

REVIEWS

Reading the World of Work

A Review by ANN KELLY

READING THE WORLD OF WORK: A LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH TO WORKPLACE LITERACY AND ESL

By MELINA GALLO

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160 pages

As the title of this book suggests, Gallo advocates a learner-centred approach in framing workplace literacy programs. She claims that such an approach can change conventional notions of workplace literacy, improve communication practices throughout enterprises and help adult learners realise they have acquired much useful information in their lives that can be built on in their workplace learning. In addition, through further learning using learner-centred methods, they will be able to 'transform' rather than 'adapt to' conditions in their workplace.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first two chapters focus on understandings of literacy generally and, specifically, workplace literacies. Here Gallo critiques narrow forms of workplace literacy provision and hyperbolic statements about what workplace literacy programs promise. To ground her position she draws on previous relevant literature by Boyle (1999), Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996), Gowen (1992) and Hull (1997). She contrasts such approaches with one that is learner-centred. This is described as 'innovative', 'based on employees' strengths, concerns and interests', and resulting in their being able to 'navigate the power dynamics and culture of the workplace' (p.2). While I suspect many literacy researchers and practitioners would agree with such an ideological approach, Gallo herself falls into the trap of hyperbole by making claims for the effectiveness of a learner-centred approach—a claim that seems to be largely based on the work of Paolo Freire and her own experiences.

The following chapters outline a number of features Gallo identifies as needing to be incorporated into the planning and implementation of a workplace program. For the most part, these seem to be sensible and, from my knowledge of such programs, would reflect good practices in this provision. For example, in the planning phase, Gallo recommends that the views of all stakeholders be heard but, again, she goes further than perhaps might be feasible, by suggesting that the views of potential learners be given

priority. She further suggests that goals be realistic and achievable as well as being able to be assessed and recorded; workplace documentation be used; teachers spend a little time in trying to understand the more general literacy context of the workplace as well as the specific literacies needed by the learners, including oral communication needs; and agreement with respect to critical issues such as whether attendance will be voluntary, paid and in work time, be established. One important point she makes is to recognise that the values of the learners' co-workers must be recognised and respected and that improving individual's literacies may have a serious impact on their interactions with these co-workers.

The methods Gallo recommends that literacy teachers use to develop competencies include use of discussions, representing the main themes of these in a range of forms, including visual imagery, and then textualising these themes in a written form. In drawing these ideas together, Gallo proposes that 'workplace improvement projects' be used as the foundation for curricula. These are based on principles of situating literacy activities within authentic life situations and using problems identified by the learners as topics of particular interest. Again, she asserts that this approach is successful, using her own experiences as evidence to support such claims. In her final chapter, as well as re-asserting her claims for a learner-centred approach, she proposes a number of different assessment strategies and reporting forms to show not only learner development but also to promote workplace programs.

This could be an important publication for workplace literacy teachers who are starting out delivering programs in this area as, in general, it is based on sound recommendations. For others with experience in such teaching, though, there may not be much that is new. I also have reservations about a couple of aspects of the book. In addition to the very strong assertions based on scant evidence regarding the effectiveness of this particular approach, I also question whether workplace literacy programs should be focusing, to a substantive extent, on literacy activities engaged in by learners outside of work. This is especially problematic if programs are funded by employers. Gallo devotes a whole chapter to advocating that this should be an integral part of workplace literacy programs. Thirdly, I do not believe the first part of the title of this book reflects the content. Gallo does not really address the issue of 'reading the world of work', except in a very limited way. Finally, the dichotomies that Gallo sets up in her thesis are a concern. While understandings of good practice relating to workplace literacy programs have been published quite extensively, including the principle that learner needs and interests should be integral to such programs, the work of Farrell (2000), Jackson (2003), Kelly (2003), Kleifgen (2005), Scheeres (2007) and others, has shown us that workplaces are not sites that can be understood in a simplistic way. Indeed, while workplace literacy programs have been operating here in Australia and elsewhere for more than twenty years, there

has very little research into the actual literate practices of workplaces and the effectiveness of different literacy training approaches. As a result, I would have appreciated a little more tentativeness on Gallo's part in promoting her learner-centred approach as an option in developing workplace literacy programs.

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