

*This paper is dedicated to Bhoyi Mkhize
Who led the charge from the very beginning,
in acknowledgement of his commitment and leadership to trade union education*

Title

**The Industrial and Working Life Programme: Critical Social Pedagogy or
Preparation for a neo liberal Labour Market?**

Authors: The participants of the IWLP

Lindikaya Butshingi
Thabo Gcabashe
Maphule Molefe
Adrian Williams
Busisiswe Shezi
Themba Ngcogo
Lungisa Dlodla
Israel Mthembu
Michael Koen

Editor: Aisha Bahadur

*'The emancipatory interest is directed towards realising human autonomy and
responsibility in the historical process'*

(Romm on Habermas 1997 p235)

FIRST DRAFT: not for quoting
Abstract

The Industrial and Working Life Programme: Critical Social Pedagogy or Preparation for a neo liberal Labour Market?

‘The emancipatory interest is directed towards realising human autonomy and responsibility in the historical process’

(Romm on Habermas 1997 p235)

This paper reports research conducted by the Workers College and students participating in the Workers College diplomas and the Industrial and Working Life degree Programme at the University of Natal. Participants on these programmes are drawn from mostly labour and to a lesser extent community organisations. It examines various aspects of these adult education programmes observing that these programmes both incorporate and resist recognition of prior learning (depending on the meaning assigned to the concept) at institutional and pedagogic levels in an epoch in South Africa that witnesses the end of racially exclusive policies and the rise of neo liberal ones to replace them. These construct processes are reflected, both in institutional practice as well as individual and collective experience of teaching, learning and administration in the different programmes, through competing conceptions of learning and knowledge driven by tensions between ‘*emancipatory interests*’ and those of economic responsiveness to the *particular* power interests that have come to be portrayed as *general* interests of society. These tensions are explored amongst different participants, and their attempts to ascribe meaning to their prior experiences in the context of the programmes and institutions documented. These tensions are shown to have impact on curriculum and pedagogic practice as well as relations to the identity and role of the learner as an individual as well as making up part of broader sets of collectives in a neo liberal dominated society. Collectives included in the analysis are the learning community, the learners ‘home organizations’ and the constituencies that these organisations serve where each of these lay claim to different elements of the learners experience and hold different expectations and meaning of the learning process, impacting on how the learner experiences the tension of competing conceptions of knowledge and its purpose.

Preface

This paper was researched by participants of Industrial and Working Life Programme (IWLP) and co-authored by the research unit of the Workers College and 7 participants of the programme. The project has different layers of inquiry to create depth in the exploration of the concept of recognition of prior learning (RPL) and to assess its level of inclusion by both the Workers College and the University of Natal in their approach to the learners currently in the IWLP programme. Part of this paper was developed using an introspective self study approach, the IWLP students were initially participants in research, or 'subjects' as the term is sometimes objectionably employed, and then given an increasing stake in the research. While initially progress on the project was slow during the theoretical introduction to the notion of RPL, it gained momentum in the self-study stage. In fact it is only really through the process of using research and questioning as a learning instrument that conceptions of RPL, broader than mere access, began to emerge more concretely amongst participants.

Through assessment in its current state, informal prior learning that has been acquired by life and work experiences have not been acknowledged and relatively low value is assigned to the skills that have been gained through experiential learning, and impacts on the value in society of the South African majority that, in both the past and present, have not had access to adequate formal education. The support and dedication of the students participating in the process has been a clear message to both institutions that further consideration of RPL is required for it to be developed as a legitimate process of assessing the information and knowledge gained through experiences as well as it playing an integral role in the process of interaction with different forms of knowledge.

As the list of contributors suggest a number of people participated in the writing of this paper. As such a number of styles coexist although through our discourse we hope that coherent themes emerge for the reader. The paper flows directly from an experiential learning processes that investigated participants experiences and how they shape and are shaped by their process through the Workers College diploma's and other activities and participation in the IWLP. As such the analysis does not directly engage the theoretical discourse of RPL and its interpretations but rather presents a particular experience of struggles around learning and knowledge and leaves it to the reader to interpret its contribution to the debate through the lens of his or her own prior learning.

The writers' intend to provoke an open discussion on RPL, through the presentation of this paper, based on the experiences that they as a group have had coming together at the Workers College and the time that they have spent at the University of Natal in the IWLP. They consider the purpose and intentions of this project and the impact it has had on the participants. The paper is a challenge to the status quo in institutions of higher learning, in particular its bureaucracies, teaching methods, curriculum, and course content and a call to struggle for the urgent transformation of formal education.

Introduction

The development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and its implementation through a plethora of different structures cannot be viewed in isolation to South African polemics of the last decade. The ending of the apartheid regime brought with it a general acknowledgment of the need for redress and equal access to opportunities. This period has been characterised by large-scale policy development and implementation to effect such objectives which have permeated all facets of life in this country not least of which being education, training and human resource development. However when looking at social indicators most notably wealth inequality, unemployment and AIDS related death and suffering one is sometimes left with the feeling that everything has changed and yet remains the same.

We have gone out into the new global village seeking answers to problems created by violently discriminatory legislation and come back with 'sophisticated' industrial relations systems and innovative educational policies geared to meet the increasingly flexible nature of work and life. Frequently however, policymaking has seen its stated goals undermined or reversed through its implementation. For example, the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy had as one of its stated intentions to increase employment, and yet we have witnessed massive job losses as companies restructure to meet the demands of global competition on the one hand and simply to become more profitable in the name of competitiveness. The Skills Development Act (SDA) has largely failed to improve access to training, and resulted in large amounts of money lying unutilised in a tangle of skills structures and bureaucratic institutions that have in many instances served to reduce the amount of training and in some instances actually served to undermine jobs. Skills may be made portable but portable to where? Life long learning is, as it always has been, a reality simply by virtue of accumulated experience but inaccessible to most in the formal sense by virtue of cost. Race and gender equity as values inform much of the redressive policy on access but massive barriers to access exist on the basis of affordability. The holistic approach detailed in RPL policy creates much space for different conceptions and praxis but will resources and power interests not ultimately determine the greatest emphasis and the dominant application of RPL?

Global policies, in many instances forced upon South Africa at the unspoken threat of isolation, have found people and institutions increasingly engaged in survivalist pursuits, which by their very nature have a tendency to mute critical social engagement. In an economic society increasingly based on competition, the gap between policy purpose and practice will tend to aggravate social divides manifesting in increasing income disparities, a rapidly growing information divide, differential access to services and education and the discriminatory valuing of experience and knowledge, apparent, for example, in the closure of university departments that have become 'unprofitable'. Which experiences will come to define our social reality and resource allocation other than those with the greatest 'airtime'? In such an environment to what extent can there be real institutional accommodation of experiences, knowledge and values that do not necessarily mirror the dominant power interests that are serviced by these institutions?

The thrust of labour conceptions of RPL lay around the recognition of skills and knowledge acquired through experience but ignored by racist employment practices. However the recognition of these experiences through assessment and qualification tends to run into problems when it comes to the financial implications on wages and grading as they have an impact to the employer on the bottom line and as such will remain the preserve of distributional bargaining and not policy. Indeed one of the weakest elements of the Skills Development Act is that it served the function of removing skills from the collective bargaining agenda (in practice, it is not a statutory requirement) effectively undermining one of the stronger social pressures for a more equitable approach to skills. The lesson is clear; social struggle cannot be replaced with legislation as a vehicle for equitable social change.

The principals of the NQF are laudable but do not take into account the realities of a neo-liberal labour market in the south characterised by unemployment and desperation as opposed to the flexible labour markets of the north where social welfare nets cushion the effects of transformation.

Background to the Industrial Working Life Programme

The IWLP was created in response to further learning needs of students that had completed diplomas offered by the Workers College.

The Workers College

The Workers College vision is to promote the principles of free, democratic and independent trade unionism for workers. The basis for its design aimed at developing educational practices that sustained a participatory and critical learning process, promoting the value of open debate, democracy and non discrimination on the basis of race, gender, religion or political affiliation.

The College was established in July 1991 at the University of Natal. It moved away from the University “largely because workers felt a need to learn in an environment which was removed from main stream education” (Interview with K Moodley, August 2000). The college has a Board of Trustees that includes representation from the three union federations and independent unions and to a smaller degree community representation. Whilst initially a trade union education organisation the need to re-link community structures to union endeavours as well as shifting sights of struggle witnessed in the late 90’s led to a decision to interact with community organisations as well.

The Diploma programmes, accredited by the University of Natal have been the cornerstone of the college and have been the main vehicle used to provide education to the trade union movement. The college uses trade unionists, community activists, academics and professionals as tutors on the programmes. The diplomas are run on one

day of the week for forty weeks. There are six modules done in each diploma, two modules a semester, and assignments and examinations are written for each module. The University of Natal moderates the examinations for the Labour Studies, Labour Economics and Gender and Labour Studies Diplomas, and the University of Durban Westville moderates the Diploma in Political Studies.

Exploration Of The Recognition Of Prior Learning (RPL)

The literature identifies different approaches and or perspectives of RPL. We will not enter this debate but reflect the early internal debates around the concepts application within the Workers College and the IWLP. Whilst access to the University of Natal was negotiated on the basis of RPL it was only through internal engagement and an initial RPL pilot run within the diploma programmes that the notion of RPL was expanded to encompass the whole person and as being routed in critical experiential learning.

The following is an example of a discussion document intended to stimulate debate around the nature and meaning of RPL.

“In true South African fashion, another politically correct terminology is doing the rounds - RPL. It has found its way into the official policy documents of the education 'legislation' as a way to address the need for giving recognition and accreditation for those who have had no access to formal 'education'... Of course, the result is that such persons granted RPL will eventually find themselves back in the 'system of formal education. Somewhere this smacks of paternalism, possibly assimilation.” (K Moodley: Internal discussion document 2001). Questions that immediately flowed were for instance, in whose hands is the RPL process? What interests are being served by the adoption of RPL?

The college has always viewed education holistically and has including the experiential, informal and formal teachings and learnings where possible through participatory needs assessment and teaching methods. Questions were raised when exploring informal education such as, “What is wrong with the teachings of our parents and those before them? What is wrong with the experiences and learnings of everyday life, at home, in the community, in organisations, in struggle?” indicated to the college that these learnings “needed to be defined and reflected on to determine how they affected our lives, our struggles, our identities, and our future!” (K Moodley RPL Workshop February 2002)

The potential effect of RPL, within the scope and vision of the Workers College's activities was viewed as a means to inculcate workers and adults in the community with a sense of confidence and pride in themselves and their heritage and providing individuals with the means of looking back to draw on their strengths and examine their weaknesses. It was also acknowledged that RPL may create portfolios for organisational development, employment opportunities, and accreditation and be used to develop appropriate, contextual, homegrown solutions.

Initial explorations in RPL by the Workers College were to see whether the concept

would provide a means to address two areas that had been identified. One was the struggle that the College has been having over the writing skills & communication skills generally of its students. The other was the desire to develop an oral history of the struggles of workers and communities. This resulted in the College embarking on a programme of 'skills' development for its students. One of the exercises given to students was for them to record 'Who am I?' Kessie Moodley reports on the outcomes, "The results of this exercise revealed that when students were talking about themselves the writing flowed, even though it was in their second, third and sometimes fourth language. This raised the question of how much more effective the exercise would have been if it were given to them to do in their own tongue. The exercise revealed a wealth of knowledge and abilities, a prominent feature was that the students were exposed to many difficult and challenging experiences and situations. There was a sense of pride and self-worth displayed in the fact that they had survived all of those experiences through their own or shared abilities that reflected their competencies. It was also a revelation for the college that there was the potential for people to develop their own, homegrown solutions. For this process we identified key questions around RPL; how do we make use of these past experiences, learnings, abilities, competencies and knowledge, and of what benefit can it be to the broader community and society?" (Kessie Moodley RPL Workshop February 2002).

The experience of RPL was frequently an emotional one and certainly extended far beyond accreditation and access.

The Need For Further Formal Education

A combination of forces led the Workers College to begin to seek further access to formal education for learners resulting in discussions with a number of higher education institutions namely the University of Natal, the University of Durban Westville and the University of South Africa.

The notion of a degree also grew from an organic expression of the principal of life long learning on the part of learners who had completed one or a number of diploma courses offered by the Workers College who wished to deepen knowledge and understanding of a number of problems confronting themselves and the constituencies they represented. Implicit in this was a desire to effect social change in response to the negative impacts of a growing incorporation of neo liberal tenants in economic policy and practice.

Some of this desire is noticeable in learner interviews which reflect increasing bewilderment at the rapidly transforming post 'isolation' labour market, which saw many trade union victories being rolled back in the name of global competitiveness and the growing sense of ineffectuality in the face of restructuring and retrenchment along with the de-politicisation of the shop floor and weakening of union structures. "We came looking for answers only to find more questions and opposition in our own organisations." (Participant focus group comment May 2003) In short there were too many experiences of having to say to workers that there is nothing that can be done. The need to increase the unions ability to engage political, social and economic issues and

address the power vacuum created in the unions by the loss of leadership to the new government is expanded on by Vusimuzi Shezi, a student in the first group to gain access the university through the programme: “(The IWLP) came at a time when the labour movement was experiencing a serious lack of leadership, when the ‘think tank’ of the labour movement had moved to parliament... the unions agreed that it might be an opportunity because we are starting afresh to rebuild our organisations” (Focus Group A: May 2003)

The Creation Of The IWLP

The idea of the IWLP arose out of the discussions amongst students that had completed diplomas at the Workers’ College that were thirsty for more knowledge. Alvin Pillay from Group A of the IWLP remembers; “all the unions were invited to many meetings, there was a lot of consultation. The degree programme started if not directly by the participation of the unions, then through the students in the different diploma courses representing their unions”. (Focus Group A: May 2003) The initiative to build on the route taken by the College to get the diplomas accredited by the University of Natal and the University of Durban Westville, using relationships that had been established to lobby support within higher education institutions to provide access to Higher education for diploma graduate students.

Objectives

There were a number of objectives of the project. It was to create another layer of leadership that would fill in the vacuum that was created as a result of an exodus or departure of the experienced leadership of the labour movement to government and the private sector. It was also aimed at developing an informed leadership that would be able to grapple with complicated issues created by global political and economic demands. It was to empower trade unionist by bridging the information divide, between the labour movement and the other stakeholders in the economic environment in which they operate in such as employers and policy makers, so that they may provide better representation of the interests of the working class. The project also attempts to provide the means for participants to deepen critical engagement in society. Importantly, it attempts to demonstrate the value of knowledge held by marginalised formations in society through academic successes of people that would otherwise not be able to access institutions of higher learning on the assumption that they would not have sufficient knowledge or ability to complete a degree qualification. As a consequence of this an objective was to afford people the opportunity to value this knowledge impacting on a sense of self and instilling responsibility as representatives of valued organic knowledge. Finally it also attempts to impact upon higher education institutional values, policies and processes, in a time when many of these are being negatively influenced by the seeming imperatives of neo liberal policies.

Engagement

Seeking to create further access to education The Workers College became involved in a number of discussions with various institutions. The development of the IWLP took place over a lengthy period growing out of a long-standing relationship between the Workers College and the University of Natal. Professor Ari Sitas initially played a crucial linking role between the two institutions having been involved in the initial establishment of the Workers College. Some members of the College board, the director Kessie Moodley, and diploma participants engaged influential lecturers and senior staff members of the University (UND) to provide an opportunity for a group of students that have gone through and passed diplomas at the College. This arrangement had to change the entry requirement to UND, which was a matriculation certificate.

Whilst earlier approaches to establish a workers degree were rejected, pressures were building on the university to begin to promote redressive access and community orientation in the unfolding policy terrain of post apartheid South Africa. One of the means to alleviating this pressure was to open the university “to build further on the diplomas being developed by the Workers College, to grant trade unions access to tertiary education and to a degree programme in response to their changing needs.” (E De Kadt: IWLP Evaluation Meeting: February 2003) Apart from Professor Ari Sitas, other key people at the university involved in the creation of the IWLP were Professor Elizabeth De Kadt, and the then Vice Chancellor Professor Bower and later Kibbie Naidoo, the current programme director.

The various policy documents concerning the National Qualification Framework (NQF) placed pressure on the University to think about different ways of creating learning opportunities for adults who were excluded from learning. The University “realising the need to move away from its focus on matriculants; to look at life long learning, and access to people who had previously been excluded from education. The notion of recognition of prior learning (RPL) became a key area needing to be addressed. The project proposal was accepted by the university senate and approved as an alternative access route into the university in 1998, under the department of Human Sciences that was given the go ahead to be innovative.” (E De Kadt: IWLP Evaluation Meeting: February 2003)

Professor Sitas reflects on the process of establishing the IWLP; “the road was not an easy one. “Many hurdles had to be overcome concerning study hours, credits, relevant course materials as well as costs”(Internal evaluation interview 2000). After consultation within the labour movement, and learners further discussions with the University and SAQA a mixed mode programme of study was developed, leading in a first phase to an Undergraduate Certificate, and in later phases, an Undergraduate Diploma and then a Bachelor of Social Science degree that attempts to accommodate learners specific needs such as limited study time, specific skills requirements and labour movement perspectives.

Access To University Education

The entry-level requirement for the IWLP is either a matriculation exemption or a Diploma completed at the Workers' College, that is valued as 16 credits on the IWLP. The College selects the students on the basis of their performance in the diploma programme and an interview. Those students who obtain between 50 to 60% in the diploma are advised to take another diploma course before proceeding to the degree. The students are aware of the 'special circumstances' that provided them with access to the University. Busisizwe Shezi explains, "the flexibility in terms of allowing the Workers College diplomas to be an entry requirement when it was going to be impossible for us to enter this institution that required one to be rated on 'did you pass matric and what points do you have?' If we took that route as individuals, we would not get through the gate. Now as a result of negotiations in terms of accommodating people like us, it gave us access to university". (Focus Group A: May 2003)

The barrier to accessing the university was not based only on the lack of formal education; the lack of financial resources available to the diploma students would make it impossible for them to pursue further formal education as individuals. Lindikaya Butshingi of the most recent group to gain access to the University describes the beginning of the year as a difficult time for his family; "I had to use a large chunk of family budget to pay the commitment fee for my studies, if the college had not made financial arrangements for us, we would never be able to attend the University, it lowered the burden... in terms of affordability". (Focus Group D: March 2003) The college went to great lengths to lobby financial support for the programme and to gain recognition for financial resources to be acknowledged as a barrier to formal education that needed to be overcome. "We were able to register our first cohort of students in 2000 with generous funding from SACTU and one-third remission of fees from the University. There are several access programmes at university but this only one of this type for mature learners." (E De Kadt: IWLP Evaluation Meeting: February 2003)

Four cohorts of participants are currently registered on the IWLP. These are referred to as Group A being the first group to enter the programme through to 2003 entrants, Group D. Together they represent some 60 learners.

Structure of the IWLP

While the aim of this programme is to complete a Social Science degree, exit points are available at Certificate level (8 completed modules 128 credit points) and at Diploma level (16 modules - 256 credit points). Students are registered in the first instance in the First Level School for the Undergraduate Certificate in Human and Social Studies. Satisfactory performance in this Certificate guarantees acceptance to the Undergraduate School and the Bachelor's degree programmes. The programme takes five years of study to be completed and "these exit points are designed to allow students flexibility in completing the degree as some might experience changes to their circumstances at work or home during this period... it was good forward planning of the part of the university and the workers college as it is a suitable approach to adult learners that are employed

and have family and other social responsibilities” says Vivian (Group A: Interview May 2003)

Learners register for a maximum of two modules in each of the two university semesters and attend classes every Friday. This workload is in line with the notional study hours laid down by SAQA and is the recommended maximum load for persons in full employment. In addition, some suitable modules are run during the winter school by the Workers College. Most students interviewed felt that the IWLP was well structured “on the whole there is flexibility, it has not lost track of us” (Milton: Group A: Interview June 2003) However, their were concerns; “the workload covered in one day is too much for you to understand everything” (Themba: Group A: Interview June 2003), “choices on modules that can be taken are limited” there is no flexibility to chop and change courses as we have to attend as a group, so there are courses that I would like to do but they are not offered to us and there is nothing I can do”, (Thabo Gcabashe: Interview: June 2003)

Courses covered in the IWLP thus far include:

- Academic learning English
- Individual State and Society
- Sociology
- Community Development
- Research Methods
- Economic Concepts
- Internet expertise
- Developmental Activism
- Activism in the Information Economy
- Industrial, Organisational and Labour Studies (second and third year)

Methodological Framework

Participatory Action Learning

This paper draws from a number of different sources and methodologies within a broader framework of action research. The Programme and the institutional interaction as a whole needs to be viewed as an experiential based learning system. Institutional interactions are seen a part of the process of critical pedagogy and as such data is drawn from observation of the various interactions between actors of the two institutions, participants, their constituencies and ‘home’ organizations making up a complex web that is quite attuned to broader socio-political, cultural and economic tendencies in society. In this process of observation a number of more specific data collection tools and methods have been employed such as focus groups, interviews, questionnaires and document analysis. These more specific tools were as far as possible participatory where participant researchers collected course outlines and developed analysis of curriculum contents, acquired interview skills and then conducted the interviews, analysed data and so on. Whilst experienced facilitators ran most focus group sessions, participants of the IWLP conducted all staff interviews and 27 of the 33 in-depth interviews.

The process of writing this paper involved the Industrial and Working Life Programme (IWLP) writers in a number of different activities initially as participants in research, or 'subjects' as the term is sometimes objectionably employed, and later as facilitators during a research skills workshop involving 20 other IWLP participants that were taken through a process of developing an interview schedule from the broad research questions of the Jet funded research project, concretising operational definitions, developing interview and recording skills and then conducting interviews with one another. The feedback from this process was very positive, as participants felt they had gained skills simply by talking about their experiences in a structured way and had contributed in a meaningful way to the effort of attaching value to their collective experiences. During the evening session of the workshop, this process motivated those present to commit to a programme of action to impact on their learning environment, the institution of the university and higher education in general as well as labour and community movements.

At the conclusion of this process the participant researchers went through a facilitated process of analysing the interview data, conducting interviews with staff and other students and then through discussions of the themes that emerged developing a structure for the paper and contributing to different elements of it.

Due to the participatory nature of the research participants in the process adapted initial research questions.

The areas covered in the RPL research project were as follows;

- Access
- Teaching and learning methodology
- Assessment methodology
- The nature of participant prior experience
- The effect of participants prior experience upon academic performance
- Staff and participant experiences of the curriculum
- The valuing of knowledge by the institution
- Power relations and forms of knowledge
- Institutional engagements
- Social value of knowledge

Theoretical Framework

As indicated, this paper deals with the experiences of participants and does not try to engage in theoretical debate. Data collection and later processes of analysis did use the theoretical constructs of the Habermasian typology of knowledge to frame discussions and interviews around forms of knowledge and their value whilst Freire's work on critical pedagogy was used in examining teaching and learning as well as institutional engagement. These two sets of constructs were chosen as they integrate particularly well with the activist notion of RPL, which in turn has particular application to the objectives of the IWLP noted above.

Using The Learning Context To Develop Critical Pedagogy In A Liberal Academic Environment

Whilst the initial use of RPL related to access when viewed in more holistic terms and when superimposed upon the principals of critical pedagogy, its application becomes widespread both in terms of an analytical tool as well as informing practice.

The learning experience is broader than classroom engagement, assessment and finally accreditation. Any evaluation of the IWLP as a RPL a process needs to take this into account (RPL is used in the broad sense of the concept meaning the recognition as reflected in institutional practices of participants experiences and values). The complex interactions that are set up in the process of education should be viewed holistically and the impact on the individual and the collective assessed. In this section broader institutional interactions and participant involvement in these processes are described.

Critical engagement requires us to look beneath the surface and assess the informing values. Values relate to how organisations and people engage with the world. In focus groups and interviews participants were asked what values they thought were promoted by the university and the curriculum in general. Many participant responses reflect a strong opinion on the liberal nature of the education, as well as a lack of trust in the agenda of the university. This relates to the power interests that they view the institutions serving.. In examining how participants come to this assessment it was apparent that many people tended to ascribe meaning to institutional practice by contrasting this with experiences. Most view the university as serving the interest of capitalist, neo liberal and western values.

Milton: “Our experience is not reflected because it is dismissed under the capitalist and euro centric agenda of the university. I am an African from a rural community who is interested in self determination, community development and leadership skills within the context of our cultural needs and Ubuntu”

Nomusa: “The curriculum needs to accommodate different ideologies as we are currently being channelled to one ideology, capitalism.”

Douglas: “Indigenous knowledge from elders and the community is not accepted by the university.”

Moses: “the university values of the capitalist system which is poison to a worker”

“the university serves capitalist values, texts are pro capitalist, learning is Euro centric, we are taught that the West is better. Documented information only is accepted that suits the curriculum not always in line with your ideology”

Focus group D, Focus Group A, Participant interviews March and July 2003)

Yet for many participants the university is held in the highest regard. In many interactions participants seem to view their attendance at the university as a ‘dream come true’ and an opportunity they never thought would be possible in their lifetime. This reflects some of the tensions of attempting to engage a liberal agenda through a radical discourse in an economic environment defined by its scarcity, following the excesses of apartheid exclusion. As some participants reflected, “it is difficult to be critical when

your presence at the institution is something that would never have happened in the previous system, and yet being at that institution does not make the suffering around you disappear.” (Synthesis focus group discussions)

The intention behind the IWLP was not to simply to provide unionists with access to a degree. From the outset of the IWLP, the Workers College has maintained an integral role in the programme. This has been done in a number of ways and had varying impacts on the complex relations that exist between institutions, participants and broader social pressures and constituencies. It is important to emphasise again that the entire interactive process is seen as the learning experience for all concerned and that institutional engagement is a key element in the development of critical pedagogy. Given that universities are grappling to remain relevant to the ‘student market’ wishing to invest in their human capital to again in time sell this in an ever-constricting labour market, this institutional engagement is viewed as essential and core to any evaluation of the programme. This does set up tensions between the various actors but these are necessary tensions reflecting a critical environment. Efforts to change the world into a political classroom will inevitably have contradictory outcomes as views on this process are not held homogeneously through different actors, institutions and participants and neither should they be as people explore their understanding of self in the world and respond differently to the stimulus of ‘emancipatory, communicative and practical knowledge’. (Group discussion on the nature and impact of knowledge, all degree cohorts represented, April 2003) (Romm 1997. Habermas 1973 Held 1976)

Some of the processes of broader participant engagement beyond the academic curriculum are detailed below, drawing on evidence from various sources to explore some of the contradictory processes that have emerged and how they relate to the way participants view themselves and their role as well as how they value some of their own experiences. The contradictions reflect a liberal core to a process that has a radical framework.

1. A System of Representation

Frequent interaction between the Workers College and the participants around issues of resources, strategic direction and assistance are held. The college facilitates formal interactions with university structures. A participant representative structure was established at the onset and a number of structured initiatives have taken place around strategic direction of the programme and planning toward meeting its purposes. Initially these representative structures functioned well but soon began to deal with fairly routine issues and complaints, for example the need for lockers and summaries of lecture notes. As this emerged frequent challenges have been thrown at participants around their focus and intentions within the IWLP.

Over time some participants have come to take increasing responsibility for these co-ordination efforts but it has been difficult to reverse the notion of the Workers College as the representative of participant interests to the university and the dangers of dependency that this can create as the institution of the Workers College comes to be seen as an

alternative authority structure. This perception is apparent in that most participants perceive the Workers College as serving labour and socialist interests and in getting them to university. Mano: “WC has opened the university doors for adult learners like us.” And Pat: “WC has played a significant role without it we would not be where we are today.” He adds “I represent my constituencies, from home to work including Workers College” (student interviews, July 2003)

Many participants have come to see the role of the college as a mediator between students and the institution and as a watchdog to the interests that are being served. Some view the college as part of their constituencies. Milton: “The Workers College should keep the programme in line with the concept of trade unionism, prior learning and break barriers in formal education in the university.” Moses: “The Workers College should be fully involved in setting curriculum and selecting projects of the IWLP.” Lindikaya: “The Workers College should play interventionist role when we are going astray including relations with the university.” and Gladys: “The Workers College should continue to monitor the programme until the university is transformed.” (student interviews, July 2003)

As a result of this and also the status with which the university is viewed, see above, it is apparent that a dual authority structure has been created which tends to pull participants in different directions. Ira Shor (1993) in discussing the work of Freire talks of authority-dependence as an interference to transformative education identifying the resistance of teachers and learners as well as institutions to critical social pedagogy. This authority dependence at times has implications for and links to participant identity and how some people view their role and the purpose of the programme. Indeed external realities of a competitive survivalist economy tends to encourage a strong element of competition between some students at times and certain elements of careerism exist both of which steer individuals away from their ‘responsibility to the historical process’ and into such forms of dependence.

The dual authority structure has tended to have different effects at different points in the process. Early representation of participant and constituency interests at the point of setting the IWLP up and in the early part of its existence was well coordinated and tended to raise substantive issues and reflected political consciousness. As time has passed the process has become somewhat weaker. The research could not provide a concrete cause for this process but a reading of the data tends to suggest several influences.

As successive groups of participants have entered into the IWLP they reflected perceptions of less and less participation in the formation of the programmes, but rather following in the footsteps of previous cohorts of participants. Experiences related to access reported from different group focus sessions can be summarised as;
Group D refers to access more as a process through a system that has been established. Group B and C refers to access through recommendations by peers and from the union. Group A were most involved in the process of gaining access to the university. Again around determination of curriculum the first entrants to IWLP, Group A, reflected greater feelings of agency than successive groups.

Group D, the latest entrants, already reflect different needs and views of the process of access through different experiences from those in Group A. As one moves through the data from group A to D, students are less confident in being critical of the institution, feel less able to participate in the setting of curriculum, feel less empowered to change curriculum design, express more self doubt and are less comfortable at the university. These trends are broad and certainly not homogenous reflecting different emancipatory self-knowledge and levels of critical engagement. Given the early participants greater involvement in informing the objectives of the programme, they have felt more committed to their broader objectives than later groups. Later cohorts have also demonstrated deference to earlier groups and therefore tended to take less responsibility for the process of institutional engagement. The participants of the first group had by in large been involved in social struggles for longer periods of time and were more deeply embedded in older cultures of struggle. The liberal nature of much of the engagement has also had an impact in changing the nature of critical processes and suggesting greater institutional accommodation, creating the need to begin to specifically surface and reflect on these issues. The participants of the IWLP frequently express the shift of focus from collective interest to that of the individual. Pat: "The current curriculum serves to create intellectuals. You are viewed as an isolated person in society. Also I think it encourages people to see you as capitalist not as the labour movement." and Themba: "creating an elite, only info on globalisation is good, I don't want to leave the masses behind I can share my skills but the system should change". (student interviews, July 2003)
(Interviews/Demographic data and interviews 2002/2003)

Towards the end of 2002 a number of participants met in a focus group as part of this research culminating from discussions that had been developing over the year. Whilst this meeting was initially facilitated by the Workers College participants were 'forced' to begin to take over the process by the withdrawal of this facilitation and identification of individuals from the IWLP to step into this role. Participants identified key areas and then divided into groups to work on different areas. This continued into 2003 where a three-day workshop was facilitated by participant representatives that took a broad array of learning and environmental issues into account in formulating plans to engage institutions and civil society.(Focus group workshop November 2002)

An extract from the introduction to the minutes of this workshop demonstrate these new initiatives:

FOCUS WORKSHOP PART TIME DEGREE HELD ON THE 20-23 MARCH

20 MARCH 2003

The workshop started at 20h00 with the total number of 36 people attending. The program was introduced and adopted by the group without changes. Sub committees began reporting back on their work. Four sub-committees were dealing with the following:

- *Transformation*
- *Organizational linkages*

- *Commitment and accountability*
- *Course content and R.P.L.*

Thabo Gcabasha, a participant of the IWLP discusses the difficulties of creating effective representation of the IWLP at the University “*The question of representation has to be looked at in order to establish both the levels of relationships between the project and the university authorities as well as the general student body, to understand the linkages of these structures. In terms of the IWLP representation of students takes different form to that of the institution and general students. The IWLP participants have a responsibility outside the institution to their organisations from communities, labour movement, political parties and workplaces, over and above their responsibilities to the IWLP and the institution. The institutions’ structures are bureaucratic and in most cases rigid. The senate as the most superior structure in terms of decision-making is far removed from the IWLP representatives. The IWLP meetings are limited to the staff of the university involved as lecturers and administrators of the project, and even the management committee is not accessible to them. This makes it difficult for the IWLP students to have an effective influence on the running of the institution. The members of the senate and management’ do not sit in on meetings involving IWLP, which means that issues that are raised in these meetings will have to be referred to these structures for further deliberations and decision thereafter. The student representative council is the only officially recognised body of students in the institution. This raises a question regarding the significance of the role the student representatives of the IWLP play and their ability to influence transformation of the institution under the circumstances.*” (Research process input July 2003)

The above discussions reflect some of the problems emerging around authority dependence and the curriculum and nature of the degree and institution, as well as the conflicts caused by tensions between different interests as they are expressed through the broader programme and its context.

2. Participation And Experience

Participants may volunteer to become involved in different aspects of College programmes. A number of participants have become involved in research projects undertaken by the college which have involved a mentoring component as well as planning and conducting research, facilitating on action research projects involving shop stewards learning to conduct research in their workplaces, and in turn mentoring these shop stewards. The research that this paper reports is another such example. IWLP participants have also become involved in a series of community projects and in a few instances more recently begun to raise issues from their own communities or communities in which they are involved in an attempt to developed structured development and/or capacity initiatives. Other participants have become involved in education projects in Southern Africa and domestically as well as beginning to play an active role in the College diplomas. Approximately 25% of the participants are currently directly involved with these other college initiatives on an ongoing basis. For many the

constraints of work and studying make this level of involvement difficult. This is regrettable as such involvement creates quite a different experience of the IWLP and assists in the acquisition of generic skills such as facilitation and research. These skills are experientially based and unaccredited. All participants who complete the IWLP will graduate with the same qualification. Even in an RPL initiative the bureaucratic nature of achieving accreditation through recognition is often prohibitive. The research that this paper reports is an example of such participant involvement.

3. Critical Content

In consultation with participants the college has developed two modules that were accepted by the University senate as part of university curriculum and have facilitated these modules in the winter semester. The modules are Developmental Activism, and Activism in an Information Age. These modules draw heavily on the experiences of participants and have both skills as well as theoretical components. Discussions of these winter school modules during focus group sessions tend to suggest a much stronger feeling of ownership on the part of participants than in the case of other courses attended. There was a commonly held view that the particular modules should be accessible to the general student body as an option to accumulate credit points towards their own degrees as this would provide a vehicle for exchange allowing these students to become more familiar with the experiences and knowledge held by the IWLP participants and at the same time contribute towards developing a culture of activism and social justice that in the opinion of many seemed completely absent amongst other University students. It would also provide a vehicle for the IWLP participants to learn more of the experiences of young students in tertiary education who in many instances it was felt, have grown up in a very different political culture to their own *“we sit in their courses why should they not sit in ours.”* It was also suggested that these initiatives are, as a principal and in practice, an important way to influence the curriculum of the university and some of the values that seem inherent to it.

The IWLP participants feel that they are not part of the general student body at the university separated by age, background and experience. They see themselves as coming from a different class to the rest of the university students. All but two of the participants who were interviewed indicate that they are not comfortable at the university for a range of reasons that essentially create barriers between themselves and the institution and general student body such as language, culture, class in relation to background and culture. The two that indicate they are comfortable still however view the institution and general student body in an ‘us and them’ way. *Themba: “I feel UND is for high class people and I am not comfortable because I am learning so I can contribute to the working class struggle. I am studying about what I am doing they are not. I have practical experience, they have theoretical knowledge.” Thabo: “Its difficult to relate to mainstream students due to our different backgrounds, wave length and understanding of social issues. I take studies more seriously than they seem to, culturally they are different to us.”* (student interviews: July 2003)

The level of informal interaction differs from group to group; the first group of IWLP participants have had more interaction than the newest group through shared classes and a more active approach to engaging the general student body. Where students have taken classes with mainstream students they have sometimes had study groups and report positively from the exchange. Recently a group of student made contact with the Student Representative Council (SRC) at the University and helped in setting up the SRC elections. The group seem to have gained from this an increased sense of value to student body and felt they had positively contributed to the institution through their experiences

Most acknowledge that the university attempts to accommodate adult learners but is technical in its approach. *Israel: "they accommodate us in access to facilities after hours and attendance once a week, workload, deadlines and assessment."* (Student interviews: July 2003) Participants feel that this accommodation does not extend to taking on board of the perspectives and values they feel they have come to represent in this process.

Liberal Course Content In The Frame Work Of Critical Engagement

To return to the theme of liberal instruction in a context of critical institutional engagement both positive and negative tendencies emerge from the data. Many opinions expressed a more in depth and refined understanding of social processes. This largely refers to communicative forms of knowledge although responses also at times touch on a view of self in the world suggesting some changes in emancipatory knowledge forms

Thabo: "my understanding of social concepts (has improved) I am able to put meaning to concepts we are dealing with. I now know more about the political structures in the country and how it links to global communities. It has broadened my understanding of indigenous and global economics, and I understand shortfalls of policies like GEAR." He also says: "IWLP has changed me little I see myself as a political activist advancing the struggle to better the majority. I see world differently I can link relationships of countries politically and economically. I can also see the difference between the have and the have not's, the power of the individual and the manipulation of the powerless masses. When I got involved with IWLP there were issues I took for granted especially power of capital. I used to be conscientised of the power capital has and its influence on development in different countries and the way powerful countries manipulate the less powerful"

Lindi: "my participation has changed the way I view things as I did not see myself as having power to challenge the status quo at all levels of society, now I am prepared to take up challenges for change."

Pat: "today I see the world differently, workers are the people to liberate the minds of cast majority of disadvantaged people. Combining our knowledge with those of elders who did not attend to such institutes will lead to a brighter future of our generation. "

It was difficult to isolate different forms (practical, communicative or emancipatory) of knowledge to specific elements of the programme but commentary around teaching and learning methods did tend to suggest that emancipatory forms of knowledge were not often explored directly in the curriculum, rather emerging more as a function of

institutional interactions. One area of concern raised a number of times was a need for greater focus on practical knowledge in course modules that directly impact on how participants perform in different areas of trade union work. Labour law is a specific example here, although it is part of the curriculum to be completed these feelings can be traced back to the motivation of many participants to come onto the programme as an attempt to find answers to problems being confronted by unions in terms of their inability to cope with the changing nature of the labour market and union roles in post apartheid South Africa. It is of course too early to make a complete evaluation as to the impact of the programme as no participant has yet completed it however the tensions between the curriculum values and the critical framework of institutional interactions are apparent.

It is apparent that these tensions perform a function of facilitating reflection on self in the world. Participants demonstrate awareness of the potential impact of the university on how they see themselves

Gladys: "see myself as a professional after completion of my studies but need to be cautious about how I use the knowledge I have and abandon the interests of my class"

Nomusa: "they are creating an elite, only information on globalisation is good, I don't want to leave the masses behind I can share my skills but the system should change".

Sister: "it has changed my understanding and made me able to be alert to the dangers of being co-opted into other peoples or class ideologies."

Influences of incorporation

The data also reveals that to some extent the very act of accumulating knowledge can have an incorporationist effect. This is an area of enquiry that surfaced in the research process and requires further attention. Through the incorporation of knowledge and skills gained from the university, participants approach to other people has changed in their interactions. The tone of responses in interaction seems more deliberative or more negatively stated, more passive. This is not simply a function of this particular knowledge however as tendencies toward directing conflict through institutions of accommodation as the CCMA is a general trend in the labour movement as a whole which has since 1995 tended to increasingly deploy resources in these institutionally moderated forms.

"If people were faced with a choice in 1985 between a law course and a politics course more comrades would have chosen the politics now everyone wants the law course." (A Pillay Focus Group A, May 2003) When probing around statements like on reflection the reasons given were twofold, in that the political imperative had passed as well as that the skills related to legal competencies tended to make people feel better about themselves, i.e. it impacts on self image. A potential explanation, which requires verification, is that during the racially exclusive system political education tended to serve this purpose of the development of self-image and identity in the face of a system designed to tell people they were inferior. The external reference point for valuing these different forms of knowledge has shifted from being external to the system to internal reference points. Skills have come to be emphasized above perspective and debate. Labour continuously refers to capacity building as the focus has shifted from systemic solutions to problem

solving as a means to service membership and retain numbers as opposed to effecting class liberation.

Lindi: "to an extent my knowledge has impacted on the employers, because before I used to get angry with them without establishing where the problem emanated, now I get to the root cause then deal with it."

Alan: "I have learnt to be calm against my enemy but destroyed tactical by thinking not by arm struggle."

Mano: "In negotiations on conditions of service and wages, I can argue a point without becoming emotional."

Students also have changed their approach to dealing with issues, they are more technically inclined than before depending heavily on verified information and consider positions. This may mean that they are becoming more impartial to the workers cause as they become more familiar with the dynamic political, social and economic forces that exist.

Moses: "I have been able explore and better understand power so I understand power struggles better."

Protas: "I am more critical when taking a position, I look at cultures and diversity differently (than before)."

Douglas: "I have developed negotiation skills, I prepare beforehand such as check stats before negotiating wages, try to collect information before taking an action." He also says: "I am changed. I can listen to other people. I developed a culture of respecting other peoples beliefs. I was a stereotype person now I am flexible."

The above statements do not all speak to systemic accommodation, but certainly indicate a tendency that has surfaced in the absence of a clear political alternative that is widely held as a means of dealing with social crises confronting South Africa. These issues may also be related to the tensions, described elsewhere, between self-development and commitment to the constituencies who are the intended beneficiaries of the programme. The continuous process of individual assessment and having to perform academically will quite naturally focus participants on individual academic performance as opposed to collective responsibilities as they try to 'jump through the hoops' of curriculum.

In conclusion to this section it is necessary to reflect on the question, why not focus on trade union skills alone and form or participate in a different qualification with this as its focus? Various interactions and interviews dealt with this as a subtext and a few themes emerge. Firstly in many ways it sets up an interaction based on preaching to the converted. The process of the formal qualification then becomes its own focus and such reduces the need and focus on institutional transformation. It follows that the opportunity to engage on many levels around transforming higher education would be reduced. Critical engagement requires a concrete problem within the learning environment that may be absent were there to be a pure trade union focus. The emancipation of self through the realization of responsibility to the historical process possibly requires an experiential base in relation to the immediate conditions of the learning process. From the particular perspective of RPL the attempt to demonstrate the value of experiential and

indigenous knowledge to participants, their constituencies as well as to external social formations would not be served by ‘playing a home game as opposed to an away fixture.’

Curriculum

Curriculum design and teaching methodology

Lack of recognition of experiences gained through union and political struggles. They view the method of teaching as problematic mostly because it is not a method that they have received instruction in before as it is what the individual takes from the lectures and applies in assessment. The method more comfortable to them is one where an issue is presented for discussion and various positions developed as a group rather than as individuals without any interaction.

Miriam: “the learning method that best suits me is participatory learning that makes me feel part of what is being taught”.

Thabo: “I find it best to think for myself and engage in discussion so I understand better.”

Most students state that study groups are the best way for them to understand the work

Israel: “a study group is the best way for me to understand as I focus better and gain confidence”

Students express frustration at tutors that don’t value this approach and view it as a western approach to learning and they also don’t value the information gained through this method. Their preferred approach relates to the way that knowledge is transferred in the labour movement and during the political struggle based on participation and sharing experiences.

Douglas Mambo gives an example of experience not recognised by the university: “We are like bush legal advisors although this is informal, but have all the information that is needed”. This information that he refers to was gained through the sharing of workers experiences of negotiation and representation.

Sandile: “I think learning is about interaction and sharing ideas.”

No forum to express their experiences and because not documented are not valued by the university.

Gladys: “since my experiences are not documented, they cannot be useful at the university they therefore become redundant.

Milton: “The curriculum should first identify needs of the people and they should form part of the decisionmaking process.”

Nomusa: “documented information only is accepted that suits the curriculum not always in line with your ideology”

“The degree focuses on the world of work and the people, processes, organisations and institutions involved in production. The world of work is perceived not only in terms of the factory floor, but also within the local, national and, importantly, the global context.” (evaluation report 2000)

In structuring this programme, cognisance was taken of the specific interests and needs of adult learners who are either shop stewards or union officials and who are expected to operate in a particular work environment. Most participants feel their involvement on the programme to have broadened their understanding of the context that labour struggle

operates in socially, economically and politically. However, they indicate that the curriculum is not flexible; “The curriculum should be open to needs of the learner and not dictated by the learning environment” says Sandile, “I could contribute a lot firstly I am a worker I know what workers strive for, modules or curriculum should be able to address the need of workers.” (student interviews, July 2003) According to learners, they do not have any direct input in the curriculum design Milton: “The curriculum should first identify needs of the people and they should form part of the decision making process.” However, so far they have found the courses useful for their context. They feel exposed to new ideas and new debates especially around the transforming nature of global capitalism.

Again tensions are apparent in curriculum selection that reflect differing expectations of RPL based access, i.e. is it assessed against learner needs or external standards.

Whilst a consultation processes around curriculum selection is touched on above it is important to stress that selection happens on a group basis and individuals can not select a module. This is for practical reasons of funding as teaching most often happens in an interaction between a lecturer and the IWLP cohorts and not in general student classes even though they may be the same course. More generally though the actual course choices are constrained by what is offered by the university, with the exception of course that are developed by the College and run in the winter school semester. As such participants are exposed to a general university social science curriculum with many of the liberal traditions that accompany such a curriculum.

“A historical dimension is added through the inclusion of modules in Economic History. In order to enhance worker students’ capacity within various environments, the programme offers an approach, which considers theories and their applications. This is in line with ongoing curriculum reform within the faculty, which is increasingly stressing problem solving and applications to real life situations. Although not all modules have a direct bearing on the workplace, learners are encouraged, through assignments, to seek application to their own particular work contexts.” (Evaluation report 2000) While some participants responses are in line with this review, they refer to technical aspects of application; Douglas: “I have developed negotiation skills, I prepare beforehand such as check statistics before negotiating wages, I try to collect information before taking an action.” (student interviews: July 2003) Participants contradict the the review of the application of institutional learning, claiming it is a two way process in that they also apply of their prior knowledge to their academic studies. Nomusa: “What we are studying we knew but could not put in the right concepts and theories... We could not relate theories but knew what it means practically.” Pat: “ (the IWLP) allows me to reflect on my experiences, but this is minimal... When I write assignments I draw on my experiences and combine them with what I got from the University.” (student interviews: July 2003)

Language

Attention is also paid throughout the project to the ongoing development of generic study skills, including language skills, which are also of broadly vocational application. The principal language of learning and instruction is English. The use of other languages, where this is clearly appropriate, is encouraged, e.g. in language courses and where such use can facilitate understanding of academic content. (review 2000) This is clearly not the case; participants mentioned that they are instructed on using academic language rather than practical language. This opinion is supported by the tutor of the Academic Learning English module, Roy Dale that says “I would like to see the course revised to more professional and less academic writing because you only write an academic essay once for the university while in most of your practical work you have to write reports and formal letters and prepare arguments for cases as some of you are already doing”. Their feeling is that, the institution is still emphasizing on promoting of capitalism to use big words or to talk like a white person. Participants are even struggle to change accent to fit in or to prove that they communicate better in an academic language. Most say they are able to communicate in English but it would be easier to participate and do assignments if it was in their mother tongue. Most feel that they would excel in the programme if it was in their language, time would be saved as most translate from Zulu to English. Some feel that the tutors could use simpler language to explain concepts. Performance in exams would also improve as the translating from one language to another takes time. One refers to limited participation because language barrier; A participant refers to limited participation because of the language barrier: “Sometimes it is intimidating to see you are very low in standard of communicating and you end up keeping quiet.”

Teaching and learning methodology

The research has revealed different views from the participants with regard to their experiences at the University in relation to power issues created through the dynamic of teaching and learning. The majority of participants indicated various concerns on teaching methods used at the University. The teaching method used is often described as “a banking system”, obviously a term coined in their discussions as students, indicating that some collective thought had gone into the methodology of the university’s teachings. This methodology is regarded as spoon feeding, and not suitable to the needs of IWLP participants that would be better served by more participatory methods.. Mirriam: “ the learning method that best suits me is participatory learning that makes me feel part of what is being taught”. Participants mentioned that this system is not capacitating them to grow further in the institution.

Also commonly mentioned is their limited independence in terms of exploring their knowledge. The participants feel that there is a lack of recognition of experiences gained through their involvement in labour and political struggles. Kuki: “Since my experiences are not documented, they cannot be useful at the university they therefore become redundant.” Their preferred approach relates to the way that knowledge is transferred in

the labour movement and during the political struggle based on participation and sharing experiences. Students express frustration at tutors that don't value this approach and view it as a western approach to learning and they also don't value the information gained through this method. Douglas gives an example of experience not recognised by the university: " We are like bush legal advisors although this is informal, but have all the information that is needed". This information that he refers to was gained through the sharing of workers experiences of negotiation and representation. (student interviews: July 2003)

In terms of teaching methodology the trade off between class room time spent in debate and analysis as opposed to progress through the curriculum is experienced more acutely in the degree programme. This is different to majority of students educational experiences and that the trade off is largely resolved in favour of university curriculum is reflective of broader power dynamics or more accurately the power conferred to institutions by the status quo through systems of accreditation. Participants view the method of teaching as problematic, partly because it is not a method that they have received instruction in but mostly because it is about individual academic pursuit based on the individual understanding the lecture, reading prescribed material and applying information they have assimilated in their assessment. The method more comfortable to them is one where an issue is presented for discussion and various positions developed as a group rather than as individuals without any interaction. . One of the participants, Sandile expresses this simply as, "I think learning is about interaction and sharing ideas, here the notion is to pass not to understand". (student interviews: July 2003)

Tutors who do not recognise participants historical background and experiences and who will not acknowledge their prior knowledge further frustrate participants. "They concentrate on what they read in books, they are unable to associate it with practical experiences because they have never been in the field. We are being further socialized to think and talk like a book." (participant comment: (Group A focus group: May 2003)

Participants criticise some tutors for not preparing themselves for the class and reading directly from the book. Participants argue that, they expect tutors to provide highlights of the subject and alternate information on the topics for discussion and are not challenged by the current teaching methods." When tutors are challenged they will claim of having degrees, honors etc. therefore they cannot be told by the participants who does not have a piece of paper." (participant comment: (Group A focus group: May 2003) Participants feel that some of the tutors are threatened by them; "Some of the tutors are scared of challenge and become defensive, reason being they are not practically experienced". (participant comment: (Group A focus group: May 2003). Other tutors are viewed as enjoying the challenge and the exchange of knowledge and experience between IWLP participants. Participants mention that some tutors are sympathetic to those participants that struggle with English and even commend some for the extra time and effort they put in by making themselves available for consultation outside of lecture times.

Miriam: " the learning method that best suits me is participatory learning that makes me feel part of what is being taught".

Thabo: "I find it best to think for myself and engage in discussion so I understand better." Most students state that study groups are the best way for them to understand the work

Israel: "a study group is the best way for me to understand as I focus better and gain confidence"

Students express frustration at tutors that don't value this approach and view it as a western approach to learning and they also don't value the information gained through this method. Their preferred approach relates to the way that knowledge is transferred in the labour movement and during the political struggle based on participation and sharing experiences.

Sandile: "I think learning is about interaction and sharing ideas."

No forum to express their experiences and because not documented are not valued by the university.

Participants clearly do not see all pedagogic endeavour as inappropriate though;

Reflections on implementation of project

Thabo Gbcashe, class representative Group A.

In this session I would like feedback on your experiences at this university over the last three years. ...We have to thank Roy - ALE - the old man; he really shaped us. We thought we knew how to write letters and respond to management but we didn't know. He really showed us how to write.

Then to thank Susan - ISS - she really helped us, she took us apart and then she brought us back together again. She was still young and you know we wanted to talk but she didn't limit us, she was able to guide us and to help us.

Vanessa, the troublesome, sociology - we had this thing called common sense and slowly she took us through and showed us that we had to have facts, go beyond our common sense. She was wonderful.

Group A, we were the guinea pigs, as a group we have grown and achieved something. But there is still a lot to be done. There are still those individuals who are sucked into the system of thinking as individuals and not as a group members.

(Minutes of evaluation meeting Feb 2003)

This tends to indicate that the experiences of both participant and staff are mediated by their approach to the programme further illustrating the relative inadequacy of policy to deal with issues of RPL and the need to rather focus on praxis.

Assessment

All modules are assessed by means of a semester mark and an exam. The precise manner of assessment varies between modules. Many modules utilize continuous assessment. Learners are required to complete a combination of assignments, projects and some times tests. An exam must be completed for each module. Assessment has a major controlling impact over teaching and learning methods. These areas are discussed more fully in the research report.

Some participants are happy with the current form of assessment being tests, assignments and exams as they see no alternative but note that continuous assessment relieves pressure at exam time. Some want more interactive methods of assessment such as oral presentation and participation in debates. Others feel they have to regurgitate what is 'fed' to them to pass and it is not based on understanding or interaction with the issues and that the whole approach to teaching is based on the methods of assessment. Sandile: "the notion is to pass not to understand". (student interviews: July 2003)

Curriculum, teaching and assessment conclusion

When stepping back during a discussion amongst participant researchers it emerged that the nature of teaching and curriculum play a critical function in the overall critical engagement at an institutional level. The problems and frustrations experienced by participants come to represent sites of struggle and as such add great value to the critical process of engagement and the experiential learning that comes from this. One researcher commented along the lines that if we got everything we wanted relating to trade unions and our own experiences we would become neutralised

IWLP impacting on participant current life and work experience

Another key area that has emerged is the central role of identity in mediating the different conflicts between demands and content of formal curriculum, educational institutions the organisations that are represented and the less tangible commitments of students to the broader development of society and themselves.

Participants experience pressure from all sides, at work, in their family life and in their studies. They often state that it is difficult to study whilst working and having family and community commitments. Many feel that the institution is not accommodating enough with regard to this. Participants are expected to perform their duties at work, home and the community and find time to study. They are expected to submit assignments on time, and also to give input in tutorials. Participants find meeting these requirements very difficult and added to that challenge is their language struggle with academic English.

Impact Of The IWLP On Work Experiences

One of the main purposes behind the creation of the IWLP was the crisis that is being experienced by unions in the mass departure of leadership to corporate and government positions. During interviews and focus groups with course participants fairly mixed experiences emerged as to their own union responses to the programme. If grouped thematically, where participants were shop stewards co-workers tended to have a fairly positive to neutral view of the process, although in number of cases, where the participants were trade union officials, there was a somewhat more hostile perception of their participation. Interestingly in the case of the latter group the responses tended to differ depending on the status of people in the organization, as evident below.

Mano: "the people I represent have also changed due to the knowledge I have because now they treat me with respect and are confident that I can help them through the problems they encounter. I get paid time off to attend school as well as study leave in between exams I also have access to resources available at work like computers even though I don't use a computer at work."

Lindikaya: "my employer responded well to my involvement in the IWLP in the kind of support I receive and compromises they are prepared to make to accommodate me."

A: "Some people view me as coming with new political ideas which threatens them as a result they say it will endanger the organisation. My impact varies because I am often seen as an intellectual in a higher class and others see me as a threat to them"

B: "there are those that feel threatened by information and skills I have acquired they don't see benefit but danger to their existence."

C: "It differs, in some instances I am treated as an asset, and in some instances as a threat to their position."

D: "my improved effective participation in my political organisation make certain individuals feel that I think I am acting big or becoming more important whereas the community views me as someone who is increasingly becoming more helpful."

E: "you can sometimes sense fear and insecurity from those in higher positions. So one is viewed as a threat. Sometimes others recognise your skills and need you to assist them."

F: "both positive and negative. I am seen as a threat by my superiors at work but also as a resource centre for colleagues and society."

(A-D Focus groups and July 2003 interviews)

Some participants faced such pressure from leadership in their organisations that were forced to quit the programme early. On one hand, Leadership became threatened by the new skills developed by participants, combined with elements of jealousy and fear from those that stand to lose their positions and influence. Many IWLP participants report that they challenge leadership on issues and are able to influence peers because they have become critical and are capable of thinking independently. Whilst on the other hand the organisation gains from their increased participation and their ability to engage purposefully, solve problems and represent workers more effectively.

Participants view their participation on the programme to have improved their value to their work organisations. Some say it has broadened their understanding of the context that the labour struggle operates in socially, economically and politically.

Mano: "relevant because we learn about society and how we live, applicable at work and the community, broadens understanding on issues. I have knowledge and am willing to pass it to others." (student interviews: July 2003)

Others mention skills that they have applied in the workplace.

Pat: "I have gained negotiation skills and can critical analyse a situation, it is now easier to interact with people and my participation in political structures has increased" (student interviews: July 2003)

Impact Of The IWLP On Life Experiences

The demands of the IWLP also impacts on the family life of the participants. Some say that they don't get to spend much time with their family as they leave early in the morning for work and sometimes arrive home so late after studying that the family is in bed. Several of the female participants mention that they feel they neglect the needs of their children. Other participants mention tension in the home because they are not able to perform family duties and meet family commitments.

Miriam: "affects home, I don't pay much attention to my children, their school work suffers"

Milton: "disintegrating home life as I spend much time away studying"

(student interviews: July 2003)

Others report positively on the impact of the IWLP on their family life. Some say that their relationship with their spouse has improved and they are able to help their children more with homework.

Vusi: "I can offer more help to my children with their schoolwork.

Themba: "I now give my wife more space to express her views."

(student interviews: July 2003)

Most students very involved in community activities and have a real sense of commitment to community development. Also they feel a great sense of responsibility to 'plough back' into the communities that they come from as they have experienced poverty, forced relocations and lack of access to basic services. The project has broadened the participants understanding of social and community issues and they view community struggles as linked to labour struggles. Participants are able to help communities in dealing with complicated issues and planning on how to go about tackling community problems. Dealing with social issues has since become a priority focus for some of these activists and they have taken it upon themselves to organise communities on social problems. They view the information that has been collected by the participants as crucial for community development and advancement of the struggle for social development.

Thabo: "My understanding of broader issues and my skills to relate to those that have assisted me to being able to put across clear messages when I am involved in community activities."

Vusi: "the programme has been worthwhile, I am able to give advice to the community, students, workers on matters of social development, political and economic development."

(student interviews: July 2003)

Implications for Trade Union Education and organizational form as a reflection of purpose

This particular case study of the IWLP needs to be cast against the backdrop of trade union education in South Africa. Union education has a rich experiential tradition in South Africa largely as a function of the overtly political nature of union struggles in the

70's and 80's. Linda Cooper relates this education as being located within a social movement paradigm. Such education is also fits broader conceptions of RPL in the sense of the valuing of knowledge;

“It served the dual purpose of developing skills as well as self belief through the valuing of working class experiences as providing a basis for a more equitable society.” (Cooper 1996 p3)

Cooper argues a dialectic relationship between trade union education and organizational form through the period of the 80's and into the 90's in the context of social struggle against racial capitalism. The transition period of the early 90's and the consequent political changes emerging post 1994 provide a very different context in which trade union education must function. Reintegration into the global economy has seen labour in a far more defensive stance than in the 80's. The removal of overt political oppression has to some extent diluted the generally offensive nature of union action. Most unions have experienced heavy casualties as a result of the changing nature of the labour market and intensifying global competition. A sense of pessimism has emerged, some times as a result of the inability of unions to resist the onslaught on jobs and union organization and sometimes even as a function of trade union education itself,

Some words of union members and learners are illustrative.

“I understand why things are going badly now but I can't see anyway out of this *globalization. I fear the future.*” (*Evaluation of a course on globalization*)

“The bosses have us now. Every time they want to change something its because of overseas competition. Our leaders have run away because now it is each one for himself.” (Interview July 2003)

“You see that bus. Imagine it is full of people and the bus driver falls asleep. What will happen? Some might survive, most will die or get very hurt. The union is like a bus driver who fell asleep behind the wheel”

(privitisation of metro buss services research report unpublished)

The realities of the neo liberal labour market have given rise to alternate views of this education,

“The slogan “Knowledge is Power” was previously entertained in the educational struggle for social justice. As a consequence those who officially represented the struggle attempted to get hold of that knowledge. When that knowledge was acquired the smell of the attached power was sensed. Many lost interest in turning back to address the second step in their liberating mission, namely the question of redistribution, due to the distancing that power often creates.” Lars Dahlström (2003) Unpublished paper

Most participants received their initial critical education in that very paradigm of knowledge being power. Some of the conflicts being experienced by current students

relate to that second step. Internally by virtue of their shifting location to shop floor workers and externally as some increasingly pose a threat or perceived threat as they accumulate knowledge. That there is little participation by the students 'home organisations' tends to aggravate the situation as the programme itself comes to be viewed as a locus of power and therefore a terrain for contest. The Workers College Diploma programme seems to experience similar tensions but these are not brought to bear as directly on the participants as in the case of the degree programme, but rather at an institutional level and around governance issues.

An alternate way of educating?

Nothing so revolutionary but these brief comments of union education are meant to throw up debates around alternative pedagogies that may avoid some of the incorporationist traps of the politics of knowledge. It suggests that as the nature and form of external struggle changes so the use of struggle in the critical process of experiential learning needs to change in itself. Certainly there is a need to rise above a skills based focus to union education, not by simply attempting to incorporate political debate into curriculum but perhaps by institutionalising struggle praxis in the frame work of learning.

Conclusion

The research processes broadly then tends to indicate a set of different pressures that impact on the recognition of prior learning both negatively and positively. There is some evidence of institutional accommodation as well as evidence of individual accommodation. These processes have impact on and origin in curriculum and teaching methodology as well as relations to identity and the role of the learner as an individual and making up part of broader sets of collectives. Collectives include the learning community, the students 'home organizations' and the constituencies that these organizations serve. Each of these lay claim to different elements of the learners experience and hold different expectations. As the learners have moved through these different processes these different collectives have come to view the learners differently and this feed back into their experiences and knowledge and ultimately their actions.

What this paper does not explore in sufficient depth is the dialectic relationship between these tensions and the identities of learners. This is a key consideration as herein lies the demonstration of the emancipatory impact of this particular RPL praxis using institutional engagement to develop critical social pedagogy with a particular focus on higher education.

To conclude we quote a participant researcher's evaluation of the IWLP;
"In the institution there is little but very significant impact that the project has made. Firstly, this project is the first of its kind in the country, which makes it a model to work on for the future reference. Secondly, the participants brought with themselves a wealth of practical experience, which contributed to the development of some lecturers and tutors; this has been proven by the comments that have been made by them. Thirdly, the performance and experience showed by the participants during class, as well as the introduction of accredited courses from a participant based body into the university curriculum.

What impact has the IWLP made? This is a complicated area due to different forms it takes that, be it on the individual, the organisation, community and the institution. On the individual bases the impact of the project relates to new skills learned, which contributes to being tolerant and accommodative to others' opinion and being influential during debates and discussions, which then earns the respect of others during the process.

It has broadened the understanding of broad social issues including politics and economics with its dynamics locally, regionally and global structures. It has also brought up the importance of researching in order to arrive at an informed position and give meaning to it, what is academically known as moving from a common sense to scientific method. There is also an element of negative developments that are individually based but affect the group such as losing the main focus and buying into the system and becoming individualistic in benefiting. It seems though that some of these processes are being reversed.

Lastly, the student representative council has also approached the group at some point to get information on how to run some of its business and expressed the need to work closely in dealing with issues of transformation. This linked to new initiatives to organise ourselves and decisions around a layered approach to institutional engagement promises an interesting experience based learning for us all through the rest of the year.”