Workplace literacy programs have been viewed as the way to raise workers' basic skills so they could perform more effectively in increasingly complex work environments. As these programs have proliferated, so have the number of issues associated with workplace literacy. Some issues are related to assumptions underlying the need for workplace literacy; others have to do with program development and implementation. Many of the issues associated with the assumptions on which the need for workplace literacy programs are based focus on the "language" or vocabulary used to describe this need, language that depicts workers as being deficient or lacking in basic skills. In addition, responsibility and blame for the current economic woes are often placed solely on the workers. A second set of issues is connected to program development and implementation. Nearly every component of workplace literacy programs has affiliated issues, such as curriculum, instructional delivery, assessment, and evaluation. (An annotated listing of 16 print resources and a list of 8 resource organizations are provided.)
During the 1980s, the concept of workplace literacy was catapulted to national prominence by the perception that, as a nation, the United States was losing its competitive edge. Viewed by many as a solution to the nation's economic woes, the area of workplace literacy became a growth industry within the education and training community. Workplace literacy programs were developed with the goal of raising workers' basic skills so that they could perform more effectively in increasingly complex work environments.

Many diverse strategies and programs have been implemented to address the need for a better educated work force. As these programs have proliferated so have the number of issues associated with workplace literacy. Some of these issues are related to assumptions underlying the need for workplace literacy whereas others pertain to program development and implementation.

Many of the issues associated with the concepts on which the need for workplace literacy programs are based focus on the "language" or vocabulary that is used to describe this need. In citing the need for workplace literacy programs, publications frequently depict workers as being deficient or lacking in basic skills. Not only do such descriptions dehumanize workers, but they also fail to take into account the considerable skills and knowledge most bring to the workplace.

In addition, many articles tend to place the responsibility for the current economic woes solely on the worker, failing to acknowledge that literacy is only one component of a more productive work force ("Myth #15", 1991). In contrast, some scholars are now suggesting that government policies and corporate practices—not skills shortages among workers—are primarily responsible for the diminishing competitiveness of the U.S. work force (Weisman, 1991, 1992). It is also not unusual to see discussions of the "costs of illiteracy" to business and society linked to insufficient basic skills. Again, in these discussions workers are blamed for large economic losses without considering the role of the organization (Hull, 1991).

A second set of issues is connected to program development and implementation. Nearly every component of workplace literacy programs has affiliated issues as illustrated by the following questions:

- Curriculum. What should be taught? Should the curriculum be strictly job related or should it be more broadly based? Who should determine what should be taught? To what extent should workers be involved in determining the curriculum? Who should develop the curriculum and on what should it be based?

- Instructional Delivery. What are the most effective methods of delivering workplace literacy programs? Is it better to use school-based approaches or those that are more closely aligned with the workplace context? What is the role of peer teaching and collaborative learning in workplace literacy?

- Assessment. What constitutes appropriate assessment procedures? Can standardized assessment instruments accurately measure workplace-related skills and knowledge? What can be done to prevent assessment information from being misused?

- Evaluation. How can workplace literacy program outcomes be measured? Should the focus be on personal or workplace outcomes?

Although there are many debates about the assumptions underlying workplace literacy programs and the most appropriate approaches to program development, no one disputes the need for such programs. Unfortunately, there is still limited research to guide practice in workplace literacy, but a practice-based literature that can respond to many of the questions and issues related to program development is slowly emerging. The resources on this list can be consulted for further information on workplace literacy programs, including a discussion of related issues. An earlier Trends and Issues Alert on workplace literacy (ED 304 563) lists additional resources.

Print Resources


Intended for trainers of literacy providers and practitioners in the field, this manual explains how to develop a workplace literacy program and market it to employers.


Developed as a background paper for the OTA's report, Worker Training: Competing in the New International Economy, this review of workplace basic skills research and practice identifies factors contributing to program success or failure.


Includes the findings of six reporters from diverse areas who looked at how their communities were responding to adult literacy, basic skills, and workplace literacy programs.

Reports on the results of a project that tested whether the ASTD Workplace Basics model was feasible, whether it was useful to employees and management, and whether it could be transferred to other workplaces.


A study to identify trends influencing the literacy requirements of two entry-level jobs at each of three manufacturing sites and three hospital sites concluded that job descriptions and training manuals were not reliable indicators of literacy requirements but observation and interviews were.


An analysis of the popular, dominant myths of literacy and work and presentation of alternative points of view and critical reassessments.


A case history of one group of women workers, who after losing their jobs in 1988 when a major apparel manufacturer closed a plant, took part in some aspect of the Job Training Partnership Act training program following the closing.


This issue of the Education Writers Association newsletter focuses on the differing views of workplace literacy efforts held by labor unions and company management.


An up-to-date listing of over 450 workplace literacy-related publications, each indexed using one or more of the following terms: applied, general, policy, or research.


An analysis of current workplace literacy efforts in terms of approach, e.g., high skills or low wages, and a charge to support those that are "high skill."


The first examines literacy task analysis practices, tools, and techniques and presents a system for developing and implementing the process. The second includes case studies in five job areas and information about the relationship between job task analysis and literacy task analysis.


A practitioner's guide to developing literacy training programs for workers containing 28 chapters divided into four parts: understanding the need for workplace literacy, identifying workplace training needs, examples of practice in workplace basic skills training, and discovering approaches for program development.


Suggests that skills shortages among high school graduates are not related to diminishing competitiveness of the U. S. workforce.

**Resource Organizations**

AFL-CIO, Education Department, 815 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006 (202/637-5144)

American Society for Training and Development, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313 (203/683-8100)

Business Council for Effective Literacy, 1221 Avenue of the Americas, 35th Floor, New York, NY 10020 (212/512-2415, 2412)

Center on Education for Training and Employment, 1900 Kenny Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1090 (614/292-4353)

Education Writers Association, 1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 310, Washington, DC 20036 (202/429-9680)

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, 1900 Kenny Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1090 (614/292-4353)

Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, 204 Calder Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6216 (215/898-2100)