

THE NEGOTIATION PROCESS FOR ESTABLISHING INDUSTRIAL LITERACY

Training providers throughout Australia are involved in establishing and conducting Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) programmes with funding from the federal Department of Employment, Education and Training (D.E.E.T.). In 1992 Maryborough Regional Education and Training Services commenced its first WELL programme. This involved a lengthy negotiation process with the local factory which is part of a multi national group of companies. This paper describes the characteristics of Maryborough, the training provider, the culture of both the provider and the industry involved and presents the argument that negotiations are most successful where the commonalities of the respective cultures meet and when training providers understand the culture of the industry with whom they are working.

Maryborough Skillshare is a community based programme funded by D.E.E.T. which targets unemployed people who are most disadvantaged in the labour market.

To increase funds for the Skillshare project and to increase training provision in the area, the Skillshare management committee formed an industry and fee for service training wing in 1991 under the umbrella of Maryborough Regional Education and Training Services (MRETS). Although staff of the industry training wing of MRETS was involved in negotiations with and training for industry Maryborough Skillshare is the term used in this paper in regard to the training provider.

Maryborough (population - 8000) has a strong industrial base in the areas of textiles and clothing, book printing, food processing and fabricated metals. In September, 1992, Maryborough had an unemployment rate of 25.2 per cent, compared to a national average of 10.5 per cent. 53.8 per cent of people left school at the age of 15 or under (A.B.S. 1986). There is a high number of adults, employed and unemployed) with low literacy skills.

No literacy audits have been conducted at the major industries. However Skillshare staff estimate that 45 per cent of participants have a literacy level of level D or under on the ALAN (Adult Literacy and Numeracy) Scales which were developed in 1990 by Patrick Griffin and Anne Forwood. In June, 1992, 23.3 per cent of Skillshare participants were classified as having "literacy level affecting employment". Skillshare literacy staff work with this target group on a one to one or small group basis. Most are from English speaking backgrounds. In 1986 only 1.7 per cent of the population of Maryborough were from non English speaking backgrounds (A.B.S 1986).

In early 1992 the manager of one of the largest industries in Maryborough (Industry X) was asked if his company would participate in a WELL programme if Skillshare was successful in its funding application to D.E.E.T. He agreed that the company name be used for the purpose of the submission but

that he would need more information about the programme before formal commitment could be given to it.

After notification in April that the funding submission was successful the manager was again approached, and after extensive and lengthy negotiations, a planning committee was formed consisting of representatives of Skillshare, management of the local factory and the relevant union. In early May Skillshare staff addressed one hundred and fifty five workers on the factory floor, of whom 29 volunteered for skills assessment for participation in "communications courses". This name was chosen on the advice of the planning committee who indicated that workers may be threatened by any association with "illiteracy". The ALAN scales were used as a framework on which workplace assessment materials were grouped and as a reporting framework. The first course commenced in September.

From the first approach to industry until the present (October, 1992)

constant negotiations have taken place - more than were originally assumed by Skillshare to be necessary - about such issues as:

- * the commitment of the industry to the programme,
- * the occurrence of training in worker or industry time,
- * which training staff were to be involved,
- * confidentiality and
- * union representatives not always being notified by management of meeting.

Outside the formal negotiations other issues such as training staff dress and coffee breaks were also raised. On such detail the acceptance by industry and the continuation of the programme was based. The course content was never questioned.

It became apparent that the negotiating parties came from very different workplace cultures and had different expectations and assumptions. The culture of Industry X is profit/production or "bottom line" driven and involves working to precise timing/time clocks, a respect for work rather than education, and a concept of trainers as either people who have risen through factory ranks or who fit the business/industry consultant image. The culture does not involve risk taking on the part of workers. A mistake can be both dangerous and costly. It is not a fluid culture. In addition there is a male predominance in both management and the factory floor.

The culture of Skillshare involves instant response to labour market changes, flexibility in programme design and manner of staff with clients. Staff are encouraged to be non-judgemental and to focus on the individual. There is a consultative and collaborative approach to decision making. Females predominate in management and training staff, all of whom have tertiary qualifications and an understanding of and commitment to the principles of adult learning which include:

- * Adult learning is student centred in its approach.

- * The learning programme is relevant to the learner's life experience.
- * The tutor and the learner negotiate the programme and share the responsibility for the successful completion.
- * Learning is open - ended.
- * Adults learn best when anxiety is minimal, freedom to experiment is encouraged and when individual learning styles are taken into account.

The differences in the workplace cultures, and the time it took to understand these differences, delayed the negotiation process. The production driven bottom line of industry was the major factor in convincing them of the value of the programme. Company management recognised the positive, longterm impact of the training on the company's "bottom line" and hence, its value to their organisation. However they were concerned about the "down time" or the lost production in having 16 workers off the factory floor for a total of 105 hours. Training staff, convinced of the long term advantages of potential productivity increases, took time to understand the short term losses calculated by Industry X.

The industry's concern for loss of productivity also evident a week before training was to start when the manager of Industry X said that training had to take place in workers time and not factory time, despite the understanding of the co-ordinator of the programme that it had been already agreed that training would take place in industry time. Further negotiations resulted in training occurring half in workers' time, half in industry time. Only 3 workers withdrew from the courses once this was announced to them.

Adherence to time clock regulation (another productivity means) caused criticism of skills assessors who did not take breaks between 8 by one hour assessments each daily, but who drank coffee as they worked. The culture of industry embraces work free coffee breaks and does not associate simultaneous coffee drinking and work. At Maryborough Skillshare formal coffee breaks are not taken. The Skillshare assessors who worked efficiently and effectively and who were concentrating on creating a non

threatening and comfortable environment for the workers they were assessing did not realize they were being perceived by management as unproductive.

The culture of industry has a strict dress code which differentiates workers and management. Industry trainers dress like managers and tend to be male. Our staff took care to be tidy and comfortable but were seen not to dress to industry expectations. The comment was made that "You need to look and sound like the people you are talking to." When Skillshare staff suggested that it was necessary for participants to feel at ease with the trainers the industry representative explained that management and workers have the same stereotype of trainers.

We have not researched the expectations of workers in regard to trainers but have abided by the dress code of management to facilitate the progress

of the programme. What we may well be doing is aligning ourselves with management in the power relationships within the industry. If so, we are not providing an anxiety free learning situation for the adult learners. We may be increasing the stress level of the learners which slows or delays learning. This requires further investigation by Skillshare. It is interesting to note that the manager of Industry X commented that he had a problem with Skillshare staff because they are "all teachers". Consultation has been an inherent part of Skillshare's culture from its inception. Although industries are increasingly aware of the value of consultation we often had to make sure that true consultation was occurring. After one planning meeting about which the union representative was not informed the Skillshare representative had to remind the manager that representation of all parties was essential, indeed an obligation of the contract.

These examples of the areas of potential misunderstanding indicate that differences in workplace cultures can lengthen or even threaten negotiations. In the Maryborough situation, successful agreements were made and the training is underway without problems. Industry Management has indicated commitment to a further programme. The differences of cultures did not seriously impede negotiations because there were common grounds shared by the industry and Skillshare. These areas included commitment to raising skill levels of workers, the accountability of both parties (the industry to its head office, Skillshare to D.E.E.T. and to its local committee), commitment to excellence, awareness of image in the community and knowledge of and response to award restructure.

The cultures of workplaces are different. Trainers and co-ordinators of WELL programmes need to understand and respond to the industry with whom they work to gain the respect and commitment of managers and workers who share preconceptions of "outsiders" to industry. Training providers need to be prepared to compromise on some issues but not in vital areas of confidentiality, respect for workers as individuals, adult learning principles and their own standards for training.

The second WELL programme that Maryborough Skillshare will conduct will be influenced by what we have learnt from the culture of this particular industry, from the workers and from the trainers. It was a programme for which the manager of Industry X was prepared to take risks. We are convinced that he will see the direct benefits to industry that come through having a more literate workforce. The following recommendations will be adapted by Maryborough Skillshare and may assist other training providers in their own negotiations with industry:

- * That terms and concepts be defined very clearly at the outset of negotiations particularly confidentiality, consultation and assessment processes.
- * That significant aspects of the negotiations be recorded and signed and that no assumptions be made by either party.

- * That industry managers be briefed on the principles of adult learning.

- * That we investigate the expectations of workers in terms of dress and attitudes of trainers and discuss the results with the planning committee which includes management and union representatives.

- * That all Skillshare staff involved in industry negotiations and training be briefed on the expectations, norms and culture of the industry with whom they are working.

- * That more representatives of the industries with whom MRETS is involved be invited to join the Skillshare management committee to improve industries mutual understanding of our respective cultures.

- * That any areas of potential misunderstanding be clarified as soon as they arise.

- * That the loss in production to industries in having workers off the factory floor be appreciated by training staff

- * That coffee only be partaken of in coffee breaks!

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