

## MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS: THE TRAVAILS OF LITERACY EDUCATION IN AN EMPLOYMENT PREPARATION PROGRAM

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### *Abstract*

*The relative status of literacy education and vocational education are examined within a Canadian employment preparation program. The low status exhibited for literacy education results from several factors, including the contextually low value of the social and cultural capital literacy educators offer to participants and the organization. The author argues that if program organizers can move beyond viewing the provision as primarily employment preparation training and embrace a broader, collaborative educational status not only will the program be truer to their espoused philosophy, but the experience and knowledge of literacy instructors will have a vital role to play.*

### *Résumé*

*Tout ce qui se rapporte à l'alphabétisation et à l'enseignement professionnel est présentement examiné par un programme canadien de préparation à l'emploi. Le peu d'intérêt démontré pour l'alphabétisation découle de certains facteurs comme le fait que les éducateurs en alphabétisation offrent peu aux participants et à l'organisation d'un point de vue social et culturel. L'auteur prétend que si les concepteurs des différents programmes peuvent les voir au-delà de leur rôle primordial de préparation pratique à l'emploi et accorde une plus grande place à la collaboration, alors le programme sera peut-être plus conforme à leur philosophie, et l'expérience et les connaissances des enseignants joueront un rôle crucial.*

During recent research into an employment preparation program for adults in western Canada I became interested in the way literacy education and vocational preparation were viewed within the program. Despite the program administrators' claim to have created an integrated curriculum giving equal weight to literacy and vocational skills I observed an imbalance between these areas. The official curriculum of the 6-month program gave identical time to literacy skills and vocational preparation, but the perception

of the subject areas within the agency was quite different. Vocational education was consistently viewed as the more valuable area, and vocational instructors consistently experienced better conditions of employment. The relationship between the two types of instructors was not an easy one, with basic skills staff far less involved in the organization. In this article I describe these differences, which illustrate a concrete manifestation of one current (perhaps dominant) view of adult literacy education: as the handservant of employment training. I examine the boundaries between the subject areas of literacy and vocational skills, and those between the instructors involved with each area. I then provide a reflective explanation of one mechanism lying behind the differences in treatment of the two instructor groups—the contradictory view of vocational skills as more valuable intellectual capital than literacy. My analysis may be useful to other educators who are attempting to create a collaborative educational program with critical content.

### **Context of the Study**

My initial interest in this study was examining how curriculum was formed in a community-based adult education program, but my research quickly showed me that the program did not provide a uniform context for curricular development. Vocational and literacy instructors were working under different degrees of influence and credibility within the organization, which directly affected what could be taught. The separation of the two areas and respective staff seemed to me a significant shortcoming of the program, as it inhibited literacy and vocational educators coming together to the benefit of both as well as that of the learners. My analysis of this separation is rooted in notions of intellectual capital. Here I briefly outline the socio-political framework of my analysis and the background of the research setting.

#### ***The Socio-Political Framework***

My analysis begins by accepting the status differences between subjects as a meaningful phenomenon, and I adopt Bourdieu's (1976, 1997) notions of intellectual capital as one way to explore that meaning. Bourdieu sees education as a means for instructors to transmit certain knowledge and attitudes to learners, and he conceptualizes these as a form of capital in order to emphasize the similarities to economic capital. For this discussion, the most important aspect of his approach is the notion that different types of intellectual capital can have significantly different value and roles within a particular setting. In some cases, instructors' personal capital is intimately

related to the credibility and effect of the educational process because they are teaching what they themselves do. An example is a university professor working closely with a doctoral student, essentially apprenticing the learner to a way of life. Contrast this with situations where the instructors are merely passing on information rather than sharing part of their own world, such as when the same professor is lecturing to a large group of first-year undergraduates. The process is still significant, but lacks the personal dimensions of the first situation because most of the students do not want to be professors and, of course, the professor knows it. The professor's intellectual capital is less directly involved. This perspective underpins my argument that a central factor in the status attributed to vocational and literacy skills is the difference in the role played by the instructor's capital. Vocational instructors invest significant amounts of personal capital in their work, whereas literacy instructors risk far less of their own capital. This insight helps to explain both why the vocational instructors' pedagogy is so much more rigid than that of the literacy instructors, and also why they have more status within the organization—risking more capital in social form leads to more social returns, represented by status.

Despite the scarcity of critical curricular discussion in the literatures of adult education and literacy beyond an unquestioned orientation towards learner-centredness, I view the selection and delivery of knowledge as the central question in all forms of education. The knowledge content of adult literacy education and the means by which it is delivered are the result of decisions taken by people who inevitably represent certain interests (Williams, 1961). Subject areas arise through the selection and recontextualisation of information, and I believe it is essential for critical adult educators to ask where the knowledge at the centre of their work comes from, how it is being used, and what is left out—in other words, whose interests count. There is a need to make the boundaries between different areas of knowledge visible, and ask why they lie where they do.

If literacy instructors want to create a critical form of education that goes beyond narrowly constructed workplace demands to support the engagement of learners with the socio-political issues surrounding work (cf. Gee, 1996) they need to create more organizational space (not just time allotment) for themselves and their curriculum. A starting point for such an endeavour is increasing the status of their work within collaborative programs. I have two suggestions: Firstly, employment preparation programs should position themselves as educational providers in the broad sense rather

than training settings in the narrow sense. This could not only help literacy education but, most likely, lead to other benefits as well. Secondly, it is critical for literacy and other educators to work together closely, starting in the program planning stage and continuing in the delivery of components. The employment preparation program in this study illustrates the contradictions of holistic intents without working closely together.

### *The Employment Program as Case Study*

In 1998 I spent several months looking at curricular structures in an employment program offered by Union Training Project (UTP, a pseudonym) in western Canada (St.Clair, 2000). Union Training Project was a relatively large organization, waxing and waning with funding, but employing an average of around 45 staff. Between April and August I spent time in classrooms and coffee rooms, read and analyzed many administrative documents, and interviewed all the government funders, administrators, and instructors involved in the Cooking and Basic Skills (CABS) program. I worked closely with two adult literacy and two chef instructors, though my case study subject was the whole organization. I chose, after some deliberation, not to include participants in my research, though I did spend time talking with them and had to gain their permission for classroom observation. Participants are not given any choice about attending these programs if they want to continue getting Social Assistance, though they can choose which program to attend, and I was uncomfortable with trying to involve both unwilling participants and agency staff. Because the central research question concerned how the context influenced the organization's provision, I decided to start by focussing on the staff and leaving the participants for a future project. My analysis of UTP is not intended to be generalizable, but I believe the organization is a useful example, selected for characteristics such as a balance between uniqueness and similarity to other collaborative projects (see Hamel, Dufour, & Fortin, 1993).

It is unusual for a union to be involved in employment preparation; the political left has traditionally been critical of the ideas underpinning these programs (Swift, 1995). All too often the training implicitly—or explicitly—blames unemployment on the deficits of the individuals involved rather than acknowledging the underlying economic issues. In the case of UTP, however, the funders decided to place emphasis on developing whole persons within their community rather than just the aspects relevant to employment—in essence a form of citizenship education. Nevertheless, employment preparation dominated UTP's work, with 90% of the programs designed to

move unemployed people into either employment or further training. A UTP administrator explained:

Every program has got to have an employment focus in it. You give upgrading of some kind, or you're giving some kind of lifeskills training, but to what end? Where do they go next? How do you ensure that they're going to carry on with their action plan? So, no, we've always tried to focus on skills training, where there was lots of employment opportunities available.

The programs feed into apprenticeable trades, such as not only the retail sector represented by the union but also aviation and mechanical trades. Every program offers both classroom components and industry-based experience for participants, with the needs of employers a key influence on program development. A UTP administrator clarified:

We always go back to the industry and set up industry advisory committees, and that would be labour and management sitting down and funnily enough, despite what we read in the newspapers, certainly during negotiations and collective agreements there's very little difference between labour and management. They both need a trained labour force to the benefit of both and they co-operate very well.

The CABS program was around 6 months long; it combined 9 weeks of literacy instruction with the same amount of vocation-specific cooking skills, one week of lifeskills, and a short work placement. Each iteration of the program was a self-enclosed cohort, passing through the stages with very little contact with other UTP trainees. The programs were designed for long-term unemployed people without high school graduation, the idea being to address gaps in basic skills as well as to provide vocational experience and training. A range of programs were available to unemployed people in Western Canada at this time, the least intensive being one-day workshops on resume writing for people who were skilled but laid off from their jobs. CABS was at the other end of the spectrum, setting out to address the needs of the hard-core long-term jobless, and program administrators and government funders considered the combination of basic skills along with trade preparation unusual in Canada. In one program participants could attain the academic skills seen as essential to workplace success and then move on to specific preparation for a workplace. This multi-lateral approach developed because unemployed people whose basic skills were considered a barrier to employment were hard to interest in literacy programs. A government project officer explained:

We mounted a literacy program and it didn't work ... In the States they decided to deal with literacy by bringing it with a direct trade attachment so people could see a direct employment skill as a result ... The advantage to that was not only that you get people into the program because they feel they're going to get a job at the end but also in teaching them the skills ... it was an integrated teaching method so with the Cook Literacy [an early version of the CABS program] we were able to, for example, use the cookbook instead of an English text book. We used a cookbook and people inadvertently learned. The first program was amazing. We had people that we tested between grades 4 and 8. I don't think we had anybody higher than that and 85% achieved a GED, which is a grade 12 equivalency, within a 4-month period.

As I began my research at UTP the founders of the training centre told me several times about their deep commitment to the whole person of the participants, and the multi-faceted nature of their development. This led to a holistic view of curricular knowledge, as pointed out by a UTP administrator:

It's all blended. I use the word blending. When I develop curriculums, I make sure that we blend certain things because there again ... you've got to have a little bit of focus on everything.

The UTP administrators and instructors are very proud of the holistic view and often refer to their efforts to shape the curriculum to reflect this philosophy of integration. The project strives to go beyond the obvious fact of unemployment and to treat students as people with families, communities, responsibilities, and rights. There is acknowledgement that moving into work, particularly as a skilled tradesperson, has implications beyond the individual. The curricular implications are that subject areas dealing with life in general (lifeskills and basic skills) can legitimately be brought alongside those subjects targeted towards work (vocational skills). UTP administrative documents frequently quote an outside consultant, who described the delivery format as successfully "integrated and content based programs" (cited in a CABS proposal). The organization gives a strong impression of consistency between the holistic view of participants and the integrated knowledge delivered in the programs. My observations suggest, however, that significant differentiation does exist, both between the subject areas and in the ways instructors of each are viewed within UTP.



### **Diverse Perspectives**

True to the founders' philosophy, a significant amount of the curriculum is shared between programs at UTP. For example, almost all participants learn about computer operation and lifeskills such as conflict resolution. Literacy instruction is also a common area for all participants, with very similar basic skills education provided for people with quite different vocational goals even though it is taught in separate classes. Whether the aim is employment as a mechanic, a cook, or in theatre arts, the necessary skills are seen as fundamentally similar. As might be expected, curricula diverge sharply when participants reach the vocational stages of the programs, as shared knowledge becomes harder to sustain, and the degree of integration consequently falls dramatically, as explained by two UTP administrators:

Whether it's a cooking program, the cook/server program, a carpentry program, electrical program, theatre, it's all exactly the same on the life skills.

As far as the rest goes, because we're dealing with so many various types of work placement here that's where it ends. That's where they start going off into their own different areas.

One important curricular boundary lies between different programs during the trades training components, but not during the basic skills components. A second boundary lies between the components of each program.

### ***Setting Subjects Apart***

UTP suggests in its documents that programs are seamless, with participants moving from lifeskills to basic skills to vocational training and work experience smoothly and consistently. My observations of the CABS program do not bear this out, and I saw many examples of inconsistencies between components. The first 9 weeks of the program were spent in a classroom setting working on math and language skills, followed by 9 weeks of training in a kitchen several kilometres away. There were then 2 weeks of job placement; a week of review and final exam; and 2 weeks of job club involving resume writing, interview skills, and so on. Some integration of these components is assured by the introduction of "cook theory" (UTP's term for more abstract knowledge such as portion control and yield calculations) in the initial 9 week classroom session, delivered by the chef who will later instruct the group in the kitchen. Nonetheless, over the 23 weeks of the course, the "academic" basic skills and the "vocational" cooking are separated both in time and in space.

The basic skills instructors attempt to balance the needs of the workplace with a desire to create a critical literacy perspective in the classroom. Students get practice working with the kinds of math and written practices most likely to be useful in a cooking job, with fractions and measurement conversions featured strongly, as is reading comprehension of recipes. The instructors try to make basic skills relevant and interesting to the students and their future career, but use illustrations with a more critical edge. For example, during one classroom session I observed a discussion on newspaper reports of a notorious court case, and what biases the reports revealed. Similarly, one math instructor asked participants to engage with the reality of paid work by calculating “how long do you have to work at a low paying job at [a hamburger restaurant] in order to buy a [sports car]?” The literacy and numeracy curricula attempt to reflect both pragmatic and critical perspectives.

The vocational (e.g., kitchen) component of the program is almost all hands-on experience in a large commercial kitchen, usually borrowed from a school. Each participant is given a manual of several hundred pages, and during their time in the kitchen is expected to study it as homework. For example, a section on chopping vegetables may be allocated as reading the night before preparing a recipe calling for *crudités*. Meals prepared in the kitchen are sold at extremely low cost to local people (I noticed that many customers were seniors). At the end of the component is an examination admitting participants to apprenticeship status.

Despite the best efforts of the basic skills instructors to provide participants with useful knowledge, and the claims of administrators, the two central components of the program are far from integrated. Rather than a two-way flow of information and techniques, high status vocational knowledge has come to permeate—and dominate—the literacy curriculum with no countervailing flow. From the beginning of the CABS program the goal of employment, and the knowledge leading this goal, are emphasized. The use of cooking texts and recipe calculations in the basic skills component can be seen not only as an attempt at relevance, but also as a means to ensure literacy retains some degree of credibility within the program. In the classroom I observed program participants balking at language exercises they considered not relevant to kitchen work and too reminiscent of the abstract exercises of initial schooling. One of the most successful exercises used by a basic skills instructor was for participants to find a recipe (their own or from a book), write it up on the computer, do the



layout, and finally end up with a booklet featuring recipes from each learner. Similarly, math exercises looked at calculating recipe quantities and potential food yields. Overall, the ultimate vocational destination of the participants determined what was credible as part of the basic skills curriculum.

Basic skills instructors sometimes thought they should focus even more strongly on skills directly related to work, but that perception was contradicted by concerns that being too strongly linked into vocational imperatives can undermine the basic skills components. An instructor pointed out that the potential of literacy education to reflect the life experience of the learner is diluted by the status accorded to vocational knowledge, and explained the dilemma of forcing more critical perspectives upon learners:

I want to think some more about whether the pressures of just doing cook stuff are such that you sort of give into it. And then where that line is between adult education, where you have students demanding a certain kind of thing where you're saying "no, you've got to do this newspaper writing" and is that fair. Am I being anything other than, you know, high school teacher? You know, it's a really interesting kind of dilemma.

The clear division between educational programs is perhaps not surprising when participants have entered their vocational specialization, but it does seem to contradict the aims of the organization to have such strongly separated vocational and basic skills components, with such different amounts of status, within each program. This phenomenon runs deeper than the educational provision itself, however—it also manifests in the relationship of the instructors.

### *Insular Instructors*

Similar to the differentiation between subject areas, instructors of each subject are viewed differently within the organization. The two groups of instructors also view each other as separate and—from the basic skills instructors' point of view—much less than equal. It soon became clear to me that trades instructors were seen as assets to the organization, manifesting great skill and credibility. There were many comments like "[The executive chef] is the ultimate professional." In addition to professionalism, the ability of instructors to give participants a flavour of what it is really like in a given work setting was seen as crucial. For example, an administrator commented:

We do try to have our instructors relate to any particular industry. I'm a great believer in being anecdotal in front of the class cause that gives you credibility with the class. Don't stand there and read out of a book and then tell them about stuff, the way it should be. You've got to have a little anecdote, then they know that you've been there.

The second half of this comment can be seen as a direct criticism of the approach basic skills instructors were presumed to take.

The expertise of vocational instructors was also recognized by the program participants, who tended to speak respectfully of them even when they disagreed with them. The comment that "the chef is always right" became a running joke among the participants. The joke was never dismissive in any way, and participants worked hard to meet the expectations of the vocational instructors. Throughout the agency there was a shared appreciation of the status of the master tradespeople, with their credibility deriving from years of successful work and knowledge of what life in the workforce is like.

Basic skills instructors were seen quite differently, and there was no source of credibility comparable with the vocational experience of trades instructors. Literacy staff were treated as hired help rather than as assets, and had a different relationship with participants. Perhaps the most striking manifestation was the difference in employment conditions, with basic skills instructors working in less secure conditions than vocational trainers. Although both types of instructors were technically on short-term contracts lasting for the length of their direct involvement with participants, vocational instructors were given program coordination positions between cohorts. Not so for the basic skills instructors, who were expected to find other employment between contracts at UTP. A number of pragmatic reasons were put forward for this difference, but it comes down to the willingness of the program to keep people employed and committed to UTP. As one literacy instructor commented:

Here it's a little odd because the union is concerned with, with worker well-being and it's certainly all of the principles and ideals are being, are around, built around worker well-being. And yet contract trainers are in a very precarious situation and you know, it seems to fly in the face of what the union professes to believe in.

The value assigned to the different types of instructors at UTP is consistent with the value assigned to the areas of knowledge they teach. The ultimate criterion of status is vocational application, especially where

instructors can talk about their pragmatic experience in the trade. This makes sense in terms of the overarching purpose of the program—moving sufficient numbers of people into work—but it contradicts the holistic claims of the program administrators. UTP demonstrates a consistent vocational privilege, with the knowledge and personnel most closely related to employment outcomes being held in the highest esteem.

When I began the research I thought there might be some tension between the two groups of instructional staff, but I was surprised how significant it turned out to be. Trades instructors were sometimes blatantly dismissive of basic skills instructors and their work. During a cook theory session, when the chef comes into the basic skills classroom for part of a day, one participant asked if the work they were doing with the basic skills instructor counted towards their final mark. The chef replied that it did not, that his marks had “nothing to do with” the basic skills instructor, and that “what I’m concerned with is what I teach you—I don’t care if you can spell or if your grammar’s bad if you can convince me you know the answer.” This comment demonstrates both misunderstanding of the literacy instructor’s role and little interest in finding out more. Shortly after recording this statement I chatted briefly with the chef, who told me how important it was to have a trades background in order to teach. The chef appeared concerned about the cooking topics in the basic skills instructor’s curriculum, and commented that the instructor was “trying to teach a subject she knows nothing about.”

The barrier between the two groups of instructors is not easy to overcome. Literacy instructors told me how difficult they find working with the vocational instructors, as their fundamental philosophy of the instructor-participant relationship is often incompatible. One of them explained:

I sit down and sometimes I’ll participate with [a cooking] teacher but it’s clear to me that these guys don’t want that. Like what they need is that they need some training in adult education. It would also be nice if they could work as a team but obviously the kind of hierarchy of cook and chef is such that you don’t work as a team when you’re the master chef. So they’ve come through that and now they’re kind of top dog and they’re not going to work as a team with anybody. ... Now the other part of that though would make it very tricky for him is that I try to have an equal relationship with the students so there’s a lot of respect and I see that I have to do some leadership stuff with them, but that I get them to help each other, we talk about stuff, we work things out, we change

things, we work it out as kind of a team so I try to be a team member. And maybe I'm not doing them any service by doing that because they walk into the kitchen and [the chef] orders them around.

Interestingly, the trades instructors are not aware of the difficult relationship between the two groups. When asked about tension one vocational instructor told me:

I don't find that at all, and I've worked in the office as well. I worked in the office doing other work, like I was a co-ordinator for a program. I wouldn't say that at all. You have some personality conflicts, but that's got nothing to do with the training or the trades or anything else. I have a good rapport with all of them in the office over there, so I really, that's why I can say that's not true.

On one side of the divide are vocational instructors, seen as experts by administrators and participants alike, using an autocratic approach to their teaching and denying there is a problem. On the other side are literacy instructors, on temporary contracts, trying to create more critical classrooms and all too aware of their lower status. Why?

### **Disjunctures of Social and Cultural Capital**

Despite the claims that UTP demonstrates an integrated approach to curriculum with many strands pulled together into a common program, there appears to be a deep disjuncture. This apparent contradiction can be explained in many ways, but I begin by accepting that the current structures are neither essentially flawed nor arbitrary, and must serve the interests of the people involved in various ways. In this section I examine the contradictions of capital and then look at ways of putting capital to work. My main argument here is based in Bourdieu's work on intellectual capital and the closely associated concepts of social and cultural capital, but there are three other aspects I want to touch upon.

#### ***Aspects of Gender and Educational Culture***

The first aspect is the pattern of gender relations at UTP. In a previous analysis I showed how pervasive concern with gender and gender roles is within the organization (St. Clair, 2000). UTP is an extremely white and masculine organization, and engages with difference in very limited ways. The vocational instructors were all male, as were the two administrators in charge of the program; the literacy instructors I worked most closely with were one woman and one man; several of the program coordinators were

female. Even though this division of labour does not reflect an unproblematic mapping of gender to organizational role, it must be set within the larger context of education as a feminine concern. As Gaskell and McLaren (1991) proclaim, "we cannot possibly understand educational work without considering it as a gendered experience" (p. 22). This argument holds true for adult literacy education (cf. Quigley, 1997) as it does for initial education.

By reducing the status of literacy education, UTP was asserting the higher importance of vocational education, as represented by the professional portrayal of white male chef instructors, over basic skills, as represented by the instructor who "doesn't know what she is talking about." The analysis I offer in the rest of the paper, framed in terms of social and cultural capital, should not be understood as a different, non-gendered way of looking at the organizational structures, but as a parallel perspective, where the value of capital forms is intimately and essentially related to their gender significance.

The second aspect I wish to highlight is the strategic advantage instructor differentiation offers to the agency. Continued funding depends upon vocational outcomes, usually the percentage of program entrants who end up getting work and are no longer claiming public support. The people who most obviously affect this outcome measure are the vocational instructors; therefore it is crucial to keep them involved and happy. When applying for funding UTP can point to the experience and quality of its vocational trainers as an asset—in fact, their resumes are included in the program proposals. Having long-term commitment from trades instructors adds to the credibility of the organization, especially when the instructors have long histories in their field, are well-known and respected, and have trained many of the people now managing hotels and restaurants in nearby communities. Participants are more employable after being trained by these instructors, and it is easier to find work experience placements (and ultimately jobs) because of the connection. However, contingencies of funding make it hard for UTP to hire all its instructors on a permanent basis. A trade-off has to be made, and pulling vocational instructors into the centre of the organization while holding basic skills instructors at arm's length balances the organization's needs for constancy and change.

A further strategic advantage of the current structure is that it allows the organization both to attain the measurable goal of participant employment and to express its philosophy (albeit to a limited degree). In the low-status basic skills component, instructors aim for critical ends and genuinely try to view participants in a holistic way consistent with UTP's espoused approach.



In the high-status vocational components a more conventional, teacher centred form of education is put in place to ensure graduates are employment ready and do not reflect badly upon UTP or its instructors. The initial stages of the programs emphasize internal growth and are expansive, challenging individuals to see the world in new ways, whereas the later stages make it clear that there are specific external demands for participants to meet, and that some knowledge and behaviours are more valuable than others. UTP can demonstrate its holistic, person centred approach being applied (albeit in an area seen as less important) while following up with effective mechanisms to create work-ready individuals (the essential measure). Once again a balance is created, this time between the organization's desire to reflect a worker-friendly philosophy and the need to ensure continued funding.

The third aspect affecting the division between subjects and instructors is familiarity. The founders of the organization and many of its administrators have a trade union background. They are people who have worked their way up, and one of the founders was deservedly recognized by a provincial literacy organization for achievement without completing high school. The pragmatic, no-nonsense approach of the vocational instructors is familiar to this group, because they were educated that way. The literacy instructors were a lot more reflective and stimulatory of critical thinking in their approach to education, and I came to believe this was uncomfortable for the administrators. The literacy instructors' approach was disturbingly critical of the workplace organization with which the administrators were familiar, and in which they had invested a great deal. Unions have generally been cautious about criticizing industrial structures during the last few years, because they have realized their membership and future are predicated upon having large-scale employers to work with (Kincheloe, 1999). UTP, by taking an employer-friendly approach, both gains credibility for the unions from employers and reflects a form of education consistent with the experience of the powerful people in the organization.

To summarize these factors, the differentiation between subjects and instructors is reinforced by the strategic advantages this disjuncture offers, the gendered nature of knowledge, and by the biography of those in control of the organization. However, these factors alone might not be sufficient to create vocational privilege were it not for a deeper and more personal level of differentiation affecting instruction at UTP—the way Bourdieu's (1976, 1990, 1997) notions of social and cultural capital play out in the educational form.



### ***Contradictions of Capital***

The basis of Bourdieu's approach is the claim that every social field, whether vocation, recreation, education, or family, has specific intellectual capital attached to it. One of the most important forms is social capital, seen as membership in a network of people offering access to shared resources in return for acceptance of shared obligations. For example, as a dog owner I have access to the pet-sitting services of other owners, provided I reciprocate and do not break the rules by mistreating my dog. Another form is cultural capital, or the ability to act in social fields in appropriate ways to achieve given ends. An example of this is knowing how to find a vet in a new city, or how to feed and exercise my dog. Both of these capital forms are collective in nature—they depend on the mutual recognition of actors in the social field. They are also convertible into other forms of capital. If I choose to start a business training dogs for other people, and publicize this through my canine contacts, I am converting social and cultural capital into economic capital.

UTP, in common with most institutions for education, can be considered a mechanism for transferring capital, and one of the most powerful influences on education is the need to safeguard cultural and social capital during this process. Just like economic capital, social and cultural capital are vulnerable to contamination and inappropriate investment. Contamination occurs when the valuable knowledge forms are diluted with knowledge considered less valuable, such as when alternative medical practices are considered equally credible as established Western medicine. The question is not the effectiveness of alternative medicine, but the effect its acceptance has upon the value of a conventional medical training. Inappropriate investment occurs when valuable knowledge is given to an individual or group who does not respect its value and use it responsibly. An example is medical doctors who step outside conventional medicine and challenge the credibility and status of conventional treatment. At some point the medical profession will create negative consequences for such behaviour.

Two critical judgements about learners in any field is whether they will maintain the purity of the valuable knowledge of the field, and whether they will treat it appropriately. Applying this perspective to UTP highlights the remarkably different implications of social and cultural transfer for vocational and literacy educators at UTP. The consequences of contamination or inappropriate investment of social and cultural capital are not at all similar for the two groups. For vocational instructors, the cultural capital they transmit through teaching is their trade. Even though they are

currently working as instructors, their identity is strongly connected to being chefs. They have spent years progressing through apprenticeship and training programs to reach high status positions within their profession, accumulating a wealth of knowledge on cooking and kitchen management techniques. When they teach program participants the first stages of food preparation it is their own craft they are sharing. Contamination of that cultural capital, through sloppy technique, bad hygiene, or the introduction of radical new ideas, reduces the value of their own knowledge of how to do it right. Correct ways of doing things have value only when they are strongly separated from wrong ways of doing things. Similarly, investing the knowledge in a person who will not respect it allows people into the profession who will not work to maintain its status, to the detriment of all current members of the trade—including the instructors. A faulty process of capital transfer, whether due to diluted knowledge or the wrong person being selected to receive it, has personal implications for the vocational instructors.

In contrast, the basic skills instructors care deeply about their teaching, but they are not involved on such a personal level. Their own cultural capital derives from supporting adults to become more engaged with literacy activities, not from years spent developing a particularly high-status form of literacy. Of course, literacy instructors have to be comfortable with language and numbers, but they are paid primarily for their skill in teaching, and what they teach participants to do is not what they do themselves. The whole point of literacy knowledge is that it is not kept to an exclusive group of carefully selected people, but spread as widely as possible. The social field, and therefore the arena in which the knowledge has value, is not a vocation but the whole society. It does not matter at all to basic skills instructors if the person taking on the cultural capital is considered worthy or not because there is no such thing as the wrong recipient of literacy knowledge.

When the chef commented the literacy instructor was “trying to teach a subject she knows nothing about” he was right on his own terms. The cultural capital of the cooking professions was not open to the basic skills instructors. However, the role of the basic skills components was not to transmit cooking capital but to provide access to the cultural capital associated with reading and writing cooking materials. Creating situations where this kind of capital can be transferred is something literacy instructors know a great deal about.

The social capital of vocational instructors is also very much on the line during the program. The participants get their work experience placements at

the end of the program through the network of contacts known to the instructor, and it often takes a personal recommendation from the chef instructor for the participant to get the job. For the instructor this transaction is situated within their network of social capital, and their own credibility is at risk if the recommended individual turns out to be less suitable than hoped. Once again it is critical that the participant is a known—and tested—quantity, making strongly defined pedagogy a necessary tool for selecting those people progressing to work experience and employment.

Basic skills instructors' social capital is not used in the UTP programs. The strongest professional links of the individuals I interviewed were into the community college system, a network not called upon for assistance in the educational process. Personal credibility is not open to potential loss. Literacy instructors are able to "work as a team" with learners because they have nothing to lose, and no need to evaluate participants for their suitability. Inappropriate outcomes do not reflect upon the instructors, who are to some extent insulated by the academic nature of their subject.

To emphasize the distinctions, vocational instructors risk personal forms of capital as they do their work. They can lose credibility within networks built up over years if they are not careful about how, and to whom, they transmit their knowledge. Literacy instructors are not involved in the same direct (dangerous) way. To use an economic metaphor, basic skills instructors are fund managers whereas trades instructors are investing their own retirement fund—the difference in risk underpins the differences in pedagogy and status at UTP.

Vocational instructors invest socially based capital into the learners at UTP, and many of the returns are social returns. The high status accorded to the trades instructors is not only due to the pragmatic value of the knowledge they impart, but also because they personify that knowledge to a high degree. They know what demands will be placed upon new entrants to the cooking professions, and they have participated for decades in making the rules for bringing people into chef apprenticeship programs. The vocational instructors come from a small pool of people with the knowledge and experience allowing the program to be successful, and they cannot easily be replaced. All this contributes to their centrality at UTP, and underpins the lengths taken by the organization to ensure they are happy and committed.

Literacy instructors come from a much larger pool, and do not contribute the specialized knowledge and social capital offered by cooking instructors. Their replacement is much easier, and does not affect the

programming a great deal. Unlike trades trainers, who they are is far less important than what they teach, and literacy can be taught by many types of people. Basic skills instructors can be—and have been—fired with no notice for minor infractions of implicit rules. However distasteful the results may be, there are clearly a number of rationales supporting differential treatment of instructors by subject and, consequently, the tense relationship between the people involved. Despite these rationales, in the following analysis I theorize ways in which the literacy instructors' capital might be more fully utilized in employment preparation programs.

### **Putting Capital To Work**

Understanding why literacy is a low status form of education makes it possible to analyze the underlying issues. This analysis represents one perspective upon the work of vocational and literacy educators, and should not be understood as undermining the commitment and passion of all the instructors at the project. Training to be a professional cook is a valuable opportunity, as several participants made clear to me. However, UTP demonstrates how the value of the vocational end can function to narrow the possibilities open to non-vocationally oriented subject areas within the overall educational program. The agency represents an extreme example because of the historical differences between work-oriented vocational instruction and more humanistic literacy education, but I believe there are lessons to be learned by all literacy educators.

UTP's allocation of high status to vocational instruction is ironic given the organization's espoused commitment to holistic and progressive forms of education. The literacy instructors are the very people most likely to bring new ways of thinking about work into the setting, whereas vocational instructors have a great deal invested in the current structures of the workplace. There are alternatives available to UTP if they could recognize adult literacy education as at least an equal priority to work preparation. For example, a program developed using the insights of constructivist learning theory, where the experience of the learner is taken as an essential element of later knowledge acquisition, offers a very different approach. The unemployment experience of the participants becomes a resource for developing their understanding of the social world rather than a damaging piece of their personal history to be overcome through the inculcation of conventional work values. Similarly, a sociocultural approach to learning could emphasize the importance of the group in learning, and could allow

recognition of collective capital forms and their implications for workers. In either case the curriculum would be broadened, recognizing knowledge beyond the bounds of the strictly vocational.

Despite the strength of strategic, biographic, and capital structures separating the subjects and instructors in such settings, I believe a truly collaborative approach could help programs to move beyond narrow constructions of vocational training. One important aspect is to provide opportunities for the educators to work closely together and take the time to learn about the values and constraints each brings to education. Vocational instructors can be taught about the broader values of literacy, and why open process and negotiation are important aspects of basic skills education. The drive to allow learners to become critical and reflective citizens can be contextualised within the historical and social roots of adult literacy education (cf. Gee, 1996). Similarly, adult literacy educators must acknowledge the risks vocational instructors take, and the legitimacy of the framework put in place to minimize them. Nobody is well served by a vocational training process that fails to prepare learners for the realities of the working world. But everybody can be well served by a program able to combine the way things really are with the possibility that they could be different—and perhaps better.

In concrete terms, a redesigned project would interweave the basic skills and vocational training throughout the program. Instead of 9 weeks of literacy followed by 9 weeks of cooking, there would be a truly integrated program of 18 weeks, with a curriculum designed collaboratively by vocational instructors, basic skills instructors, and participants. Broader measures of success should be developed to capture the subtleties of participant learning to supplement the gross measure of employment attainment. The curriculum could be opened up to include the inevitable tension between the demands of the workplace and the needs of the worker, and the value of vocational capital could be brought into the open as an explicit topic for discussion rather than an implicit influence upon discussion. In essence, the knowledge capital of the basic skills instructors regarding how an educational program can help to encourage informed and critical thought must be brought alongside the vocational capital of the trades instructors. Only then can a fertile blend of vocation and reflection create the kind of holistic, integrated program the UTP administrators want to deliver.

My discussions with funders at both federal and provincial organizations suggested support could be available for experimentation, and



the funding project officers appeared open to broadening the meaning of employment preparation. Although it could prove to be a difficult negotiation, I see designing a program based upon this reconceptualization as a fascinating—and important—challenge.

### Moving Beyond the Training Paradox

Analyzing UTP using Bourdieu's notions of capital highlights an interesting contradiction within the program. How does a collaborative program recognize the differing implications of its components? The circle to be squared is how to increase the status of adult literacy education even though its values are inconsistent with the main purpose of the program to transmit tightly bounded vocational capital. I believe this problem to be familiar to many critical adult literacy educators working in collaborative programs (cf. Gowen, 1992). One critical part of the challenge is how to move beyond *either/or* thinking and to recognize that critical literacy education can stand beside effective vocational preparation to provide participants with an enriched source of educational capital applicable in many arenas of their lives. Being given the chance to question need not come at the cost of the chance to succeed in a chosen career.

An initial move towards a contingent resolution is for all parties to recognize this essential paradox and commit to moving beyond it. Vocational and literacy instructors do have a great deal to learn from each other regarding what matters to them, and why. Basic skills educators have to be prepared to explain how they can contribute specialized and valuable knowledge to collaborative programs, and how interweaving literacy with pragmatic training can create a fertile learning environment for learners. It is critical to demonstrate that literacy education is not irrelevant or over-academic, but a key component in the creation of a fulfilling and inspiring education. By showing the value of critical and informed engagement with words and ideas it is possible to move beyond settings like UTP where, to paraphrase George Orwell, all educators are equal, but some are more equal than others.

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