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Critical Literacy and Beyond: Lessons Learned from Students and Workers in a Vocational Program and on the Job

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This article reports a study of students' experiences in a community college vocational program in banking and finance and the jobs the students got and lost in the data center of a bank. The study is situated in current concerns about the presumed literacy problems of North American workers and the relationship between skills and competitiveness in the global economy. The discontinuities between such concerns and the situations of the vocational students in this study are discussed, as are calls for "functional context" and "critical" literacy programs. An argument is made for the educational, social, and political importance of studies of work in juxtaposition to studies of schooling. LITERACY, VOCATIONAL EDUCATION, SCHOOLING AND WORK

Work and the Skills Crisis

The most recent of several educational crises has to do with American workers. We are told by a variety of commission reports, surveys of employers, and popular articles that literacy demands are increasing with the advent of new technologies and new ways of organizing work, that American workers are poorly educated and even illiterate, and that business and industry should make haste to provide the training that people do not get in school and college. Here is a sampling of these recent concerns:

More and more, American employers will no longer enjoy the luxury of selecting from a field of workers with strong basic skills. The demand for labor will create opportunities for those who are less skilled; the disadvantaged will move up the labor queue and be hired in spite of obvious skill deficiencies. [Carnevale et al. 1988]

Already the skills deficit has cost businesses and taxpayers $20 billion in lost wages, profits and productivity. For the first time in American history, employers face a proficiency gap in the work force so great that it threatens the well-being of hundreds of U.S. companies. [Gorman 1988]

The years of picky hiring are over. Vicious competition for all sorts of workers—entry-level, skilled, seasoned—has begun. Employers must look to the nonmale, the nonwhite, the nonyoung. There may be a push for noncitizens as well: Over the next 10 years . . . only 15% of work force entrants will be native-born white males. [Ehrlich and Garland 1988]
On the basis of such concerns, a new industry has sprung up of training services and literacy programs designed specifically for work, including guides to help employers assess the skills of workers and design and offer training programs and curricula. They have titles like these: The Bottom Line: Basic Skills in the Workplace; Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want; Literacy at Work: The Workbook for Program Developers; Strategic Skill Builders for Banking (Hull 1993).

Beliefs about workers' skill deficits do not exist in isolation, of course, but can be seen as part of a dominant discourse on schooling, the now-familiar fears that American schools are failing, that American children are not doing as well in the classroom as their counterparts in other industrialized countries, and that, consequently, our businesses and industries cannot compete globally. In this panic-laden atmosphere, educators are urged to get tough and get back to basics, and these same admonitions are applied to literacy providers and vocational trainers. There is also the frankly expressed desire to connect schooling with work as closely as possible, making sure that whatever is learned in the classroom can transfer directly to the job. Although similar concerns are almost always operative for some students, teachers, and schools, America's current economic woes and worries about competition make these viewpoints particularly potent and widespread at the moment.

If this is the dominant rhetoric, there is also a counter discourse, as people begin to question apocalyptic views of illiterate workers. From the perspective of labor, for example, Sarmiento has argued that the real problem in workplaces is not literacy but outmoded forms of work organization in the mold of Frederick Taylor (Sarmiento 1991; Sarmiento and Kay 1990). Drawing on his ethnographic research in a wire and cable factory and also in an electronics company, Darrah has demonstrated that whatever skills workers have or lack, incentives and disincentives in the workplace influence whether workers will employ those skills (Darrah 1990, 1993). A complementary counter discourse is offered by critical educational theorists. Drawing on the work of, among others, John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and Antonio Gramsci, these writers question the wisdom of linking education to marketplace imperatives, looking instead for a moral and civic rationale for schooling. Giroux and McLaren, for example, want an education that "aims at developing critical citizens and reconstructing community life by extending the principles of social justice to all spheres of economic, political, and cultural life" (1989:xxii). And they speak of "learning for empowerment" (p. xxiii), whereby education draws upon the diversity of resources that students bring to school, rather than promoting an uncritical adoption of "values consistent with industrial discipline and social conformity" (p. xvii).

Basic skills, critical skills. Preparation for jobs, preparation for citizenship in a democracy. As an educator and researcher and from a personal as well as professional point of view, I have more sympathy for the
philosophy and goals of critical theorists than I do for boosters of basic and high-tech skills for an illiterate populace. However, in the research I am reporting in this article, I have tried not merely to take sides and dig in but also to let my understandings of this opposition be informed by the experiences and perceptions of the people who are talked about and referred to in commission reports and theoretical treatises. I have wanted to see how students and workers view and experience training programs, their jobs, and our literacy crisis, letting their perspectives inform and temper my evaluation of the skills controversy. So let us turn, then, to a group of African American women and other people of color who enrolled in a vocational training program in banking and finance because, as many of them pointed out, "You know Mr. Parker? Well, he'll get you a job."

A Study of Women, Vocational Education, and Work

My colleagues and I set out to study how people experience vocational-education programs and to see what light those programs, and the jobs that people get as a result of vocational training, could shed on current claims that American workers need but lack literate skills. Although a great deal of research attention is focused these days on vocational education, much of that work is quantitative and top-down, judging, for example, the outcomes of programs as measured by drop-out rates and job placement (Klaus 1990). However, we chose to focus on people rather than programs, or on programs as they are experienced by people. Employing an ethnographic approach, we used initial observational time, as well as previous research, to identify critical issues and key events and then used multiple methods to focus on and study these issues and events.

For a little over three years we studied a vocational program in banking and finance. As one data-collection method, we gathered life histories, focusing on students' previous education and work, their views about their future jobs in banks, and also their beliefs about the importance of literacy in work. We also conducted follow-up interviews with most participants after they had gotten and, oftentimes, lost jobs in banks. Some of the interviews took place again at the vocational program, but others were conducted in participants' homes or in nearby coffee shops and restaurants. In addition there were extensive interview sessions with the teacher of the banking and finance program. Mr. Parker was quite supportive of this research, representing our research team as trustworthy to the students in his program and making it possible for us to interview on-site and to videotape classroom instruction. He also helped us gain access to banks and bank personnel. He seemed to take the research as an opportunity to be reflective about his work as a former bank vice-president and now a vocational-education teacher. Feeling rather unsupported in his community college, he viewed our interest in his program as an affirmation of his teaching. He
said we were "putting words to his music," and he welcomed me and other members of our research group with unusual good humor and eagerness. Additional data on the vocational program included field notes and videotapes of classroom instruction. We observed lectures and discussions and, on rare occasions, were called upon to supply part of that instruction, teaching students what we knew about job interviews, for example, or about writing resumes. We also observed laboratory sessions on machine calculation and simulated bank-telling, and we videotaped in each of these settings.

Our other interest was, of course, the employer's angle. On several occasions I was able to interview the personnel manager of Bank of the Pacific, the primary employer of students from the banking and finance program. Mrs. Lavelle came to the program regularly to test and interview students for jobs as proof operators (explained below), and I videotaped a number of these interview sessions. When several students in the cohort we were studying failed the proof-operation test, I served as a tutor, helping students to analyze what was required by the test and to practice it. At a bank in a different city, I myself took several proof-operation tests and was interviewed for a part-time job as an operator. Finally, several representatives from local banks sit on an advisory board to the vocational program; we attended these advisory meetings and interviewed some of the other personnel managers of local banks.

I was able to visit the proof-operation center that serves the multiple branches of Bank of the Pacific and employs most of the graduates of Mr. Parker's program. There I interviewed the manager on two occasions, got tours of the center, and collected some of the documents that proof operators use in their work. I was not able to spend as much time as I wanted in this center or in branch banks, nor could I videotape in these workplaces. (Cf. Darrah 1990, who critiques the notion of a "grand tour.") Despite Mr. Parker's intercession and our multiple letters and requests, the managers of Bank of the Pacific would not approve a longer-term study of the literacy requirements and the organization of work.3

The Program: "You Know Mr. Parker? Well, He'll Get You a Job."

The Banking and Finance program is part of Gateway College, an urban community college in the Bay Area of northern California, which serves mostly people of color: African Americans (33 percent of enrolled students), Asian Americans (21 percent), Hispanic Americans (9 percent), Filipino Americans (4 percent), and Native Americans (1 percent). At the time we studied the program, there were proportionately more African American (around 60 percent of enrollment from 1988 to 1991) and Asian American (30 percent) students, with only 1 or 2 percent European Americans. The program is "open entry/open exit," which means that a student can begin at any time and leave at any time, presumably for a bank job. A student might, then, come to the program,
stay three weeks, and be sent to a job in a local bank. As Mr. Parker was fond of saying, many students already know most of what they need to know in order to get entry-level work in banks; at this point they just require some polishing, some confidence building. A few students cycle out of the program when they and their instructor realize they cannot read well enough to pass the proof-operation tests recently instituted by local banks as part of the application process. But most students stay in the program at least six or eight weeks, at which point they are sent on jobs.

Most of the students—about 95 percent—were women. Some of the African American women were older, not having worked or been in school for a while, and hoped now to hone their skills and reenter the workforce. Others were younger—19 and 20 years old and just out of high school—some of them the single parents of very young children. These women too were eager for a leg up in the working world; they wanted to get off government assistance and make a better life for their children. Most of the other students were young Asian American women—predominantly Vietnamese and Chinese—many of whom still lived at home with their parents. Some of these students were looking for part-time work to support themselves while they went to school or to supplement another job. In the class there were also a few Hispanic American women, African American men, and Asian American men.

Some students enroll in Banking and Finance to get one more certificate selected from the community-college smorgasbord of possible vocations—another piece of paper, they say, to give them some insurance in an unpredictable job market. Others come because they are required to by some outside agency: they must show proof of enrollment to receive government assistance, for example, or they have failed a military entrance exam and thus have to go back to school for some credits. Still others come because they are pursuing a two-year degree and think Banking and Finance will round out their studies in useful ways. But the great majority of students who were enrolled during our study were there for a different reason: they had heard that at the program's end its participants get a job. As the instructor explained and as I heard time and again from students, the draw of the program was the chance to work, and it happened like this:

“I got a job.”
“Where you workin’?”
“At the bank.”
“How’d you get that job?”
“Oh, I got that job through Banking and Finance. Yeah, you know, Mr. Parker? Go down and see him; he’ll get you a job.”

The Banking and Finance program consisted of lectures and discussions in which the instructor covered some 15 “modules.” For example,
Mr. Parker presented information on banking careers and opportunities, explaining what jobs one could expect to apply for at a bank. He spent most time, however, on banking procedures and operations—how to open and close as a teller and the various customer transactions, like issuing and paying traveler's checks and opening new accounts. The course ended with interviewing techniques and employee-employer relations. Each of these lecture/discussions had a laboratory: students practiced telling, proof-operating, calculating by machine, and interviewing; the labs were structured such that they allowed modes of interaction similar to apprenticeship learning (cf. Collins et al. 1989). All of the activities took place in an atmosphere charged with immediacy and real-life applicability. Frequently the instructor related concepts to the world beyond the classroom, through stories culled from his own experiences in corporate life and through hypothetical examples of what students could expect to encounter in a matter of weeks, say, as they stood before an irate customer who had no identification but nonetheless insisted that her check be cashed. In doing so, the teacher, who is African American, relied on characteristic black speech styles and speech events (Kochman 1981; Smitherman 1977), and he did so apparently with great effectiveness for many of the students.

A large portion of time (a two-hour class each afternoon four times a week) was devoted to learning to use ten-key machines. Students practiced the operation of these calculating machines using a manual much like a typing book except with figures. The aim was first for accuracy and then for speed; both would be required to operate the ten-key calculator on a "proof machine." Although many students in the Banking and Finance program looked forward to taking jobs as bank tellers, most went to work as proof operators, data-center workers who with their left hand fed debit or credit slips and checks into a large machine the size of a refrigerator lying on its side, and with the right hand keyed into the amounts of those slips on the ten-key calculator that is part of the machine. Banking and Finance at Gateway College owned one ancient and often broken proof-operation machine, on which students got to practice a little bit—probably less than an hour each during the entire program.

Mr. Parker saw the banking program as more, however, than an occasion to impart banking skills and lore; he saw it as a chance to help students "articulate themselves," to construct a new and positive image of themselves. (He thought everyone else had given them a negative image previously; "it's all been negative," he said.) This image Mr. Parker helped students build was not just to boost their confidence, though that was surely crucial. He was also aiming to help them construct an image that the corporate world would find palatable. Here, for example, is an excerpt from a class discussion in which Mr. Parker taught students how to conduct themselves in an interview:
Mr. Parker: Don’t sit down until somebody asks you to sit down. Don’t take for granted that they want you to sit down. It’s not that they don’t want you to sit down but that they have another office that they want you to go over to. So when you come in, you greet the interviewer. Always extend your hand, say “Good morning! How are you?” and wait for instruction. They’re gonna normally say, “Please have a seat.” Then that’s when you sit down. And when you sit down . . .

Class: [in scattered voices]: Don’t slump.

Mr. Parker: [scrunches his face]: Please don’t slump! [General laughter.] I mean, don’t go to bed in the seat. [Pulls a chair over to a student.] When you sit down [he sits down and crosses his legs], sit down nice and erect. [Stands up and goes over to Jackie.] Jackie, have a seat. You’ve just walked into the office. [She goes to the chair.] Have a seat, please. [He gestures to the seat with a ruler and she sits down.] Okay. [To class] Watch her legs. [To Jackie] Sit down. [To class] Watch her legs. [To Jackie] How are you gonna sit?

Jackie: I can’t sit like that the whole interview.

Mr. Parker saw this socialization as a necessary means to an end: getting students off welfare, out of poverty, and into work. He defended his approach, with its emphasis on the practical and the expedient, this way:

I tell my students, I’m not concerned with theory. To hell with theory. I’m a practitioner; I don’t want to teach no theory. If you want theory, go up to Cal [University of California, Berkeley]. I’m teaching practical application: pay the rent, and a loaf of bread—that’s what I’m teaching. Because you gonna need some money to pay the rent and a loaf of bread, and my students understand this. Don’t talk to me about no theory; don’t talk to me about “much ado about nothing,” Shakespeare. If you wanna do that, fine; that’s good to do, and it’s fine to know all of the sonnets and all of the plays by Shakespeare. You can’t sell it at Safeway [a grocery store]. When you go to Safeway, they don’t want to hear the sonnets; they want to know if you got two dollars and fifty cents for a loaf of bread. Those students understand that, Doctor, they understand it a hell of a lot better than me and you do ‘cause they’ve gone through it.

In Mr. Parker’s view, getting his female students jobs in banks as proof operators and tellers was a positive alternative to poverty, welfare, and dependence on bad-intentioned men. He saw these jobs as entries into the powerful world of banking—jobs of a different kind than that of turning burgers, jobs with some possibility of advancement. And the personnel managers of local banks seemed to share Mr. Parker’s attitudes about the opportunities available to students who get jobs as proof operators and tellers, claiming they could “move on” to other, better jobs at the bank.

Across the board, the representatives of local banks were pleased with Mr. Parker’s program and with most of the program’s students whom they hired. In fact, these employers came to Mr. Parker’s defense at one
advisory-board meeting in which some administrators at Gateway College proposed that Banking and Finance be revised, specifically be broadened to include more theory on banking and less practice of the sort students received in ten-key classes. One new course was to be called “Principles of Bank Operation,” and another, “Bank Management.” The rationale for this revision was that such a curriculum would put those students who so desired in a better position to transfer from the community college to the state university or university system. Mrs. Lavelle and the other board members were adamant in their support of Mr. Parker’s program. They claimed not to care whether students knew “principles of bank operation” but said they needed people who got to work on time. “Students who are interested in bank management aren’t the kind of people we want as tellers and proof operators,” added another personnel manager. Someone else claimed that Mr. Parker’s program gave students an edge over people who just walked in off the street, and this edge was all they needed. And Mrs. Lavelle warned that, if the proposed curriculum changes were enacted, the employers would simply go some other place where they could get what they wanted. The victors in this skirmish were Mr. Parker and the banks; Gateway College’s administration backed off, and the vocational program in Banking and Finance continued in a manner approved by its advisory board.

One more comment on the curriculum. The program included no instruction on reading or writing or mathematics, no “remedial” basic-skills work or other literacy-related instruction—although Mr. Parker was concerned that students sometimes had difficulty doing the reading on the proof-operation test that was part of the banks’ employment screening. Asian American students, he surmised, had the most trouble because they had the most rudimentary reading skills, due simply to second-language issues. Occasionally a student would leave Banking and Finance and cycle back to a remedial literacy class at Gateway College, but this was a rarity. There did not seem to be much coordination among programs or at least not much student-and-instructor perception of such linking. If students lacked the reading, writing, and math capabilities they needed, they simply dropped by the way. Mr. Parker was especially skeptical of the usefulness of remedial classes; he said such programs stigmatized students and offered little in the way of practical help. But he was equally adamant about not wanting the responsibility for reading and writing instruction in his program and had, in fact, stopped administering a standard reading test at the outset of each semester. He claimed it was a matter of pride: those were not his specialities; those were not things he knew. He saw himself as an expert on banking and finance, not basic skills or literacy.

The Workplace: “I’m Hiring You as an Hourly.”

The proof-operation center of Bank of the Pacific is housed on the 12th floor of a large, modern, imposing office building across the bay from
Gateway College. Its entrance is closely guarded 24 hours a day; to gain access to the elevator one must have a special card as well as a badge that specifies an official connection to the bank. When you step into the 12th-floor proof center, you have an immediate purview of the whole operation: row after orderly row of proof-operation machines—138 to be exact—and a sea of female faces operating them.

The best time to see this center is late on a Friday night, around 11 p.m., when every machine is sure to be clattering and humming. On Fridays banks do a lot of business, which means that proof operators will work hard afterwards. The proof operators at this center work by the hour and with no benefits. According to Mrs. Bork, the trainer and manager, “We don’t offer benefits . . . at all anymore, and we’re not the only company doing that. Benefits are expensive for a company.” She also pointed out that a proof operator who works 8 hours a day is not as effective as a proof operator who works 6 hours a day. The bank wants a person who still has a burst of speed left in her at the end, and that also argues for part-time workers. Mrs. Bork promises her employees 15 hours a week; she said “Up front I’m telling you I don’t plan to give you very much in the end. I’m hiring you as an hourly.” Proof operators come to work around 4 p.m. and stay until the work is done, which may be 1 a.m. on Saturday. Mrs. Bork admitted that “here our hours aren’t the best in the world . . . If you don’t have transportation, you can forget it.” Proof operators work when the bank needs them, as projected by historical records. “That last week of the month when there isn’t much work, I’m going to work you Sunday, Monday, and Wednesday, and that’s it,” said Mrs. Bork.

As mentioned earlier, what proof operators actually do is feed debit or credit slips through a machine, simultaneously key in the amount of the debit or credit on the ten-key calculator that is part of the machine, and encode a number designating the type of transaction. These slips come in bundles from branch banks and customers; the bundles are weighed, and the amount of time in which they should be processed is generated by computer according to their weight. Some bundles are “cleaner” than others, that is, they contain fewer errors. Errors might be a bank teller’s mistake or a customer’s mistake—for example, a mistake in addition or subtraction: you fill out your deposit slip as $450.00 when the check you are depositing actually reads $452.00. Whatever the source of the errors, “The buck stops here,” joked Mrs. Bork. Proof operators must correct those errors, key in the correct amounts, and route the debit and credit slips through the machine, in which they are photographed and spit out into one of three pockets, depending on their designation. All this happens very, very rapidly. All one sees is a blur of papers and fingers.

At this bank, operators start out at $6.20 an hour. For eight weeks they go through training, which involves both practicing hands-on with proof machines and also studying manuals, memorizing codes for 98
separate documents. And then they are put out on the floor. At this point they should be able to process between four and five hundred items an hour, and if they cannot, "they really struggle," said Mrs. Bork. At three months they must process eight hundred items an hour, or they are let go. Final production quota is sixteen hundred items an hour, but people do more for incentive pay. The highest rate that Mrs. Bork has seen is three thousand per hour, but she said that with the simplification of the process—her bank is now changing from a "multiple pocket sort" to a "single pocket sort"—the rate keeps pushing up. According to Mrs. Bork, this move toward simplification has resulted in deskilling:

In banking you don't need to know as much [as in the old days]. In other words, proof operators... don't do anything else; that's the only job they need to know. It's much more specialized and centralized; it's much cheaper all the way around....

... When I started in proof... in 1962... we had a machine that sorted 32 pockets. We're working towards a one-pocket sort [at Bank of the Pacific]. Western Bank has been on a one-pocket sort for years. We've been cutting down slowly, from 32 pockets, down.

Not only is speed important; workers must be accurate as well. Proof operators are fired for making too many errors, or their incentive pay is docked: "If they make three errors in a month," Mrs. Bork reported, "I take a third of their incentive pay away."

There are other ways to lose one's job, and one of them is not being on time. Mrs. Bork explained, "In proof we have people come in exactly when we need them. We have an extremely tough [tardiness policy]; well, it's not unacceptable but it's very strong, and we stick to it. You don't abuse our attendance or our tardiness guidelines, or you don't have a job. And we're very strict on the first three months." Students who worked at the data center confirmed Mrs. Bork's description of the strict discipline. They talked about being watched and about feeling their supervisor's eyes on them waiting for them to make mistakes or steal the occasional currency that students believed was deliberately planted in their work bundles. Here is Alma talking about traps:

Alma: They always set a trap for you. Okay, like you have a—they put a 50-dollar bill in there... in your bundle of work; you just stick it in your pocket, you know you're gone—

Interviewer: Did you have one in yours?

Alma: Sure! They did that. I saw it run through the machine... I knew what it was. I stopped the machine, and I called a supervisor and told her what had happened. She came in, she look at the bill, she say "Okay, of course you got to sign for it, you know."... It's amazing how they—they'll set traps for you.... There's cameras everywhere... everywhere.
The demands to produce and be accurate, the strict rules about tardiness, workers' perceptions that they were being watched—all combined to produce a very pressured work environment: Here is Mrs. Bork's description:

There is a burnout rate in proof operators. . . . It is an extremely pressured job. I mean, you have to clock in when you walk in the door, on a log, and you clock every movement you make. I mean, if you get up and go to the bathroom, it comes out of your run time. . . . We have deadlines to meet, and our deadlines . . . are always very tight; so you're always pushing your people at the end of the day.

These working conditions certainly seemed sufficient to cause heavy turnover in a proof center, which in turn requires constant training of new employees. According to Mrs. Bork, "There's always going to be turnover any place in the bank, especially when you're in this large of an office." Besides, she continued, if there were no turnover, "it would make me unemployed."

A Case Study: "The Third Time I Was Three Minutes Late."

Jackie had been out of high school for two years when she enrolled in Banking and Finance at Gateway College. She had been accepted at a local four-year university after high school, but because she did not receive sufficient and timely financial aid, she was unable to attend. Then she became pregnant and waited until her baby was one year old to resume her schooling, which she knew she needed, even though she was somewhat intimidated by the prospect. She said she received a good high-school education in which the faculty was like "family" and during which she was required to complete academically challenging work, such as ten-page papers. But Jackie had not not always wanted to attend college, not until a career class in high school changed her mind. She also worried about how she would fare academically: "I was scared, you know. I didn't think I was going to do real good in my classes and all of that—I wasn't smart enough. That's the real reason why. I was scared to go. Scared, scared." Her past job experiences included working at a child-care center in a nearby park, doing janitorial work at the local army base, handing out free lunches for the parks and recreation department, working at an insurance agency, and perhaps most memorable for her, working at McDonald's.

A recurrent theme in her work life was problems with transportation. She described her first semester at community college, when she was also attempting to work part-time:

First I was going to school and taking my baby to child care, and I was working at [United Parcel Service] at night; I was catching 14 buses a day last semester. Take my baby to school, then go to school, then go home for a little while, then eat and stuff, then go pick my baby up, drop him off at the baby sitter, go to
work, go pick up my baby, go home, all day long every day. 14 buses, you know, like if I want to go pick up, I mean take, my baby to school, I got to catch the [bus #] “40,” then I got to transfer to the “14,” then I got to get on 14 again and then get on 40 to go to school, all semester....

... If I get a car, you know, I get another night job, and start, and get extra money, and stuff—but catching those buses like that, I was like getting at home 11:30 every night, you know; it’s all cold outside, [and] me and my baby on the bus: I didn’t like it really.... [Just] trying to get my baby some stuff for Christmas.

When she enrolled in Banking and Finance the following semester, she decided not to work, depending instead on government assistance and credit for education to see her through.

The semester in which she enrolled in Mr. Parker’s class was her second at the community college. Originally planning to major in child development, she had weighed the time it would take to get a community-college degree against being able to complete the banking program and get a job in a semester, and she chose the latter: “In May I’ll finish and get a certificate; then I can start working.” Jackie talked a lot about wanting a job: “I need a job now, a good job,” she would tell us, “so I can help me pay my rent.” But she also considered a banking job as a decent career move, a chance for stable employment: “Banks is all over the nation, you know. You’ll always have a job... once you work in a bank.”

Added to this were her expectations that the atmosphere in a bank would be quite different from the noise and aggression she experienced at McDonald’s:

Jackie: It seems more pleasant.... I’d rather work at a bank than work at McDonald’s.... It’s a peaceful, more peaceful environment.

Interviewer: Have you ever worked at McDonald’s?

Jackie: Uh-huh; yeah, it was a lot of problems; you know, customers talking about “I didn’t order this” and get into arguments with the customer. Hey, you know, the customer [is] always right.... Most times I had to go get a manager, because it was like a Korean lady or something. She ordered like ten Big Macs, five McDLTs, and stuff, you know, and I gave her her order, and you know, she said “I didn’t say this, I didn’t say that.” I said, “Well, that’s what I thought you said.” You know, she didn’t have to talk to me the way she did. So I just went to get a manager; I didn’t argue with her or nothing.

Jackie was a standout student in the banking program, doing all the work with no difficulties. She also passed Bank of the Pacific’s proof-operator test with ease and was interviewed and hired. But within two months of having been placed in this position, she was given the choice of resigning or being fired. It seems that she had been late to work three times, the last time, she said, by three minutes. The culprit was her old problem with transportation. Now she had to catch rapid transit
You know, I had to drop him [the baby] off, then go way out there [to the proof center]. Sometimes we had to be there at 2:30, sometimes 3:30, and BART—sometimes the BART comes five minutes apart, then sometimes they come fifteen apart, you know. . . .

. . . I had got a car too, then I started going out driving out to West Oakland to the BART station and leaving my car at the BART, still catching the BART but catching it out of West Oakland because it was cheaper, faster for me to get there. And on Fridays, you know, the BART closes at 12 [midnight], and we was getting off work like at 1 a.m. [or] 12:30 [a.m.]; so I had to drive out to San Francisco on Friday.

Not only did working in the city present logistical problems for Jackie in terms of child care, it was expensive as well. Proof operating is a night job, and free day-care closed at 5:30 p.m.; so Jackie had to pay for a babysitter during the evening hours. There were other expenses associated with working in a large city a considerable distance from home, such as the cost of gasoline and train fares and eating meals in San Francisco:

It costed to go to that job, though, because . . . I started . . . using gas for my car, and then the BART, and then you got to eat your dinner there. Then you got to catch the BART back home. It was like 4 dollars a day for just BART. And then, um, I was paying like say 15 dollars a week for gas, and then if I had to drive out there, that would be 5 extra dollars and stuff. It was costing, though, and then you know [at] lunchtime you got to spend 3 or more dollars just to eat and stuff. It costed every day, but then when your check came, it all broke out even.

Although Jackie tried to be optimistic about her earnings, there was a real question of whether her salary from the bank would support her and her child, especially considering these additional expenses.

Jackie: We was on part-time [status]; we really like—we don’t get no benefits or nothing, but once you get on prime-time and then get full-time, you get more benefits and everything. Dental, all that.

Interviewer: By working part-time, did you make enough money to support yourself?

Jackie: I think, if I would have kept—yeah, yeah, it would have been enough; um-hm, it would have been enough to pay for like 400 dollars in rent here, 20 dollars on PG&E [gas and electricity], like 30 on the telephone bill. If it was like that every month, you know, I could have made it with that, you know, because we was only working like 6 and 4 hours. If I would have been working 8 hours or something, I really could have bought food and everything, bought a car and everything.
Despite all the problems, Jackie hoped to work again at Bank of the Pacific, and Mr. Parker encouraged her to hope based on his connections:

Jackie: I’m going back looking again ‘cause that’s where I want to work. I want to work in a bank.

Mr. Parker: I can get Jackie a job in a bank, just from a personal reference. Um, the only thing: I hope this is a real learning thing for her. Meaning—

Jackie: I know, when I got fired.

Mr. Parker: You gotta be there, see. (Laughs.) See, you gotta be there. That’s the bottom line. Uh, I can get her a job in a bank. We—first of all, she’s got a very nice personality, and that’s what they really want. She’s articulate, and she’ll be a good person in customer service, and now she knows what she has to do. It’ll be different this time around—

Interviewer: Mm-hmm—

Mr. Parker: So we can work that. That’s no problem.

When I last spoke with her, Jackie was at home with her child, living on government assistance and some help from her child’s father. She felt particularly discouraged, having tried and failed to get another bank job on her own and having enrolled in a job placement service, also to no avail.

The Skills Controversy Revisited

As I followed Jackie and other students from training to work and beyond, I began to realize that there was no simple, one-to-one correlation between, on the one hand, being skilled or able to accomplish work, and on the other, doing well in training, getting a job, or keeping it. Banking and Finance, you will recall, had no entry requirements. Some students like Jackie had done well in high school, but others still had difficulty with reading and writing, and others, recent immigrants from Asia and Latin America, were self-conscious about speaking English as well as reading and writing it. The short-term nature of the program and its lack of focus on skills and knowledge did not, however, seem to serve most students badly in terms of being able to get a job. Among the students that I knew, many passed Bank of the Pacific’s employment-screening proof test the first time around, despite the fact that it required facility with the ten-key machine, visual discrimination, direction following, and problem solving, and all of these under time constraints.

All that then separated students from Bank of the Pacific was an interview, which seemed more a formality than anything else. Mrs. Lavelle chatted politely with the nervous potential employees, asking them why they would like to work at the bank, what their long-term career aspirations were, and whether they could work at night and were interested in part-time. Some students shone in these interviews, trying out approved explanations for spotty job histories and talking corporate
talk in just the way Mr. Parker had modeled. Others spoke in monosyllables, very shyly and self-consciously. But Mrs. Lavelle hired people, not wholly on the basis of their performance in the interview and not wholly on the basis of their test scores, but also because Mr. Parker advised that they were "ready" or, more rarely, that they really needed a chance. It seemed that the proof test was just a means to eliminate people if the need arose, rather than an instrument useful for matching people’s skills with possible jobs, and that Mr. Parker and Mrs. Lavelle both recognized this function and acted accordingly. Indeed, Mr. Parker referred to it as a "process of elimination." It is noteworthy, too, that some workers claimed that the proof test had little or nothing to do with the actual job.

The contradictions surrounding skills continued in the workplace. There I realized that the very things that many African American students seemed good at—and one of the things most stressed in Banking and Finance, that is, interpersonal skills such as would be required in an interview situation or in a sales-type position—were not required in the proof center. It did not matter so much how you dressed or presented yourself so long as you got to work on time and were quick and accurate at your work and able, as one worker pointed out, "to keep your mouth shut." As for literacy, some reading was required in the training period, but most people managed it—even recent immigrants—by taking the manuals home to study. For example, we saw one training manual that a worker had annotated in Chinese. On the actual job, little conventional literacy seemed to be needed at all. People read and punched in numbers, and they checked off boxes on forms. The only skills needed on the job besides a tolerance for stress were those capabilities for operating the proof machine. Ironically, students did not get much practice in Banking and Finance on its one rusty old proof machine (although they did get to practice the ten-key calculator). But such practice may not be so crucial for most students; for by all the accounts that we have, those capabilities quickly become routinized. I do not mean to downplay the skill required at "unskilled" work—Kusterer (1978) has demonstrated the considerable "working knowledge" that machine operators develop and depend upon. However, the jobs that students from Banking and Finance most frequently got required little knowledge of banking and few social skills—in direct contrast to the program's emphasis—nor did they require much reading or any writing, which runs counter to the basic-skills literature and the widespread claims that American industries are suffering because workers lack advanced literacy skills and high-tech competencies.

Finally, the most striking contradiction I uncovered was that being able to do the work of a proof operator—the deployment of whatever knowledge and skills that this job requires—was not sufficient for staying employed. Put another way, within the group I studied, many of the skilled workers, those who were fast and accurate at proofing like Jackie,
lost their jobs right along with the very few workers who were less skilled, who were not sufficiently fast or accurate. In fact, there was an extremely high rate of turnover at the proof center for students in Mr. Parker's program. And judging by the regularity with which local banks sent their representatives round to interview a new crop of applicants, the same rate seems to apply to other centers and for other workers.

I have tried to demonstrate, for this short-term vocational program in banking and finance and for the job of proofing, that the current popular rhetoric that attempts to blame economic difficulties on unskilled labor and then attempts to remedy the problem with literacy programs and ever-proliferating sets of workbooks and computer-aided instruction on basic skills simply misses the mark. People entered a training program that emphasizes skills that would not be used on the job, were given an employment test that required skills that have questionable relevance to work, were hired despite doing poorly on the test and the interview, and lost their jobs even when they were competent at doing the work.

Looking for Solutions in Critical Skills

Well into the research, I began to ask Mr. Parker what he thought might be done to improve his banking and finance program, and he mentioned the inclusion of instruction on reading and writing and math. Although he had stated early on that he did not teach reading and writing, that literacy was not his bailiwick, he also became increasingly aware, as we examined the screening tests instituted by area banks, that some of his students were being shut out because they had had little practice with the literacies associated with such test-taking events. He had also begun to think more seriously about the limited possibility of advancing from proofing to other bank jobs without literacy skills or some certification thereof.

Within communities of literacy teachers and researchers, it is often acknowledged that literacy is multiple, that reading and writing are not generic psychological skills, but rather are social practices (Cook-Gumperz 1986; Gee 1989; Heath 1983; Reder 1987; Scribner and Cole 1981; Street 1984). A simple example of this is the demonstration that there are different kinds of literacies, and possessing one kind does not mean possessing all the others. A person might be quite adept at reading racing forms, for example, but do poorly on a test of reading comprehension. Studying the Bible in Sunday school carries with it certain understandings of text and author and interpretation, understandings that would serve one poorly in a literary analysis of Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass. Writing a legal brief means being party to a special set of conventions, commonplaces, and modes of argument; being able to compose advertising copy means being literate in a different way. It follows that, just as there are different literacies, there are also different pedagogies and sets of instructional practices that are associated with various school-based literacies, and these notions of literacy and the
practices associated with them can be more or less productive (Lanksheer with Lawler 1987). And here is where we must be careful.

To decide, as Mr. Parker may have done, that literacy is a good thing, a necessary addition to a vocational program, is not to decide what version of literacy might be taught. In the popular literature on workplace literacy which I mentioned at the beginning of this report, there is little if any recognition that literacy is multiple and that there are more- and less-productive ways of representing literacy and introducing literacy practices to the classroom. Instead, it is presumed sufficient to champion literacy, to decry illiteracy, and to leave the rest—what will count as literacy and as valued literacy practice—unspoken and untested.

When we do examine the literacies most often associated with basic skills programs, remedial education, and literacy training for adults, we find a strain that continues to ward off criticism from a variety of quarters. Giroux (1988), for example, identified a perspective on writing instruction which he called the “technocratic school” and argued that such instruction needs to be replaced by a pedagogy that links writing, learning, and critical thinking. Bartholomae (1979) developed an alternative to the basic-skills approaches common in remedial college-writing instruction (Bartholomae and Petrosky 1986; see also Rose 1983). Grubb and Kalman (1991) critiqued what they labeled “skills and drills” instruction—which they found to be overwhelmingly characteristic of vocational and job-training programs for adults—in light of instructional principals drawn from “good practice” literature in adult education.

Basic skills approaches are typically driven by an overly zealous subscription to rules and correctness and a focus on product to the exclusion of process. They tend to represent complex competencies such as reading or writing as componential, as separable into discrete units that can be taught one by one. They value individualized learning, the pace of which is governed by tests and assessments. And they treat reading and writing as neutral, technical skills that are equally available and empowering, both educationally and economically. Alternatives to basic skills, on the other hand, foreground the active construction of meaning over the mastery of forms and correctness. They treat reading and writing as activities that must be practiced holistically. They emphasize the considerable extent to which literacy depends upon social interaction and membership in community. And they view literacy as deeply and permanently ideological rather than politically separate or culture-free.

One recent, much-praised alternative to basic skills in a vocational program is the “functional context” approach, whereby instructional materials on reading, writing, and math are derived from job-related literacy materials. (See, for example, Sticht et al. 1987 and Mikulecky and Philippi 1990). The reasoning is that, not only will adults be more
motivated when their schooling is based on work-related, presumably relevant materials, but they will be better able to learn since the texts will be based on things they already know about, and moreover, what they learn will actually be applicable to work. However, there is no inherent magic in job-related materials. Sometimes, as Gowen (1990) has demonstrated, the very fact that literacy materials are job-related is enough to alienate disaffected workers. And as Grubb and Kalman (1991) have pointed out, job-related literacy materials are just as susceptible as other kinds of "content" to a skills approach.

The most radical alternative to basic skills, and the one that is often absent from adult programs, is the critical literacy perspective. A central notion of critical literacy is that, not only should students learn to decode or inscribe texts, they need to learn to assess those texts, to read their "world," as Freire would say, in an attempt to understand the relations of power and domination that underlie and inform and create them, and ultimately to act to change them. According to Lankshear and McLaren, critical literacy exists only "where concerted efforts are being made to understand and practice reading and writing in ways that enhance the quest for democratic emancipation, for empowerment of the subordinated, the marginalized Other" (1993:xviii). Similarly, the goal of a critical pedagogy is helping students acquire the modes of critical analysis, theoretical ability, and moral incentive to transform, rather than only serve, the dominant social order.6

For example, we can imagine a curriculum based on this critical perspective in which Mr. Parker's students would not just learn how to take the bank's proof tests but would inquire as to why it is that banks have suddenly, at the present moment, reinstated such requirements after a ten-year hiatus. Students would not only learn to operate a proof machine; they would consider how it came to be that most of the people hired nowadays as proof operators are women, women of color, and how it is that proofing came to be a centralized activity rather than one shared by numerous employees at local branch banks. Students would not just dream of and work toward advancement and a career within the bank but would also research the likelihood and conditions of such progress. Students would not just learn the rate at which they needed to process documents to make production at the proof center and to receive incentive pay; they would calculate their maximum hourly salaries and compare that to their weekly expenses and the profits of the bank. Students would not just accept the designation of part-time employee; they would question why it is that proof centers will only hire them as "hourlies." And all of these activities would take place in a language-rich environment, where students read and write a variety of types of texts in interaction and collaboration with each other.

Postscript: Beyond Critical Literacy

After the particular research reported here had concluded, my colleagues and I stayed in touch with Mr. Parker, Jackie, and the other
former students. We continued to interview them about their jobs and their lives, and we talked regularly with Mr. Parker about his program and his new classes. We also invited him to participate in a continuation of the research project, which involved interviewing managers and workers at a different proof center, observing work at proof machines on the floor, as well as learning about the literacy requirements of other jobs in the data center. One of our intentions was to help Mr. Parker improve his program, perhaps by introducing a critical literacy perspective, and we thought that recent, firsthand, accurate knowledge about working conditions, literacy requirements, and the limited potential for advancement at the bank would help. In the meantime, as we continued our project, the economy worsened; area banks consolidated, decreasing the employer pool for the program; and it grew more and more difficult for Mr. Parker to place his students in any kind of job. None of the former students that we knew now worked for the bank, and all were either struggling economically at other part-time, low-wage jobs or depending, however reluctantly, on welfare.

Remembering the vocational classes I observed, recalling the enthusiasm many students had for this program and their high hopes for employment in a "professional" job at a bank, and juxtaposing those moments with their desperate current situations, I am prompted to reconsider how I would conceptualize a critical literacy project. Many of us who work within educational institutions turn first to educational solutions to social problems, "educational" in the sense of classroom-centered. However, what I have learned is the necessity of pairing classroom-based, critical educational programs with active efforts to promote social and economic change outside the classroom, and of not confusing or substituting one of these initiatives for the other.

In carrying out the larger ethnographic project that is partially described in this article, my colleagues and I analyzed the ways in which Mr. Parker, his students, the community college, the banks, and bank personnel all interacted to create the conditions that sustained a vocational program that sent students to what were mostly low-level, short-term, dead-end jobs. This analysis showed, for example, that Mr. Parker acted as both a savior and a seller for the Banking and Finance students. He showed more human concern for them than most were accustomed to receiving from personnel in educational institutions, but at the same time he used his program to socialize students into becoming workers who would be pleasing to a corporation that did not exactly have their interests at heart, to put it mildly. Such an analysis, and complementary ones for other players, was helpful in understanding the complex ways in which the status quo is maintained and in which social and economic classes are reproduced through schooling.

But in this case, it would be false to imply that all players contributed equally to or were equally implicated in this maintenance. If we imagine, for example, the transformation of Mr. Parker's program along the lines
I sketched above, instituting a critical literacy approach in which students learned to read critically the social texts and discursive practices of the banking industry and their probable relationship to it as a future employee, one likely outcome would be the dissolution of the program. The banks would withdraw their patronage and go elsewhere to get what they wanted—workers with circumscribed skills and ambitions—as Mrs. Lavelle once threatened would happen. Another possible outcome would be that students would still take jobs at proof centers—recall Jackie's desperation to find work and also these hard economic times—and they would still get fired. Or perhaps these students would be impatient with a curriculum that seemed to delay or be irrelevant to getting a job, having long ago developed their own critique of the world and now being concerned with economic survival. "You can't sell it at Safeway," Mr. Parker remarked, as he contrasted his practical course of study with Shakespeare and theory. "The process of empowerment cannot be simplistically defined in accordance with our own particular class interests," warned Angela Davis in her discussion of how powerful a concern unemployment is for African American women (1988:351).

Therefore, I want to suggest that in our theorizing and in our practice, we be as much concerned with the transformation of work as with the transformation of schooling. It is much easier, of course, to study and engage in critique of schools, our own classrooms, or those of willing colleagues than to conduct related work in corporations and other workplaces. Indeed, ethnographic studies that join an analysis of schooling with an analysis of workplaces are relatively rare (see Borman 1991; Gowen 1990; Valli 1986), and for that matter, so are critical studies of the skill requirements of work alone (see Darrah 1990, 1993; Wenger 1991). However, to ignore workplaces as central sites of cultural, political, and economic struggle in favor of an emphasis on schooling is to continue to ignore the plight of Jackie and people like her. I do not think we can afford ethically and morally to do this. At some point we must meld our theorizing with political action, rather than, as bell hooks points out in regard to gender issues, using it "as a subject for discourse or for increased professional visibility" (1989:181).

And when we do so, we must also be ready to go beyond received notions of literacy. Ramdas (quoted in Anderson and Irvine 1993) describes a critical literacy project in India in which women attended literacy classes only until they could find any sort of work that would add to the family's income, at which time they forthrightly told their teachers to leave them alone. When this happened, Ramdas reports, "we began to work together with people in trying to understand their immediate and daily concerns and difficulties, learning together to analyze the problems and understand the root causes; then planning how we could, together, find answers and, above all, take action." They recognized, that is, that they should cease "worrying about literacy as an end in itself" (Ramdas 1989, in Anderson and Irvine 1993:97).
Mr. Parker had a favorite saying, a summation of and justification for the Banking and Finance program. When I expressed dismay at the jobs students got and the brief amount of time they kept them, he often reminded me that “something is better than nothing.” This comment haunted me; for I knew very well what he meant. Many of the students in Mr. Parker’s program did appear to lack support, confidence, or prospects—and in that way something really was better than nothing. For a time the students experienced Mr. Parker’s support, their self-confidence grew, and they got work, however briefly, in a big corporation. But I came to believe, in the course of this research, that Mr. Parker’s modus operandi—“something is better than nothing”—framed the problem in the wrong way. I also came to realize, by attending to the lives of the students in the program, that my notions of critical literacy were insufficient for conceiving of how they might better their circumstances. Therefore, at the same time that Mr. Parker should not settle for the “something” he gives to his students, as researchers, educators, and citizens, we need to look beyond current school-bound notions of critical literacy toward multiple avenues for research, reflection, and action in order to best assist adults as they attempt to improve their lives both through schooling and in the workplace.

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Notes

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1. This research project began in 1989 and was conducted by Glynda Hull and Jenny Cook-Gumperz with able assistance from Kay Losey Fraser, Marisa Castellano, and Susan Thompson. This article is based on work completed in 1991, but the project has continued, and the team of researchers involved in it has expanded to include Katherine Schultz, Margaret Easter, Mark Jury, Stan Goto, and David Mullen.

2. All names are pseudonyms.

3. Two years after the research reported in this article had ended, Katherine Schultz and I were able to gain entry to a different proof-operation center and to conduct a study of the literacy requirements of work in this center as well as the relationship between literate skills and advancement. We are currently writing a report on this research.

4. The quotations used in this article are most often verbatim transcriptions, but on occasion I have eliminated, for ease of reading, conversational fillers such
as "uh" and "you know" where these omissions did not seem to obscure anything of significance in the interaction.

5. I am indebted to Grubb et al. (1990) for the substance of this argument. In their paper most of the points I make here in brief are developed and illustrated. See also Schultz 1992 for an analysis and critique of conceptions of workplace literacy.


7. See Hull 1992 for the full report of this research.

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