E-Learning and Union Mobilization

Peter H. Sawchuk, Zenon Gawron, and Jeffery Taylor

Abstract

This article reports on findings from a research program (1996-2001) that looked at the potential relationship between e-learning, social action, and mobilization in the Canadian labour movement. Our program involved the analysis of 11 on-line workshops. Over 1,100 labour activists participated. These workshops were analyzed using server log access data, participant surveys, and telephone interviews. We used a cultural historical activity theory perspective. We ask questions about the unique cultural, political, and economic interests that organized labour have in e-learning. We outline the relationship between e-learning and social change; informal and organized learning; and virtual and real-world practice.

Résumé

Cet article fait un rapport sur des découvertes d'un programme de recherche (1996-2001) qui a regardé le rapport potentiel entre l'apprentissage, l'action et la mobilisation sociale dans le mouvement de main-d'œuvre canadien. Notre programme a impliqué l'analyse de 11 ateliers en ligne. Par-dessus 1100 activistes de main-d'œuvre ont participé. Ces ateliers ont été analysés le journal de bord de serveur utilisant données d'accès, les études de participant et les entretiens de téléphone. Nous utilisons une perspective de théorie d'activité historique culturelle. Nous posons des questions relatées aux uniques culturels, intérêts politiques et économiques qui a organisé la main-d'œuvre ont dans l'apprentissage. Nous esquissons le rapport entre l'apprentissage et le changement social; l'apprentissage simple et organisé; et pratique véritable et de «real world».

Introduction

In this article we report on findings from a relatively expansive research program (1996-2001) that explored the potential relationship between e-learning, social action, and mobilization in the labour movement. Although carried out in Canada, its findings are easily applicable to the labour movements of other countries that carry on the same debates. Our method was to construct and run a series of 11 on-line workshops and then study them. These workshops involved over 1,100 participants, the vast majority of whom were labour activists or educators. The workshops were analyzed using server log access data, on-line participant surveys, and telephone interviews with targeted workshops. Throughout the research we asked questions about the unique cultural, political, and economic interests that social movements such as organized labour might have in e-learning.

Below we interrogate the link between learning cultures of unions and the potential role, if any, for e-learning. We present an abridged statement on relevant theory for understanding

learning in the labour movement. And finally, we present some key findings from our research with special emphasis on two important subthemes: (case in point 1) the link between e-learning and social action in the real world; and (case in point 2) the possible role of e-learning in developing an expansive proletarian narrative through emergent explorations of labour history. In brief, we claim that e-learning has a variety of important roles to play for labour movement development and mobilization well beyond simply providing greater access to learning for a disparate population of activists.

Starting from the Standpoint of Labour

The labour movement is surprisingly diverse, but it has always set as one of its primary goals the mobilization of working-class people in terms of their own unique class standpoint and their own unique cultural, political, and economic interests. As with radical adult educators like Foley (1998), it is our view that mobilization is inherently an educational process; and to put it even more bluntly, for genuine learning to occur in and for the labour movement it cannot be separated from mobilization, development, and social action. Indeed, labour educators, organizers, and activists—explicitly but more often implicitly—use forms of adult and popular education techniques in their practice. In practical terms this means starting from the experience of participants, actively engaging participants in the pedagogy and learning, and using peer instructors and facilitators, all with the goal of translating learning into social change. Participants in labour movement education, for example, are universally expected to take their education back to their workplaces and union halls, applying it to the collective good of their fellow members and community. As Spencer (2002), a leading labour education specialist, has so consistently pointed out, labour education has a *social* rather than strictly an *individual* educational motive. Thus the question that animates our writing here begins with a question: What makes an interest in e-learning within the labour movement unique?

One way that learning in the labour movement differs from employer-controlled workplace training and state-organized adult education is that it is subject to a type of formalized, democratic nexus. Newman (1993) describes it as educational practice guided by three contracts, namely, the relationship between the learners/members and the facilitator/educator; the relationship between the learners/members and their union; and the relationship between the facilitator/educator and the union. In addition, Martin (1995) has insisted that union education is defined by the relationship between educational practice, union culture, and the everyday struggles of members in the workplace, on the picket lines, and out in the community. Participants in labour education events share a common community defined minimally by their union membership, their commitment to develop skills to serve their fellow unionists, and by elements of a shared world view that recognizes that work relations are inherently conflictual and that these relations are mirrored in the broader society with implications for workers generally. Labour education in the variety of forms it has taken internationally and historically (London, Tarr, & Wilson, 1990; Miller & Stirling, 1997; Hannah, Fischer, & Bueno, 1998; Taylor, 2001; Gereluk & Royer, 2001; Spencer, 2002) has at its core an emancipatory aim. And toward this aim, over the years, labour education has appropriated various educational theories and forms of educational technology. For these reasons and others, questions of technologies, instructional design, delivery, and assessment diverge significantly from both conventional employer training and schooling. As Briton and Taylor (2000) have suggested,

> 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. (pp. 3-4)

Perhaps because of its century-and-a-half-old interest in internationalism, the "problem of distance" that orients so much of e-learning scholarship is easily recognized by labour movement activists. Activists are interested in expanding educational opportunity for workers with an eye to building solidarity across workplaces, communities, and nations. But to be relevant to the labour movement, explorations of e-learning must begin with a firm grasp of the movement's unique roots and traditions in the area of education, learning, and social action. The labour movement's interest in on-line learning is not governed by a concern for credentialization and the many structures of curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy that this interest naturally entails. Rather, it is an interest governed by a vision of learning, as Calvani, Sorizio, and Varisco (1997) put it (in a different context), that cannot be reduced to knowledge transfer, but instead is best characterized as a form of direct engagement in practice in which people solve practical problems, make use of previous (knowledge) artifacts, and in general "share ways of doing things" (p. 272). To put a head on the explanation, issues of social standpoint are central, that is, for the labour movement, this type of learning includes a process where workers make meaning of their lives as workers. Thus, noting our discussion below on the use of labour history in the e-learning workshops, the labour movement is interested in how e-learning might contribute to an expansive proletarian narrative. In constructing instructional spaces on line, the labour movement can be said to share with Bakardjieva and Feenberg (2000) an ethical foundation in the design and articulation of a democratically informed and participatory communication environment.

In terms more specific to the existing literature, it is clear that over the last decade a range of research on the labour movement, the Internet, and e-learning has begun to emerge (Mather & Lowe, 1990; Reardon & Mather, 1993; Labour Telematics Centre, 1994; Taylor, 1996a, 1996b; Lee, 1997; Köpsén & Larsson, 2002; Sawchuk, 2003a, 2003b, in press). Shostak (1999) offers a useful North American introduction to a range of practical implications including the use of the technology for delivering membership services, for developing political action campaigns, for organizing new members, and for general information-sharing across state and national boundaries. However, the research that perhaps most closely mirrors our own derives from Europe. Walker and Creanor (2000; also see Walker, 2001) report on the European Trade Union Distance Education (ETUDE) project, which aims to build capacity among trade union educators through the investigation of mixed face-to-face/e-learning courses. Like us the ETUDE research registers the importance of aligning the traditions and culture of the labour movement with the modes of practice and choice or use of technologies. Unlike us they have had to grapple with a multiethnolinguistic context of pan-European participation. Walker and Creanor (2000) note a range of barriers to sustained engagement among course participants. However, to our minds these conclusions rest on an assumption that on-line practice can be meaningfully understood as a social setting unto itself. In this and other ways, the example of the ETUDE project helps us make clear how our approach is somewhat different from earlier attempts to assess the use of e-learning in the labour movement: (a) our approach to the conception of learning as an inherently social rather than a psychological phenomenon (see our discussion of learning theory below); (b) our interest in explicitly addressing the linkages between the on-line and off-line world of trade union activism; and (c) our wish to understand the possible importance of narrative development as a key mediating artifact for sustaining and creating mobilization among unionists.

A Theoretical Approach for Studying
E-Learning in the Labour Movement

In our research the concept of *learning* itself was not taken as given. Rather, early on we felt that the way learning was understood in most of the educational literature was problematic. On the one hand, we were faced with traditional Cartesian perspectives on the learning process that, either implicitly or explicitly, separated the cognitive processes of the mind and the action of the body in a cultural-historical-material world. This perspective resulted in a conception of learning defined as a universalized, individual, psychophysical act through which a person internalizes knowledge and skill. However, in this research our questions were akin to those asked by Lave (1988) over a decade ago.

> Why does the mind with its durable cognitive tools remain the only imaginable source of continuity across situations for most cognitive researchers—while we isolate the culturally and social constituted activities and settings of everyday life and their economic and political structures and cyclical routines from the study of thinking and so ignore them? (p. 76)

Lave and Wenger's own response to this question, although provocative, to our mind has not proven satisfactory, particularly in terms of the latest derivatives (which are not of Lave's doing). Like Vann and Bowker (2001) we have found that the concept of *communities of practice* has become increasingly troublesome vis-à-vis its popularization and corporatization. Moreover, analytically, it has often come to stand in for virtually any (vague) reference to some groups of people learning together informally.

In response we turned to an approach rooted in the work of Marxist psychologist Vygotsky (1978) called cultural historical activity theory (CHAT). Briefly, CHAT emerges from the Vygotskian notion of human action as tool-mediated vis-à-vis structures of participation (e.g., Zone of Proximal Development, ZPD). From this and other core building blocks, Leont'ev (1978) developed the concept of *activity*.

> Activity is the minimal meaningful context for understanding individual actions.… In all its varied forms, the activity of the human individual is a system set within a system of social relations … The activity of individual people thus depends on their social position, the conditions that fall to their lot, and an accumulation of idiosyncratic, individual factors … In a society a person does not simply find external conditions to which he must adapt his activity, but, rather, these very social conditions bear within themselves the motives and goals of his activity, its means and modes. (p. 10)

The current generation of CHAT combines and elaborates on the original principles of Vygotsky (1978) and Leont'ev (1978). First, it maintains a central role for seminal concepts such as *tool-mediation*, which is inclusive of semiotic as well as material artifacts. Second, the concept of the ZPD is expanded to make broad claims about the concept of activity. The pertinence of ZPD and the concept of *activity* for understanding e-learning is that it allows us to understand learning as more than simply an information or knowledge exchange: learners actively construct knowledge together through tool-mediated participation with clear historical dimensions. The third principle is that of *articulating activity systems*. This principle focuses on how activity systems are enmeshed within a multidimensional network of other activity systems that interact, support, destabilize, and interpenetrate (Engeström, 2001). This point is particularly important for our understanding of relations between on-line and off-line worlds, but can be

expanded to include overlapping activity systems of the local labour community, workplace, and so forth. The fourth principle is that of *historicity*: activity systems are always seen to have a development trajectory, and artifacts themselves bear traces of their historical development as well. Historicity intimately relates to a fifth principle, that activity systems developed based on the concept of *contradictions*. It is through internal contradictions of interconnected social systems that new patterns of individual and collective participation, and hence learning, emerge. The sixth and final principle that orients our general analysis in this article is the concept of *alternative social standpoints*, which writers such as Wertsch (1991) have discussed in terms of the *heterogeneity of expertise* or *multivoicedness*. We make use of this principle by explicitly addressing the standpoint of labour activists.

Rooted in these concepts, we clarify our emerging approach to learning as follows, with specific attention to relations of power not adequately addressed in CHAT approaches to date. Learning is anywhere and everywhere that human practice is mediated by cultural and material tools (Vygotsky, 1978); it is not limited to formal knowledge re/production in schools or "scientific-rationalist" endeavours (compare Latour & Woolgar, 1986). Schools, laboratories, and the like merely provide specific forms of (legitimized) institutionally mediated activity, that is, everyday learning. If the formal versus informal learning distinction retains relevance—and we think it does—it is based on the broad categories of institutional mediation to which they refer. Thus, in terms of popular and most scientific parlance, what is termed *learning* is simply a specific dimension of everyday practice defined by its legitimacy in relation to specific institutional mediations. However, this legitimization is contested, and this comes most clearly into view when we take seriously differing (dominant and subordinate) social standpoints. Everyday practice that develops positively on subordinate social standpoints necessitates an appropriation of the discourse of learning for legitimization as learning and usually requires a culturally and materially stable community and/or social movement to do so (Sawchuk, 2003a). The appropriation of the discourse of learning historicizes practice and allows learning to be accumulated, developed, and so forth. At the same time, it is through the (variously successful) struggle over legitimization that the learning of subordinate groups comes to be unevenly identified (by both practitioners and analysts) and developed.

Understood as a legitimation process, learning signals a shift from (to use the language of de Certeau, 1984) the "tactical" (reproductive practices of the "weak") to the "strategic" (transformative the practices of the "strong"). In terms of CHAT, the discourse of learning is identified as a decisive politico-discursive tool that promotes self-reflexive agency in the developmental trajectory of activity systems.

The Emergence of a Research Program on
Unions and E-Learning

Understanding the context of research is vital to understanding the particular outcomes of research. In providing a background to our programmatic development in this brief section, two things become clear: first, that research design is never as simple in real life as it is on paper; and second, in terms of research with the labour movement, this complexity derives from a research version of Newman's (1993) three contracts as discussed above.

Our program of research has its origins in Athabasca University's Labour Studies program through its collaboration with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) on the delivery and research of on-line labour education in 1992. It was in the early 1990s that Jeff Taylor moderated a month-long conference on Solinet, CUPE's computer-conferencing system. Begun

in 1985 by the energetic and visionary union activist Marc Belanger, it was the first labour-oriented computer conferencing system in the world and the first national bilingual computer conference in Canada (Taylor, 1996a, 2001). By 1994 this cooperation had expanded with the delivery of Athabasca University's first for-credit course on Solinet, and only two years later with its approval as a research project in the Telelearning Network of Centres of Excellence (TL•NCE), this research and instructional relationship became formalized.

In the first phase of our research program (1996-1999), eight on-line courses were delivered on Solinet using Simon Fraser University's Virtual-U learning management system (Briton & Taylor, 2001). The general goal of the project in this phase was to test conferencing systems in order to determine if the principles of collaboration and action-based learning would adapt successfully to an on-line environment. Attracting 1,058 registered participants in this phase, all but one of the courses were international in scope and non-credit in design. Analysis, not reported here, involved a survey (n=180) and thematic exploration of participation transcripts.

As the first phase of investigation drew to a close, it became clear that deeper exploration of informal on-line and off-line learning was necessary. A linked subproject, headed by Peter Sawchuk, was established (Sawchuk, 2003b), and a new layer of analysis was developed that further challenged the notion that e-learning can be thought of as a hermetically sealed environment separate from action in the off-line world. Specifically, Sawchuk carried out a series of telephone interviews with a cross-section of participants (n=12) specifically to assess the significance of on-line and off-line informal learning.[1] Basic qualitative (i.e., thematic) analysis was used to draw out key dynamics of the informal dimensions of learning.

As the second phase of research began (1999-2001), however, Belanger left CUPE to join the International Labour Organization (ILO), and a new labour partner emerged in the form of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). The CLC recruited participants for the various workshops, which included identifying potential participants in terms of geographic, gender, size of community, and other criteria. Formal arrangements such as these are understandable as a research variation of Newman's three contracts: the relations among the research group, the CLC, and the participants all played a powerful role in shaping the nature of the research, the pedagogy, and ultimately the modes of discussion and learning on line. This phase involved the delivery of three six-week, Web-based workshops on issues ranging from using e-learning, organizing May Day celebrations, and revitalizing the labour council structure. The workshops, metaphorically transformed into an on-line "union hall," were supplemented by a Web site containing workshop outlines and supporting materials. Over 100 participants were involved. The workshops were structured as a series of topic discussions, and participants experimented with small-group discussion in this framework.

Findings

I: Do you think that this type of on-line learning and distance
        learning
        tends to isolate people? What was that your experience in
        the work
        shop?
R: Actually, I believe that it actually makes you broader, in
        terms of
        understanding people from elsewhere by helping you to

find out what
is going on not only in your own area, but what's going on
across the
country.

I: It's also been said that [e-learning] may go against some of
the core
values of the labour movement in the sense that [the labour
move
ment] is orientated toward solidarity, and collective action
and things
of that nature. Any comments on that? Actually, I think it

R: solidified them. (Activist/Participant)2

Our research did not explicitly attempt to reproduce a CHAT analysis. Rather, we have been inspired by this approach to ask certain questions and pursue certain avenues of analysis. Furthermore, and in all honesty, our understanding of the relationship between educational culture in the labour movement and e-learning was not as theoretically explicit at the beginning of our research as it was to become by the close of the projects. Our attraction to certain theories of learning and union culture emerged organically from our initial attempts to understand the data that we were collecting.

Indeed, the preliminary analysis of data from the first phase of our program by Derek Briton (Briton & Taylor, 2000, 2001), a member of the research group, provided two conclusions. First, that workers bring to educational activity at least an incipient understanding of issues affecting them, an understanding forged through participatory engagement in activism, rather than simply a banking theory of learning (Freire, 1993) where "empty heads are filled with knowledge." Second, trade unionists, even when they are from different parts of the world, seem to share a common minimal labour culture (Briton, 2001). Briton highlighted the delicate interplay between union (learning) culture (Johnson, 1979; Newman, 1993; Martin, 1995; McIlroy, 1995), the oral tradition of participatory labour education, and the sometimes opaque technological mediation involved in the delivery of on-line courses. Across all our workshops, thematic analysis of transcripts of participation were used to draw our attention to key issues. Along with the surveys in the first and second phases, they served as a springboard to more detailed analysis making use of server log records in conjunction with the telephone interview data, two samples of which are presented below.

Case in Point 1: Informal Learning and the Linkage Between On-Line and Off-Line Worlds

I believe in the apprenticeship system. I learned the skills that I have as a trade unionist in a type of [informal] apprenticeship system. I learned that through doing it with people and other activists in the local. You know, them taking me and helping me out and showing me how to do things and that I didn't learn in school … It's sort of a mentoring model in a way. I could see [e-learning] as maybe as a possibility like this. On the other hand, so much of that depends on individuals getting together … It's hard for me to see that in the clumsy sort of slow way that you exchange emails with people [in e-learning]. (Activist/Participant)

Comments like these from participants in our workshops were common. However, we came to

understand them not as indictments of e-learning per se, but rather as reassertions of the need to link the best traditions of union learning with a new learning technology. Indeed, informal learning—what the above activist refers to as a type of apprenticeship or mentoring—has always been a necessary mainstay of educational practice for subordinated groups such as the working class. Groups such as these have consistently and systematically lost out in the realm of schooling, experiencing less schooling, different schooling, and poorer outcomes for a variety of reasons (Curtis, Livingstone, & Smaller, 1992; Hatcher, 2000).

In research interviews, activists highlighted the importance of informal learning in the labour movement and spoke directly to the potential disconnect between the learning culture of unions and the virtual environment encountered in e-learning. A minority felt the disconnect between the two to be insurmountable; however, most felt that if e-learning could be linked tightly with informal learning in the course of the real world of union activity, it could prove invaluable. In other words, activists felt that on-line learning could be a useful tool if it were explicitly used to *comple-ment* and contribute to existing educational traditions in the labour movement to form a dialectic, although one that had the latter being primary to the former. The critiques of labour movement e-learning highlighted the need for a better understanding of the dynamics of informal learning in virtual space, as well as in related offline activity.

In our workshops a variety of unplanned, informal learning experiences emerged (Sawchuk, 2003c). People collectively arrived at both questions and answers. Indeed, most said that the information-building that emerged in unplanned ways resulted in the most important learning experiences because of its tight linkage to shared practical problems rooted in local off-line settings and struggles. Nevertheless, these linkages proved difficult to sustain. As one activist/participant put it (citing the usefulness of a variety of peripheral discussions),

> I drew on other people who sometimes weren't even in the workshop about topics that came up, and that was sort of interesting. But, in the long run none of those [relationships] have been sustained because, I mean, we don't have any concrete basis for the relationship … other than being a part of the movement. (Activist/Participant)

The notion of sharing a general belief in the labour movement was simply not enough to interlink on-line and off-line activity systems, and the result was a failure to generate real educational coherence from the experience.

One solution involved making sure that experiences and information gleaned from the workshop needed to be easily transferred to the concrete, off-line world. Drawing on the basic principles of CHAT, the solution that emerged from the perspective of interviewees revolved around the creation of tools that were created in on-line activity and then transferred to the off-line world. Workshop facilitators, for example, made important attempts to organize the creation of such tools in the form of summaries, but more creative means for developing this type of transfer needed to be discovered. Participants themselves attempted to move their on-line learning into their local contexts, although with mixed results. Many created reports of ideas, news, and tactics, and then took them to their local labour councils, workplaces, and unions; still others transformed these ideas, for example, into educational tools for use in local strike support. As one woman described,

> Not only did I bring it back to the labour council but the fact that I was actually able to share that with the people in the community who showed up for this [strike support] barbecue … Yeah we were giving free hot dogs and free pop, but just that fact that they were there and we were able to get the information out to them. I think basically my ideas

came from the ideas that were floating around out there in the [e-learning] workshop itself. (Activist/Participant)

The ongoing challenge, however, remains: what is the full range of options for the development of more productive linkages between on-line learning and action in the labour movement?

As a basic CHAT analysis might predict, the recognition of articulating spheres of activity is essential to understanding the ability to transform, as it were, e-experience into e-learning. Specifically, we could say that *labour movement learning*—that is, a form of shifting social participation (with its associated development of individual knowledgeability) that become legitimized in the cultural community of organized labour—emerged from on-line experience only in connection with shared cultural values and local, concrete action.

Case in Point 2: Findings on the Role of History and the Emergence of a Proletarian Narrative

I have been drawn more and more to history telling, to narrating the movement stories I believe are most pregnant with meaning … [People] convey wisdom in the very ways they tell the story, especially when they connect their report to their own histories and those of their fellow workers. (Green, 2000, p. 96)

In our research, the process of accentuation and activation of shared cultural values is well illustrated through an analysis of the emergence of labour history as a key set of cultural tools to mediate practice. Focusing on the May Day workshop, we see through server access log data analysis that messages posted received highly differentiated levels of attention from participants. In addition to this, the interview data clearly indicated that many participants experienced difficulty learning on line. To the degree that participants were able to learn effectively in the on-line environment, they were able to form a functioning (system of) activity system(s). The question that emerges is why union culture did not translate as powerfully into the on-line world as it does in the off-line world of, for example, the convention floor, the picket line, or the union hall meeting?

Beyond the barriers experienced by overworked activists (as one activist/participant put it, "There are not 76 hours in a day. Haven't figured out the solution yet"), an important answer may lie in the pure strength of the oral culture in subordinate social movements such as organized labour. The heart of labour education, that is, has always been rooted in *viva voce*, literally by the living, embodied voice of participants; or, as Willis (2000) has concisely noted,

There is a general cultural turn towards the body and towards bodily and sensuous expression. Working-class and subordinate cultures have always tended to trust the body rather than the word. (p. 95)

For good reason oral culture stands at the center of union culture, in large part due the differences between what Feenberg (1989) calls "retrievable" (e.g., a book) versus "repeatable" (e.g. storytelling, p. 24) texts. In principle and practice, the former can be individually accessed and controlled, whereas the latter is always a social accomplishment—often associated with strong role identifications, commitment, and trust—accessed through repetition, performance. Thus we might say that the strategic reliance on an embodied oral culture is associated with the socialization of information use, the potential to develop solidaristic relations of information exchange, and collective forms of informal learning. Or rather, that the essential ingredient missing in the ability of some labour activists to project their identity successfully online was the

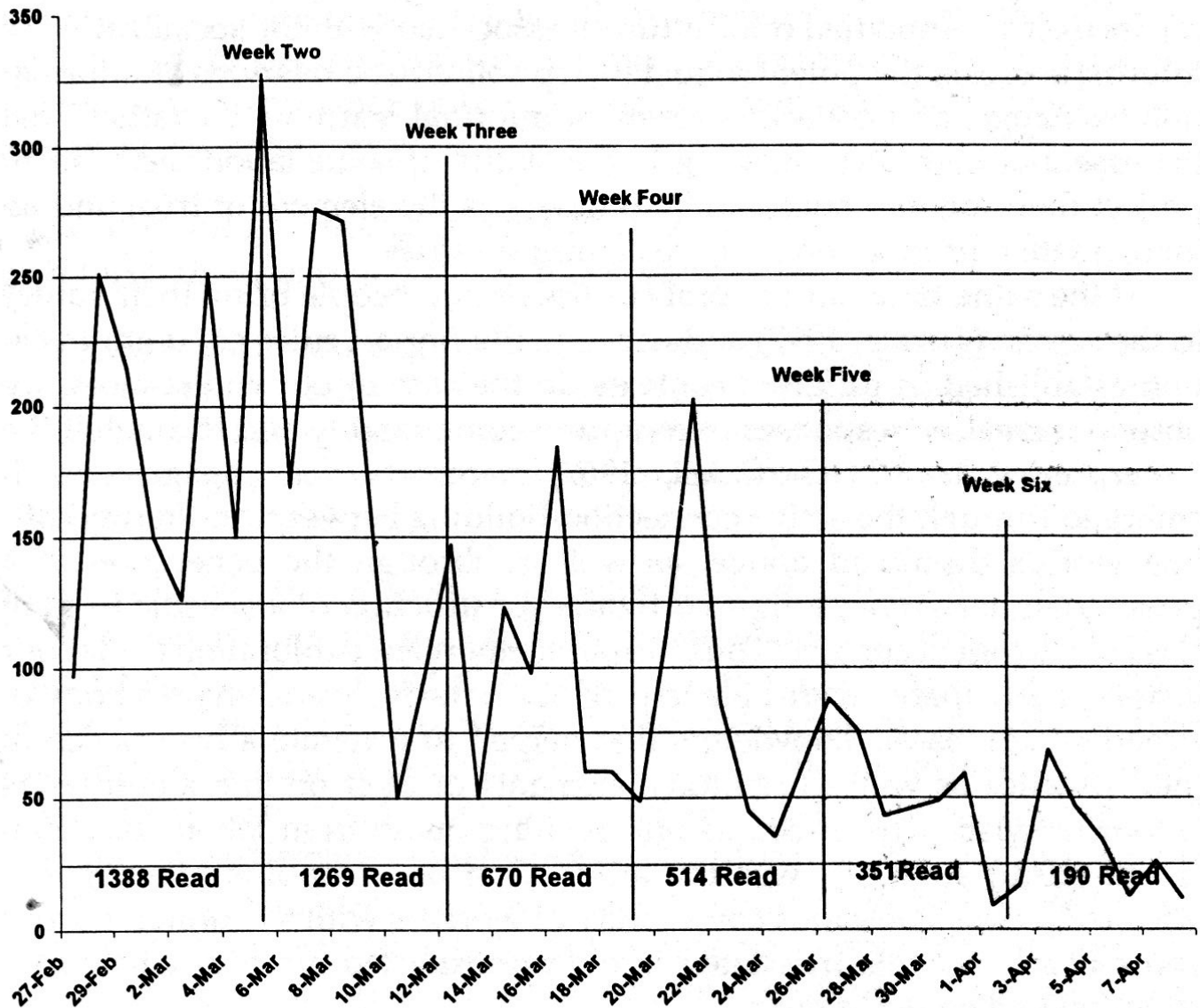element of trust and an inadequate reproduction of shared cultural values.

Figure 1. Readership of messages by date of authorship.

At the same time, union/oral culture or not, people bring their values to the screen (Turkle, 1997) and occasionally import rules of communication established in different contexts. In the case of our conferences, we observed creative responses to recapture commonality and through it the "interpretive trust" (Garfinkel, 1967) necessary for engagement. It emerged through the active connection-building between on-line and offline worlds discussed above, as well as through the generation of a proletarian narrative prefigured by the construction of a specific form of class or historical context. Thus, through emergent explorations of labour history, participants were able to produce reflexively and share a body of experientially based knowledge that helped to generate a historicism in their practice as well as reinforce elements of their on-line identities

as labour activists. The effect, as our opening quote from labour historian Green (2000) suggests, was the affirmation of an on-line identity that affirmed a class-conscious community of workers with a common history and culture. All this translated into an unexpected jump in participant attention and engagement.

Again, based on server access log data applied to our May Day workshop (see Figure 1), we examined the level of attention allocated by conference participants to specific messages generated. This measure of attention was based on the number of times that messages were accessed by participants. One factor that differentiates the May Day workshop from the other workshops in our research was an emergent historical discussion; and in our other workshops participation tended consistently to trail off. However, past the introductory postings at the start of the May Day workshop, the significant bloom of attention occurred in the period of March 5-8: this was the week when the labour history theme emerged. As we have suggested, what went on here was more than simply the emergence of an interesting topic. It was an opportunity for the intersection on the one hand of a proletarian narrative built on a positive recognition of a working-class standpoint, and on the other a linkage between informal (emergent) on-line and off-line practice.

Such an approach fits well into CHAT's identification of the critical importance of cultural or discursive tools that mediate learning. Narratives of individual participants and their local communities became intertwined when participants were asked to do some local historical research in an attempt to unearth May Day traditions in their own communities. The resultant March 5-8 bloom of (on-line and off-line) activity fed a rich e-learning discussion about the meaning and use of labour history in building contemporary social movements. Recounting the experience, one activist/participant's remarks on the "thirst" for labour history and its relationship to identity are illustrative:

> So while I already had the politics and activism down, this history allowed me to place myself within a context of a movement, which in turn allowed me to solidify my commitment and understanding of why we do what we do. I celebrate May Day to remind myself of that and to give other people the opportunity to find their own place. (Activist/Participant)

Conclusions and Emerging Analytics

E-learning has obvious contributions to make toward overcoming the problem of space for national and international labour movements. It can help connect dispersed populations for the purposes of solidarity and mobilization. At the same time, in the case of already overworked activists, e-learning can become yet another element of their activist life for which they barely have the time. In one sense, then, e-learning may find a particularly useful application among novice activists who, possibly assured by the pace and anonymity of e-learning, can nevertheless find preliminary entry into the types of informal apprenticeships and mentor-ships of union activism while also building a basic set of skills and sensitivities.

More fundamentally, we saw that the oral culture and learning traditions of organized labour did not mix easily with e-learning environments. However, we conclude that when we recognize articulating activity systems as essential to the realization of a learning process and steps are taken to interlink the on-line and off-line worlds, e-learning has something significant to contribute. The emergence of labour history as a topic in one workshop showed us an important example of how heightened attention, functioning activity systems, and hence learning can be generated. Especially when we see critiques of e-learning from the activists/participants in this

research, it becomes clear that these and other points must be taken seriously if the technology is to become more than a novelty. This tells us that e-learning can be nothing less than a form of mobilization and action in the real world, linking past struggles to present struggles, if it is to retain its relevance.

Notes

[1] Interviews took on average one hour; some follow-up telephone calls were made for clarification.

[2] *R* refers to respondent; *I* refers to the interviewer; ellipses (…) indicate deleted material.

Acknowledgments

References

Bakardjieva, M., & Feenberg, A. (2000). *Groupware for community: Ethics by design.* Unpublished monograph.

Briton, D., & Taylor, J. (2001). Online workers' education: How do we tame the technology? *International Journal of Instructional Media, 28*(2).

Calvani, A., Sorzio, P., & Varisco, B.M. (1997). Inter-university cooperative learning: An exploratory study. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 13*(4), 271-280.

Curtis, B., Livingstone, D.W., & Smaller, H. (1992). *Stacking the deck.* Toronto, ON: Our Schools/Our Selves.

de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Engeström, Y. (2001). Expansive learning at work: Toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization. *Journal of Education and Work, 14*(1), 133-156.

Feenberg, A. (1989). The written world: On the theory and practice of computer conferencing. In R. Mason & A. Kaye (Eds.), *Mindweave: Communication, computers and distance education* (pp. 22-39). Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press.

Foley, G. (1998). *Learning in social action: A contribution to understanding informal education.* London: Zed Books.

Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (rev. ed.). New York: Continuum.

Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Gereluk, W., & Royer, L. (2001). Workplace research and education for sustainable development. In P. Sawchuk (Ed.), *Proceedings of the second international conference on Researching Work and Learning* (pp. 536-543). Calgary, AB: Faculty of Continuing Education, University of Calgary.

Green, J. (2000). *Taking history to heart: The power of the past in building social movements.* Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

Hannah, J., Fischer, M., & Bueno, C. (1998). Learning about globalization: A comparative study of the role of trade union education in Britain and Brazil. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 17*(2), 121-130.

Hatcher, R. (2000). Social class and school: Relationships to knowledge. In M. Cole (Ed.), *Education, equality and human rights: Issues of race, sexuality, special needs and social class* (pp. 182-199). London: Falmer.

Johnson, R. (1979). Really useful knowledge: Radical education and working-class culture, 1790-1848. In J. Clarke, C. Critcher, & R. Johnson (Eds.), *Working-class culture: Studies in history and theory* (pp. 75-102). London: Hutchinson.

Köpsén, S., & Larsson, S. (2002). Learning in a trade union. In *21st annual conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education* (pp. 165-170). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto.

Labour Telematics Centre. (1994). *The opportunity and challenge of telematics*. LTC/ICFTU/ILO.

Latour, B., & Woolgar, S. (1986). *Laboratory life: The construction of scientific facts*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lave, J. (1988). *Cognition in practice: Mind, mathematics and culture in everyday life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lee, E. (1997). *The labour movement and the Internet: The* new internationalism. London: Pluto Press.

Leont'ev, A.N. (1978). *Activity, consciousness, and personality*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

London, S., Tarr, E., & Wilson, J. (Eds.). (1990). *The education of the American working class*. New York: Greenwood.

Martin, D. (1995). *Thinking union: Activism and education in Canada's labour movement*. Toronto, ON: Between-the-Lines Press.

Mather, C., & Lowe, B. (1990). *Trade unions on-line: The International Labour Movement and computer communications*. Manchester, UK: Centre for Research on Employment and Work, Lancashire Polytechnic.

McIlroy, J. (1995). The dying of the light? A radical look at trade union education. In M. Mayo & J. Thompson (Eds.), *Adult learning, critical intelligence and social change* (pp. 48-66). Leicester, UK: NIACE.

Miller, D., & Stirling, J. (1997). *Trade union education in Europe: A pilot study*. Düsseldorf: European Trade Union College/Hans Böckler Stiftung.

Newman, M. (1993). *The third contract: Theory and practice in trade union training*. Sydney: Stewart Victor.

Reardon, G., & Mather, C. (1993). *Information technology, electronic communications and the labour movement.* Manchester, UK: GMB National College.

Sawchuk, P.H. (2003a). *Adult learning and technology in working-class life* (pp. 32-45). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sawchuk, P.H. (2003b). Online learning for union activists? Findings from a Canadian study. *Studies in Continuing Education, 25*(2).

Sawchuk, P.H. (in press). The "unionization effect" amongst adult computer learners. *British Journal of Sociology of Education.* Shostak, A. (1999). *Cyberunion: Empowering labor through computer technology*. New York:

M.E. Sharpe. Spencer, B. (Ed.). (2002). *Unions and learning in a global economy: International and comparative perspectives*. Toronto, ON: Thompson.

Taylor, J. (1996a). The solidarity network: Universities, computer-mediated communication, and labour studies in Canada. In T.M. Harrison & T. Stephen (Eds.), *Computer networking and*

scholarly communication in the twenty-first-century university (pp. 277-290). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Taylor, J. (1996b). The continental classroom: Teaching labour studies online. *Labor Studies Journal, 21*(1).

Taylor, J. (2001). *Union learning: Canadian labour education in the twentieth century*. Toronto, ON: Thompson.

Turkle, S. (1997). *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the Internet*. New York: Touchstone.

Vann, K., & Bowker, G. (2001). Instrumentalizing the truth of practice. *Social Epistemology, 15*(3), 247-262.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, Ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Walker, S. (2001, June). *ICTs and innovation in trade unions: Internet training in European trade union confederations and worker education organizations*. Paper presented at the conference Global 2001: Comparative HRM—Learning from Diversity, Barcelona.

Walker, S., & Creanor, L. (2000, April). European trade union distance education: Potentials and problems. In *Proceedings of 2nd international conference on Networked Learning* (pp. 341-353). Lancaster, UK.

Wertsch, J.V. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Willis, P. (2000). *The ethnographic imagination*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

_____
_____
_____

Peter H. Sawchuk an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology & Equity Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. He has published extensively in the area of work, learning, and technological change. Recently published works include *Adult Learning and Techonology in Working-Class Life* (Cambridge, 2003) and *Hidden Knowledge: Organized Labour in the Information Age* with D.W. Livingstone (Rowman and Littlefield, 2003). E-mail: psawchuk@oise.utoronto.ca.

Zenon Gawron is a researcher in the Labour Studies program at Athabasca University. He has researched and written on e-learning and has worked for almost a decade to create an on-line presence for the Canadian labour movement. E-mail: gawron@mb.sympatico.ca.

Jeffery Taylor is a professor of labour studies at Athabasca University. He has published widely on labour history and union e-learning. His most recent book is *Union Learning: Canadian Labour Education in the Twentieth Century* (Thompson, 2001). E-mail: jefft@athabascau.ca.