

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

Keiko Yasukawa, Tony Brown and Stephen Black  
University of Technology, Sydney

## Research says ...*there is a literacy (and numeracy) crisis in Australia!*

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). 2008. *Adult literacy and life skills survey, Summary results: Australia 2006*. ABS, Canberra.
- Australian Industry Group (AiG). 2010. *National Workforce Literacy Project*. Australian Industry Group, Sydney.
- Skills Australia. 2010. *Australian Workforce Futures: a national workforce development strategy*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.
- Shomos, A. 2010. *Links Between Literacy and Numeracy Skills and Labour Market Outcomes*, Productivity Commission Staff Working Paper, Melbourne.
- Industry Skills Councils 2011. *No More Excuses: An industry's Response to the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Challenge*.

## According to the crisis discourse –

- Approximately 50% of the adult Australian population does not have the minimal literacy and numeracy levels to function effectively in work and community life
- Poor literacy and numeracy levels of workers are responsible for low productivity levels in the workplaces of 75% of the workplaces surveyed
- If only literacy and numeracy levels of workers were improved, labour market participation and workplace productivity would increase

.... and we have been saying the same things for the last 20 years!

## Not *all* research studies agree - case study

### 1

An ethnographic research in a local council, observing and talking to outdoor council workers (Black & Yasukawa *forthcoming*)

- The work demanded little use of literacy by most of the workers
- Workers were able to 'do' the numeracy and had little need for recourse to schooled numeracy skills
- Work was accomplished in teams
- Workers were aware of 'productivity losses', but had observed continuing staffing cuts that impacted on the work of the council
- Workers were resentful of new work practices that set up fellow workers in competing teams
- Managers had organised literacy and numeracy training in the council training room, but workers could see little relevance of what was being taught and what needed to be done in their work

## The absence of workers' voices in the dominant discourse?

- Current crisis discourse focuses on the voices of employers, government and to some extent the literacy and numeracy 'industry' that benefits from this crisis, resulting in -
  - A singular view
  - A simplistic view of the relationship between work, learning and the economy

## Workers' voices

- Literacy and numeracy alone may not be responsible for productivity problems in workplaces
- Workers may need or want to develop literacy and numeracy that enable them to understand their position in the workplace (and possibly their union) and also for their personal development
- Listening only to the employers' stories misses out on the politics of the workplace that are intertwined with the work and learning of workers
- Work can't change without the cooperation of workers

## So how can we inject workers' voice in the debate?

Unions as the organised voice of workers have a role to play

- Looking back – Australian unions played a leading role in education and training reforms (1980s / 1990s)
- This role was severely diminished during the Howard government era
- New role called for, but policy work and readjustment needed
- The UK established a formal role for unions to play in promoting learning among workers – the Union Learning Fund
- The UK unions appointed and trained Union Learning Representatives who 'brokered' learning programs for their union members

Can Australian unions play an active role in foregrounding workers' voices in the education and training debates?

How can this happen, and what will this look like?



## Starting with workers' voice – case study 2

Identifying numerous numeracy issues in a union organising campaign around casual academics (Yasukawa & Brown *forthcoming*)

- Concern by casual academics about not being paid enough led to union activists and the casual workers unpacking the pay schedule and demystifying the formula
- Casual academics logged all their work to provide evidence of the amount of unpaid work
- Evidence used to lodge and make gains through an industrial disputes process
- Reflection of the case led to casuals asking why their union had negotiated such inferior pay schedule in the first place and examining the structure of their own union
- Understanding the low representation of casual academics in the union led to increased organising by the casuals themselves to influence the next enterprise bargaining round