Skills Australia, drawing on the ALLS survey is also calling for ways to 'lift the unacceptably low level of adult language, literacy and numeracy to enable effective educational, labour market and social participation' (2010:4). Shomos (2010) from the Productivity Commission undertook statistical modelling to support his claim that increasing literacy and numeracy skills would lead to improvements in labour market participation. Reading the claims and arguments put forward by the Government and industry, one could believe that productivity and workforce participation problems can be unproblematically solved by providing workplace literacy and numeracy training programs.

In 2001 the UK government introduced the *Skills for Life* policy, which led to a significant injection of funding into adult literacy, language and numeracy programs, including provision, teacher development and research. The policy enabled a number of longitudinal studies using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to be undertaken about different types of programs including those for workers and unemployed job seekers. None of the proponents of the Australian 'crisis' discourse has cited the UK studies that engage critically with the benefits of workplace literacy and numeracy programs. However, Wolf and Evans' (2011) longitudinal studies conclude that there is little compelling evidence to suggest that short term literacy and numeracy programs similar to the Australian LLNP and WELL programs have significant or immediate productivity outcomes for the employer or employment benefits for learners. They also recognise the difficulties of determining productivity benefits directly attributable to increasing people's literacy and numeracy levels.

Another question that is not being asked in the dominant 'crisis' discourses around literacy and workplace is: how do the workers link their literacy and numeracy skills to productivity in their workplace and their need and inclination to participate in further training? Workers' own voices are not heard in the publications of the Government and industry peak bodies. Yet, studies that closely examine workplace literacy and numeracy from the workers' perspectives (Hull 1997, Black 2001, Belfiore et al 2004) provide insights that are not captured in the mainstream public discourses and which are difficult to capture in the kinds of externally devised standardised assessment and programming instruments mandated in government

funded labour market and workplace literacy and numeracy programs. These studies have examined questions of workers' literacy and numeracy using qualitative approaches, including ethnographic approaches, and work with a different conceptual model of literacy and numeracy to that of the proponents of the mainstream 'crisis' discourse. While the mainstream discourse regards literacy and numeracy skills as measurable through standardised metrics, literacy and numeracy examined from the workers' perspective reveals a different dimension and therefore understanding about what literacy and numeracy means for workers. They can show how literacy and numeracy are embedded in their work practices; the way they work together and negotiate different demands, including those that demand literacy and numeracy skills as a team; what their actual jobs are and to what extent they require the literacy and numeracy that their employers identify; and what they themselves have devised to work productively and efficiently. By critically examining these dimensions of work practices, one can begin to see the different resources that individual workers bring and that are created as a result of these individuals working together. This in turn can uncover how the relations of power between workers and their managers are played out. Their studies show that what the employers identify as the solution to problems in their workplaces are not always supported by the workers, not due to resistance to improve their literacy and numeracy, but because they do not agree that the employers are asking the right questions in the first place.

The proponents of increasing worker literacy and numeracy levels as a solution to problems in productivity would focus on workplace documents and analyse them in terms of the 'measurable' skills (e.g identifying different elements of a particular kind of graph, knowing where to fill in what details in a workplace form). By devising and using tools that assess these specific skills, employers identify which workers are in deficit of these skills and in need of training. According to this discourse, literacy and numeracy are functional skills that ought to be possessed by individual workers, and where this is not the case, those individuals in deficit can be sent to training.

Thus there are competing conceptual models of literacy and numeracy. Barton (2007) calls these the functional model and the social practices model. The functional model regards literacy and numeracy as value neutral skills that can be appropriated to a range of different contexts. The socio-cultural approach views literacy and numeracy as social practices, that is, as ways in which people use language and mathematics to make meaning of what they do in their particular socio-cultural settings. Literacy and numeracy, therefore are necessarily context-dependent and so cannot be measured by any standardised instrument. Barton (2007:32) promotes

an ecological approach...[that] examines the social and mental embeddedness of human activities in a way which allows change. Instead of studying the separate skills which underlie reading and writing, it involves a shift to studying literacy, a set of social practices associated with particular symbol systems and their related technologies. To be literate is to be active; it is to be confident within these practices.

What is significant in the ecological approach is the idea of literacy as active within and through social practices, rather than as a set of atomised skills that are not subject to any change or that can change in relation to changes experienced by individuals and their environment.

In considering the literacy and numeracy of workers, the functional approach would assume that some standard levels or measures can be derived to assess the literacy and numeracy levels of workers. This is the approach taken in a Productivity Commission study (Shomos 2010), which attempts to draw links between workers' literacy and numeracy skills and labour market outcomes. He argues that socio-cultural approaches, particularly those involving ethnographic methodologies

are expensive to carry out and unlikely to provide useful data for analysing labour market effects of literacy and numeracy.... Compare with the social and cultural approach, the functional definition of literacy and numeracy is easier to measure, making it more useful for the empirical analysis in this paper (Shomos 2010:12).

'Easier to measure', however, does not mean more informative, or even meaningful in some contexts. In seeking to develop a robust, integrated and critical framework to understand learning in workplaces, Warhurst observes that quantifying skills and learning is difficult and so the tendency is that 'what is easy to count gets counted and what is not gets ignored'(cited in Sawchuk 2006:599). But according to Sawchuk (2006:599) this is not motivated by simplicity alone,

Analyses of actual social practices associated with skilled and knowledgeable behavior, show that skill is difficult to quantify particularly on an individual basis, but this begs important questions that emphasize the need to maintain a critical political economic perspective: not simply, why exactly do we need to quantify skill, but also what does this widely held need implicitly say about what we see as relevant and legitimate?... the motive is embedded in the need for productivity, but productivity of a profitable kind; it is embedded in the need for competitive national firms, but competition under certain auspices; it is embedded in the need to engage and reward people, but people constructed vis-à-vis a labour market; ultimately it is embedded in the need by one social group to control and appropriate the efforts of others.

The tendency to 'count' the easily countable and ignore the uncountable is also examined by Warhurst & Thompson (2006) in relation to how contributions are measured by governments and firms towards their aspirations of a knowledge economy. They explain that knowledge is seen as something to be captured, leveraged or converted for commercial gain and therefore, knowledge has to be managed by the firms. At the heart of knowledge management is to 'separate knowledge from the knower'(Warhurst & Thompson 2006:795). One way in which this is achieved is to develop 'proxy measures' of knowledge – such as qualifications or broad-brush categories of occupations, rather than to examine the practices that give rise to and in which the knowledge is being used by workers. Jackson (cited in Sawchuk 2006:601) shares the concern about separation when she observes,

knowledge and skills are constructed as stable objects which stand outside the learner, and can be discovered in the form of 'tasks' to be mastered. Such tasks and their mastery are seen to be unambiguously definable and accessible to evaluation in a systematic and unambiguous manner.

Jackson explains that the reduction of what workers know in practice to something that can be examined 'outside' the worker means these objectified activities are 'defined, measured, and evaluated for someone else's purposes .. it [also] has the effect of disorganizing vocational activity for the purposes of the individuals whose 'need' is to master it as a form of practical action' (Jackson in Sawchuk 2006:601).

Although many workplace literacy and numeracy programs take a functional approach often citing improved workplace communication as one of their goals, employer driven programs privilege, not surprisingly, development of skills requirements that serve the immediate interests of the employers. However, literacy and numeracy programs that have a broader scope have been shown to afford significant social capital outcomes for the learners. Balatti, Black and Falk (2006) show that literacy and numeracy learners improve their self-efficacy, develop new networks and learn how to interact differently in a range of networks. The combination of social and human capital outcomes in turn improves the socio-economic well being of individuals in areas such as employment, health and education and learning.

Workers who participate in a literacy and numeracy course can be motivated by different reasons - an opportunity to enhance skills; punishment for poor work performance; a reward for good behaviour - and the benefit can depend on how the worker is approached, how the learning is organised and how much control the worker has in what they learn. Thus, literacy and numeracy can be critical social tools for empowerment in the community and in the workplace. From a workers' rights perspective, literacy and numeracy can enable people to 'read and write', that is interpret and shape, their workplace. However, how literacy and numeracy can lead to worker agency and empowerment can only be understood by a critical examination of the practices in the workplace, not by reacting to what the proxy measures say.

### **Looking back at union engagement**

Trade unions have had a long tradition of promoting education for their members and this takes a number of forms. Unions organise self-education for their officials and officers; there are programs for elected delegates and representatives; and there is a wider informal education of members through meetings, publications and websites, policy stances and campaign activities, a notable recent example of which was the *YourRightsatWork* campaign. Unions are also active through policy advocacy around broader education policy and systems in schools and higher education, and also in work-related policy such as in vocational education and training.

Restructuring education and training was one of the great aims of Australia's union movement in the 1980s and 1990s. It was a key plank of the Prices and Incomes Accord between the Australian Labor Party and the ACTU. Unions played a major role in VET and skill policy development in national training reform, specifically in its strong endorsement of the introduction of competency-based training (CBT). It would link training with wages, tie skill development to industry restructuring, and extend education opportunities for workers, many of whom had not been well served by educational institutions.

Reshaping vocational education was a massive undertaking that created a complex web of national and industry agencies. After 1996 and the election of the Howard government education reform moved firmly under the influence of 'industry', which became a synonym for business. Many trade unionists who worked most closely on the original reforms subsequently believed that their efforts failed to deliver the type of system they envisaged (Brown 2006).

Since then unions' involvement as visible players in VET reforms has declined, which can partly be explained by the necessarily defensive position needed to respond to the challenges associated with the Coalition government's WorkChoices laws, but also due to a narrowing vision of what role and purposed education can play especially in the broader society outside the workplace and the labour movement. A 2007 study of the ACTU's education and training programs (Brown & Yasukawa 2009) showed that most unions at that time (during the last few months of the Howard Government) focussed their education and training efforts on their organisers and to some extent delegates. There was little attention given for education and training of the union officials, members or workers more broadly with any longer term vision for the union movement, as programs were motivated by the crisis in membership decline, and education and training were seen as a means to solving the crisis.

Throughout the Howard years the ACTU continued to pass policy on VET, workplace education and union learning, including an interest in workplace learning representatives, but with ever-diminishing likelihood of it being listened to or consulted with. By 2009 the ACTU Congress again addressed issues of workplace education but this time in the context of a recently elected ALP government, however by this stage Labor's vision for education had narrowed considerably from the broad view espoused in Kim Beazley's lifelong learning ideas to the much narrower human capital driven policies that Kevin Rudd and Stephen Smith took to the 2007 election. In 2009 the ACTU resolved that,

unions pursue a range of protections for members and delegates... (and) seek commitments from employers about organising rights, delegate protections and workplace education. ...These arrangements are a key to successful organising and growth, and to ensuring Australian workers have a genuinely free choice to join a union and participate collectively in workplace issues (ACTU 2009:73).

Congress committed to

pursuing the development of stronger and more effective unions by: .....  
c) ensuring members have access to appropriate workplace education. (ACTU 2009:73) ... (and) will: ... in conjunction with affiliates, consider mechanisms to establish workplace education schemes for Australian workers (76)

In the early 1990s, following the International Literacy Year and the introduction of Australia's Language and Literacy Policy, several unions successfully negotiated enterprise and industry agreements that made commitments to promoting workers' literacy and numeracy through joint efforts by employers, union, government and employer organisations (ACTU 1993). Since then some unions have used WELL programs to organise literacy and numeracy programs for workers. Published case

studies of the CFMEU (DEST 2001) and TCFUA<sup>2</sup> (DETYA 2001) report successful outcomes including better communication skills for the workers; better understanding by workers of their legal right and OHS regulations. We do not necessarily argue against the provision of literacy and numeracy training such as what can be provided through the WELL funding; however, it is important to note that these programs are based on the functional model of literacy and numeracy where trainees are identified individually as needing in literacy and numeracy training.

There is however little indication that unions have engaged critically in relation to literacy and numeracy issues beyond this functional model. In particular, there is little evidence of the recognition that literacy and numeracy practices in the workplace are imbued with relations of power between the employers and workers. The questions of whose literacy and numeracy are valued, along with the political dimension of developing solidarity and agency are elusive. This highlights a particular expression of the more limited understanding of education that currently holds sway in both the political and industrial wings of the labour movement. The ALP's Education Revolution policy of a 'third wave' of economic reform is 'centred on investment in human capital' to position 'Australia as a competitive, innovative, knowledge-based economy that can compete and win in global markets' (Rudd and Smith 2007, 3). This view stands in stark contrast not only to earlier ALP policy thinking but to British Labour's policies of the mid 1990s and its commitment to a learning society that sought to broaden access and extend learning opportunities at work and beyond (see for instance the 1997 Fryer Report Learning for the twenty-first century). How unions might again become more closely involved in VET and literacy and numeracy policy taking as a starting point a worker's perspective is where we now turn.

### **Union re-engagement in literacy and numeracy**

While unions themselves would not typically have literacy and numeracy teaching expertise, models from the UK and elsewhere provide examples of how unions take a role in brokering learning programs for their members, for instance with local adult education colleges. The Blair Government created a union learning fund (ULF) in 1998 to promote trade union activity to support the creation of a learning society. Under the Fund it also established union learning representatives (ULRs) which heralded a new approach to vocational training and lifelong learning; this was aimed at addressing serious skills gap in the UK labour force and low participation where around forty percent of UK employees had received no training in the previous year (Moore 2009). An important feature of the system is to encourage union learning agreements with companies. The idea was that union appointed learning reps would help identify the learning needs of members and then provide access for them to obtain qualifications. This training could be provided by a range of providers and the programs could be placed in workplaces or community centres.

Statutory recognition for ULRs came into force in 2003 following the Employment Act (2002) and provides the right to paid time off work (Clough 2010). In 2008-2009 it was reported that 113,000 working people were trained through ULF projects. The five most common types of training entered into were Skills for Life; Information and Communication Technologies (ICT); Certificates in Professional Development (CPD);

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<sup>2</sup> Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA)



NVQs at Levels 2 or 3; and general Further Education courses (Unionlearn 2010). Clough (2010) reports that literacy and numeracy is the area where the learning representatives are having the greatest impact. By 2010, 22,000 learning reps existed in England, and the concept has been taken up in Denmark, Ireland, Finland and New Zealand (Clough 2010, Holland 2007).

Reports on studies of workplace learning point to the significance of having trained ULRs working with their own workplace colleagues (Warhurst, Findlay & Thompson 2007; Lee & Cassell 2009; Clough 2010). Involving union representatives in learning encourages a more 'bottom-up' approach to its development as employees are more likely to be frank about their basic skill needs to a peer than to a manager. In an informal discussion with a union representative training coordinator in the UK, two of the authors were told that some of their learning representatives had organised English language classes for low-paid migrant workers, and that the initial and significant benefit felt by these workers was the opportunity the classes gave for building a sense of community and solidarity with other workers, who otherwise they would rarely see or have the opportunity to interact with in the workplace.

Australia does not currently have the equivalent of a ULF or a ULR system. We argue, however, that unions can play an active role in influencing the literacy and numeracy policy debates in order to create spaces for literacy and numeracy that builds social capital which arguably is important for human capital development as well. We provide two small case studies from the authors' previous research to help us explore these potentials. One, undertaken by Black (2001) involved a study of the literacy and numeracy practices of local council workers. The second study centred around the experiences of casual workers in a higher education institution and examined the role and meaning of numeracy in organising these workers.

In Black's (2001) study of local council workers, he and a colleague travelled with teams of outdoor workers who were responsible for concreting footpaths and cleaning the drains in the local council area. Interviews with workers during their 'downtime' (for example, while waiting for cement to dry) revealed quite different perspectives to those obtained from interviews with the manager and supervisors. Whereas the manager and supervisors believed the workers lacked literacy and numeracy skills and were in need of a literacy class, 'in practice' there were few literacy and numeracy practices actually required of the teams. The manager, for example, espoused the need for workers to write quotes for local residents requiring concrete driveways, and to be able to calculate concrete pours, but it was mainly the team leader who assumed these roles, and besides, these practices were learnt on the job quite easily with help from fellow workers. Incident reports were another example, such as when teams accidentally severed power cables, but these were written by the cost clerk at the depot, and not by the team members. By contrast, the workers were found to be 'deficient' in literacy and numeracy in the formal weekly training program at the depot delivered by the manager and a supervisor. This program was an attempt to encourage workers to think differently at work, to take on some of the characteristics of so-called 'knowledge workers'. But what it didn't take account of was the bitterness some workers felt at their treatment by the council which had reduced their workforce numbers, and implemented workplace reforms that pitched work teams against work teams. The main outcome of the training program was workers feeling belittled ("I felt like a school kid again"), and confirmation for the manager that the workers did

indeed lack literacy and numeracy skills (“they don’t understand square metres”), which in a formal ‘schooled’ sense was probably correct, given virtually no workers had attended school beyond year 10. But the important point was that the workers comfortably and efficiently managed the literacy and numeracy practices required of them in their work.

On the face of it, the manager and his supervisor considered they had workers with basic education needs, but these needs were not perceived by the workers who daily undertook hard, physical work with little monetary reward. A formal education program organised by the manager, would have been resisted by these workers, and doomed to fail. And yet, the workers were happy to improve their skills and spoke enthusiastically of learning from their fellow workers, and pointed to the fact that the council had neglected their training needs. An alternative workplace education program, organised from within their own worker ranks, and which focused on their own perceived needs, would most likely have been welcomed, and a union learning representative could enable this to happen.

Yasukawa and Brown (forthcoming) examined the ways in which a group of casual academics in an Australian university were mobilised to take collective action about their grievance about their pay and conditions. The mobilisation of these workers arose after the dissemination of a union-funded in-depth study of the lived experiences of casual academics (Brown, Goodman & Yasukawa 2010). The study debunked many of the reasons advanced by the employers of the desirability of casual labour and gave these workers, who often work in isolation, a sense of solidarity of experience. This led to the casual workers to come together to discuss a shared concern about the amount and basis on which they were being paid. Local workplace union delegates facilitated meetings of the casuals, and it came to light that the workers found the casual pay formula cryptic and incomprehensible. The union delegate demystified the formula, and helped the staff to produce the evidence needed to challenge the basis of their pay. Whereas the employer would point to the formula as a ‘given’, this was a ‘critical numeracy’ exercise where the workers interrogated the validity of the formula in a way that led to an industrial dispute, which resulted in the casuals receiving additional pay. Furthermore, the exercise involved the delegate explaining the history of the formula, and politics within the union that has been working to silence the voices of the casual workers; this in turn mobilised some casuals to become active in their union.

The two studies cited above provide ideas for unions to build the kind of social capital unionism advanced by Jarley (2005). By focussing on the work practices of the workers, rather than ‘proxy’ measures of the workers’ skills or workplace productivity levels; unions can play a role in devising education and training programs that are designed to meet the real needs of the workers in ways that build on their existing know-how. As the UK experience shows, learning representatives can be ‘ethnographers’ of their own workplace, that is, as workplace representatives who know the authentic workplace practices, and who are more likely to be trusted in initiating discussion about education needs. Furthermore, the ‘crisis’ discourse advanced by employers can be used as an opportunity for unions to create space for involvement in worker education, while using the opportunity to facilitate the kind of critical education that builds social capital among workers.

Employers and their peak bodies understandably give primacy to human capital outcomes from literacy and numeracy learning, and view literacy and numeracy as functional skills that are needed by workers to perform their work well, and give secondary focus to the social capital outcomes such as increased participation in society that can arise out of literacy and numeracy learning. Unions can broaden the possibilities for expanding the scope of worker education, but this can only be achieved if unions do not get locked into the narrow thinking of literacy and numeracy as purely functional skills, and focus on how workers engage in their work practices. This requires renewed union engagement in the literacy and numeracy policy debates that are currently unfolding.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has argued the need to re-think the discourse around skills shortages and a literacy crisis so that policy debates, particularly in relation to literacy and numeracy can be broadened. There are competing conceptual models of literacy and numeracy (functional and social practices), and we have argued that the debate led by employers and government, with little input from workers or unions, is framed within the narrow functional model based on a human capital agenda. Yet unions played a leading role in earlier stages of training reform, and in the UK the experience of ULRs shows one way of engaging workers in taking up education and training. Examining alternative ways of engaging workers and giving greater attention to workers' experience of their work, workplace and aspirations for learning offers a way of thinking beyond a narrow skill deficit model.

There are important reasons for trade unions to be taking a leading role in promoting literacy and numeracy learning for their members. The first reason is for immediate self-interest. Promoting and negotiating education and training opportunities with and for workers increases unions' relevance to workers and workplaces. Secondly, literacy and numeracy classes can offer places for workers and union members to collectively imagine and explore ways to actively shape their workplaces, rather than see them shaped entirely by the employers' vision. The challenges confronting unions are many, some are external but others are internal. The dominant thinking about the purpose of education emphasises narrows it to be primarily a means of developing individual human capital in the interests of enterprises and the economy. This prevailing view shapes ideas within the labour movement also, however there are signs that different thinking is needed. Ged Kearney, the recently elected ACTU President has spoken of labour's need to carry two swords, the sword of vested interest and the sword of social justice so that unions are relevant not only in the workplace but in the community and society. She has argued that education's 'purposes and curriculum are (too) tightly proscribed' and that 'we need a worker education that is far broader (Kearney 2010). By creating spaces for workers to come together to discuss their experiences of work, their aspirations and barriers to achieving them, workers can develop a sense of community and collective purpose.

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