

TREADING A FINE LINE: RPL AS A POTENTIALLY DIVISIVE DISCOURSE

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**Skills/ Training historically played a
divisive role in South Africa**





FAMILY
1885

SOUTHERSBURG



Some key features of trade union education in the 1980s

- For trade unions, knowledge had a strong political character;
- Knowledge was seen as arising out of workers' experiences of organisation and action;
- Common-sense, everyday forms of knowledge were valued, and there was a primary emphasis on knowledge being useful;
- Knowledge was seen as a collective resource and something to be shared by all workers;
- An important role of union education was to enable workers to assert their own 'voice'.



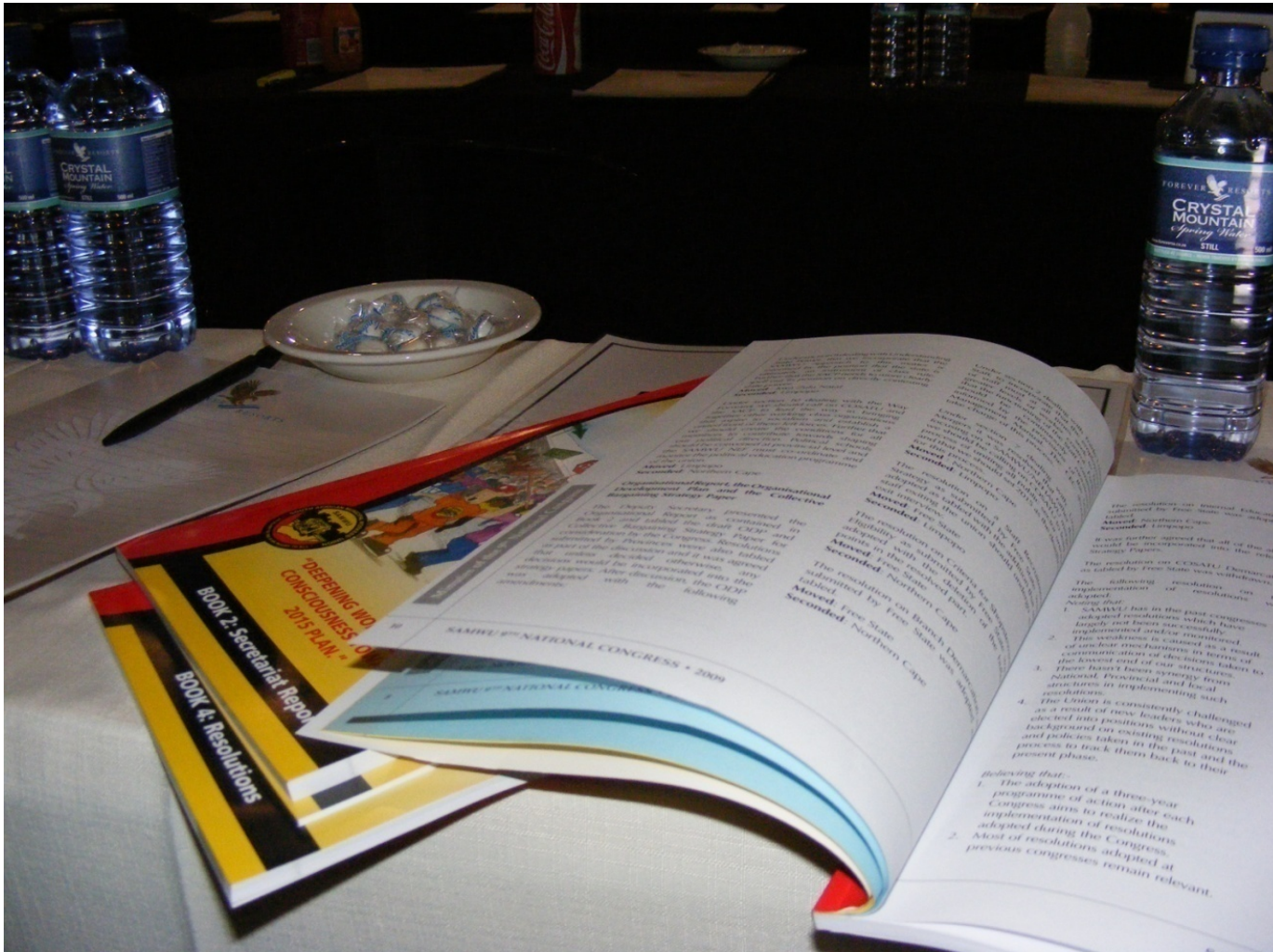
RPL as part of Adult Pedagogy.....

... there has been an attempt within the education committee to base itself on what workers know, not only what they don't know; it has tried to take that and working class experience as part of the basic point of departure in all education exercises; and it has set for itself the goal in education work, not simply of increasing the quantitative amount of knowledge of workers, but increasing also the confidence of workers in themselves, what they know and what they can do.....



LEARNING THROUGH MEETINGS

- Reliance on face-to-face, oral forms of communication
- Distinct speech genres ('code-switching', story-telling, humour and a variety of forms of oral performativity)
- Affords everyone a 'voice' for their experiential knowledge
- Part of the principles of union organising: democracy; inclusivity; 'each one teach one'; political, transformative vision



A PERFORMATIVE ROLE FOR TEXT IN LEARNING?

PROBLEMS FACING BLACK WORKERS AT END OF APARTHEID

- **Poor quality of “Bantu Education”**
- **High levels of illiteracy**
- **Workers’ experience not valued**
- **Women workers seldom get training**
- **Training strictly job-specific**
- **Where workers gained skills, they were not upgraded**
- **Companies trained for immediate needs**
- **Education & Training system fragmented and uncoordinated, and severely under-resourced**

Not enough training

No training for workers internally
- the effect is that past discrimination is not overcome



Recruitment

Word of mouth favours
existing white artisans



Recruitment

Foreign Labourers



March 1951 - Numsa Vocational Training Project-OK38

Victimisation

Union members excluded from training



March 1991—Nurmsa Vocational Training Project—CH35

TRADE UNION VISION OF TRAINING REFORM

The new system of training should:

- Address the legacy of apartheid education and high rates of adult literacy
- Provide workers with access to lifelong education and training opportunities
- Horizontal & vertical mobility
- Broad skills bands & access to career paths
- Link training to new forms of participatory work organisation

RPL to play a crucial role

- a key mechanism for addressing past discrimination and achieving equity & redress
- provide access to educational opportunities for those previously excluded
- Also a more radical purpose: a vehicle for the recognition of 'knowledge from below'

But how successfully could historical traditions of 'RPL as Adult Pedagogy' fit into the new 'human capital' discourse?

Key questions & problems encountered in RPL implementation

- *Whose assessment criteria?*
- *Whose assessment tools?*
- *Whose assessors?*
- *Who should the RPL process 'belong' to?*

Metalworkers Union:

“It appears that management and the union entered this process with very different primary purposes, and have different meanings for the results workers obtained. Management claim they wanted a skills audit (indeed one company was under pressure from Japan to produce this profile) and are satisfied that they have an accurate ‘snap shot’ of the workforce skills profile. The trade union ...officially accepted the results as a strategy to ensure access to training for their members. However, the vast majority of workers interviewed have seen no benefit from this process. The results they have are meaningless, demoralising and seen to be wrong. There have been no grade increases as a result of this process... none of the failed workers had been given access to training to help make up the skills that they apparently lacked....”

Mineworkers' Union

“... the ways in which RPL is currently being used in the workplace... is not... to achieve more equitable forms of work organisation or practice, (but)... to open access for a few and to continue to exclude the majority. ... only those forms (of knowledge and skill) that fit with hegemonic constructions of knowledge were recognised... RPL has been used to prove and maintain the exclusion of those who were disadvantaged by the education and training systems of the past.... RPL is the new word for screening people out, for identifying those who will be retrenched, for advantaging the few who have the versions of knowledge and skill (and attitude) that the employers are prepared to recognise.”

'RPL as adult pedagogy' vs RPL in Workplace/Formal Education

'RPL as adult pedagogy'

- Stressed inclusivity and equality
- All workers – with common experiences – had knowledge of value
- Oral, 'common-sense' knowledge strongly valued
- Knowledge a shared resource to advance collective interests

RPL in the SA Workplace

- Knowledge encoded in specialised languages; often text-based
- Greater power differentials
- Purpose of RPL: to raise productivity; comply with international standards
- Individual competition for upward mobility

Implications for practitioners?

- acknowledge that there are different kinds of knowledge and different ways of expressing knowledge
- need to look carefully for signs of more conceptual and analytic forms of knowledge that may have been experientially acquired in informal ways
- find ways to enable RPL candidates to draw on familiar, cultural and historical resources to mediate what they know

Trade unions need to enskill their representatives to provide guidance and support

- Cooper & Nkomo (2009)

Nearly half of those surveyed had little or no understanding of skills development legislation or of own role in skills development

- Maserumule & Madikane (2004)

Where (training) gains have been made they were the result of a strong shop steward push and strong organisation. Such cases are few, as most shop stewards interviewed expressed serious lack of capacity to handle these issues on their own.

- Webster (2003):

there is evidence of unions intervening proactively at national level to shape industrial policy... However, at plant level, unions seem to lack capacity to engage strategically with the new human resources practices that are emerging