



# Fish Plant Workers Responding to Globalization in North Sydney, Cape Breton

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## Introduction

How do permanently laid-off or down sized Atlantic Canada fish plant workers cope with the impact of workers in China who make \$0.20/hour and produce a similar product? This stark reality was recently compounded by a rising Canadian dollar which made our domestic imports less competitive as well as chronic over fishing practices which resulted in the diminishment of stocks. The decision of our workers to engage in simultaneous formal and informal workplace training was their response. This decision has provided the opportunity of examining the specific interplay that occurred between informal and formal training. In this case study, I shall attempt to describe some real learning paths of these workers, what triggers prompted their engagement in both formal and informal learning strategies, and also to examine their decision making processes and actual engagement in such training. I begin with a short description of the formal training program which was the catalyst for the learning path of these fish plant workers.

## The velcro: Essential Skills Enhancement Training

Since 2005, the Clearwater Fish Plant in North Sydney, Nova Scotia has been downsizing its operations. This is consistent with the trend experienced in almost all of Atlantic Canada's fish plants who continue to face mounting problems in their attempt to compete with an escalation of overseas' operations. A response was required for a significant permanent lay-off of approximately fifty workers. This was compounded by the anticipation of a complete plant closure. As a result, the Northside Entrepreneurial Centre, in conjunction with the Northside Economic Development Association Corporation, organized a program to assist the laid-off and soon to be laid-off workers which would enhance their essential skills in an effort to secure alternative employment. These essential skills are basically the 'velcro' skills to which technical skills stick. They include reading, writing, numeracy, document use, computer and oral communication skills as well as those skills required to work effectively as a team member such as critical thinking and conflict resolution. On-the-job workplace experiences with alternative employers were



organized for those former employees already sent to the unemployment lines. Additionally, a formal Essential Skills Enhancement Training program which involved academic skill enhancement under the auspices of the Nova Scotia Department of Education was created. This Workforce Restructuring option had been developed previously to handle such situations. This option allowed the resources of the Nova Scotian Department of Education's Workplace Education Initiative to be applied in situations where industry downsizing had occurred and the workers had to prepare for new workplaces.

Fourteen students commenced 80 hours of classroom training in early 2006 at the Clansman Motel which was also situated in North Sydney. Two classes (each three hours in length) were held twice every week on Tuesday evenings from 7:00 p.m. until 10:00 p.m. and Saturday afternoons from noon until 3:00 p.m. Three additional individuals from the local community joined the 11 laid-off and soon to be laid-off Clearwater employees as all of them planned to write their General Education Development (GED) Grade 12 Equivalency examinations following the completion of the course. During each class, we used our primary resource which was a comprehensive GED Preparation Manual. Group discussion and interaction, as promoted by myself as facilitator, was the primary teaching approach. Self-assessment was encouraged but, since all of the workers planned to write the GED examinations at the end of the program, the real evaluation was acknowledged to be their success in that endeavor. All of the 14 learners from the program, as well as other individuals, participated in providing information through the data collection meth-

ods for this case study along with instructors. To give the reader a sense of whom these courageous workers were, I'd like to profile three of them here.

Martha was still working full-time at the fish plant during the academic course delivery but had been told that the plant was downsizing further and that her days of employment there were probably numbered. Forty individuals had already been laid off and more and more processing work every week was being transferred to a fish plant in Newfoundland. She enrolled in the program designed to handle this workforce restructuring and began the essential skills program designed to assist employees of that particular plant to prepare for their grade 12 GED equivalency.

Barb took this formal course to assist in her job hunting. She was a fish plant worker who had already been 'down-sized'. During this training, she was experiencing an on-the-job work placement at a nursing home which primarily had seniors as its residents. More specifically, at that particular point in time she was working in the laundry room as part of her rotation. She enjoys group work with other students since she "finds that everyone has a different idea and it comes together as one."

Lisa's job at the fish plant was also winding down and she wanted to remain in the workforce, in fact, she was already pursuing bartending options. She prefers to work with other students. Formal training workplace programs, in her opinion, give employees more self-esteem and allow them to help their employer better by being able to multi-task. She was, at that time, volunteering as a



bartender at the local fire hall and handled bar financial matters including bank deposits and the formal essential skill enhancement program she participated in helped her in those tasks.

### **Self esteem and confidence: Setting the course on the learning path**

As workers participated in the Essential Skills Enhancement Training program, a positive change started to take place in their self-esteem and confidence. This change in their outlook about themselves put their learning path on a course that also opened up other doors in learning opportunities. These complemented the formal training program. It's like the idea of 'velcro'. All of the informal learning that happens sticks to the formal training that is delivered. This change in self-esteem and confidence seems to feed the informal learning practices as the worker carves out a learning path. There were many examples of this.

These informal learning practices included observing co-workers who were proficient in a particular process or displayed proficiency in operating a particular piece of workplace machinery such as the labeling machine. Researching information on the Internet so as to enhance their workplace skills was common – particularly with regard to other employment opportunities in the fishing industry. Another practice was discussing particular work challenges with co-workers such as how to safely increase the speed required to fillet a fish. Also, consulting books and manuals to learn how to

do something better became a habit such as Barb's investigations into the duties of a Personal Care Worker at a nursing home.

One of the learners, Martha, indicated that she had recently started consulting the manual located next to the label machine in the clam canning building as her conquering of the large GED Manual has enhanced her abilities and confidence – particularly with regard to her use of documents. She believed that watching and observing helps you learn but you must eventually try it yourself as 'practice makes perfect' and trial and error does eventually succeed. She tried to imitate others whom she believes are good workers. She learned how to operate a bag sealer when processing clams by watching and observing the task being performed by an excellent and respected worker. She also learned how to reset and reload the label machine in the cannery by watching a co-worker and consulting the machine manual. The Waste and Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) was also a very valuable course she previously took. She now practices such things as reading and understanding warning labels on various products.

Another learner, Barb, read manuals regarding what food should be prepared for certain types of residents. In her opinion, "a better-trained employee is good for management since they work faster and safer and are more productive." Lifelong learning to her means learning something new every day. For example, she learned the proper way of sorting and folding laundry from both a co-worker and her supervisor. In fact, this same supervisor also helped her learn how to keep herself safe from harmful chemicals. She also learned the importance of



respecting privacy from a supervisor who taught her the proper way to enter a resident's room.

Lisa indicated very emphatically that she really wants to perform a task as quickly and proficiently as anyone can and so she relished the opportunity to learn from her co-workers and supervisors who were more experienced than her. For instance, to enhance her bartending skills, she regularly asked co-workers to teach her how to properly make various drinks – especially the shooters which have recently become popular.

### **The thirst for knowledge and a search for answers**

In preparing for the GED examination as part of the Essential Skills Enhancement Training program, learners were focused on course materials and made unique decisions to help them reach their weekly goals. But in addition, this thirst for knowledge about the workplace and a search for answers also drove their decisions about their informal training.

This motivation was evident by the decisions they made as to what skills they wished to learn formally. For example, Martha and some of her co-workers were very curious one day at the plant when they saw a group of 'suits' being given a guided tour. One of the workers happened to overhear the name of the visitors' company when one of the plant management team was introduced. Neither Martha nor her friends on the canning line were familiar with the company name, so that evening at home

she performed an Internet search and discovered that the company was a fish plant operation based in Chicago, Illinois; a fact she proudly shared with her friends the next morning on the production line. Of course, this information prompted all of them to speculate as to whether their own company was selling the plant or, much worse, selling its equipment which would mean the end of their jobs. However, all agreed that it felt very good that one of them had been able to learn something on their own that management had decided not to share. This newfound ability to discover some of the otherwise 'secret' information that might have a profound impact on their lives was highly significant to Martha and her co-workers. In other words, these learners were searching for answers that would affect their employment destiny. Martha also indicated that since she began studying the curriculum of the formal program she was now doing more reading generally; a trend she intended to continue into the future. She has used these new skills at work since she is currently working in the labeling room and asks 'all types of questions' since she started her course. She now can calculate how many ounces the metric labels reflect. She feels that if she passes her exams, her confidence will be boosted. She now sees the potential in other people and her horizons have widened. For example, through her thirst for knowledge she has developed an interest in a Quality Control job; a position she thinks would be easier now that she is confident enough to ask questions.

In terms of informal learning, Barb indicated that she learned a lot about the proper operation of the laundry facility by asking her co-workers. She has utilized the Internet to search



for potential jobs. In the dietary section, she noticed other workers filling out forms such as lists of foods consumed by each patient and knows she could easily perform that task. Also, she noticed that temperatures of foods had to be logged at various times during the cooking preparation process and immediately prior to serving. Fridges and dishwashers also had temperature logs which various individuals were responsible for completing. As well, she has observed her co-workers operating the various types of washers and dryers. In her opinion, the best way to learn is ‘hands-on’ experience since she learns best by doing. This thirst for knowledge and search for answers on how to be a better worker has helped her make decisions to use the workplace as an informal learning environment.

Another learner, Lisa, admitted to being inquisitive and always observes others at their work as a way of learning new skills such as the aforementioned shooter recipes. These traits also helped her make decisions to frequently consult the Collective Agreement so as to enhance her understanding of it. In addition, she has learned different ways to handle her float reconciliation at Bingo which is a part-time job. For example, she now subtracts her opening float from her closing amount to check her cards sold count. This ‘balancing check’ had never occurred to her as being something she could do herself before handing in her cash and cards to a supervisor who performed the same procedure to check the accuracy of her sales. Lisa feels that informal training complements the formal training and vice-versa.

### **The motivation of money: A trigger factor**

This trigger factor is at the heart of all reasons to participate in formal and informal training. A threat to someone’s livelihood clearly focuses the mind and forces someone to secure a sufficient income so as to have a reasonable lifestyle. For example, during Martha’s last week of work, only 5 or 6 maintenance people would be at the plant – and then it would be shut for the whole summer. This was a motivating force to continue her learning. As for Lisa, she wanted to maximize her tips as a bartender and so she wanted to become a more efficient worker. She planned to learn new drink recipes and introduce them at the bar. During her last week at the plant a new opportunity opened up for her in the kitchen of the Sydney Coast Guard College which pays approximately \$13/hour. She had taken a Food Handler’s certificate course as part of the recent formal learning program in addition to WHMIS and First Aid and both the formal and informal learning that resulted from these activities are starting to pay off for her now.

One of the instructors interviewed who recently taught a Workplace Education Essential Skills Enhancement program to a group of maintenance employees from a school board, felt that such programs help students advance their careers and achieve necessary certification required for other positions with the board. Barb does plan to consult with her supervisor as soon as she successfully completes her grade 12 certification so that she can utilize this achievement to then success-



fully apply for positions requiring a high school diploma which is an increasing reality.

### **Appreciation of achievement: The intangible benefits of skill promotion**

For the most part, workers want to succeed at whatever task they are attempting. This deep-seeded social condition was reflected by all participants who provided information for this case study. For example, Martha felt that success – such as passing the GED exams – should be recognized at work. But she also cautioned about the potential embarrassment of others who have not obtained a grade 12. Confidentiality is important and seems more and more to be threatened. As she aptly put it, “privacy is the only thing you have.” Barb felt that a ‘thanks’ from a supervisor at the end of the day was so appreciated but should not be so rare. Lisa was very appreciative that her supervisor seemed very proud of her and accommodated her work schedule so she could write the GED exams. She also indicated that by doing her job in the best way she could, a simple ‘thank you’ from her employer would be enough. She went on to stipulate that employers need to realize that the benefits of learning informally are the enhanced morale, increased production and the lowering of costs for the company.

### **Improved quality of work and home life**

This factor was also generally shared by the participants in the case study and has an influence on how they see their learning paths. For example, Martha now attends more union meetings and would even consider accepting a union executive position because of her increased self-confidence and her enhanced essential skills. As well, she wanted to better herself outside her work and cultivate more opportunities for personal growth such as taking other training courses. As for Barb, she was very aware of her children’s expectations about education and wanted to set an example for them. For the first time in a long time she is helping her teenagers who are in Grades 9 and 11 with their homework. Barb indicated that she is learning a lot at the classes and loves getting out with other people. As a result she is gaining more confidence. Her participation in the course has inspired her to think about taking a Personal Care Worker course in the health service industry which she would not have previously considered beforehand. She also spends more time on computers now looking for work. She has talked about the course to the dietary supervisor at the nursing home and she was told to come back when she successfully passes her exams. She expects that some of the enhanced essential skills and informal learning that occurred will help with more complicated jobs. In particular, she expects that during her kitchen rotation she will be able to use the measuring skills she has acquired.



As for Lisa, since participating in the course, she has discussed math issues at work and this never came up before. She has more confidence now in applying for new jobs and expects to pass the GED exams. As for informal learning, she has asked her supervisor about different types of jobs in other fishery operations. More importantly, she is a union representative and constantly improves her communication skills at meetings. In addition, she is very comfortable using the Plato GED prep software program at the Entrepreneurial Centre.

### The voices of the instructors

Chad, a former workplace instructor, was a keen contributor to the Project Team which organized the formal Workplace Education program. He also encouraged the learners to visit a local available Training Centre he worked at so that they could utilize the PLATO GED computerized software program. The informal learning that occurred through this resource enhanced the formal training they were receiving in the classroom. The advantages he noted included the learner's new found abilities to help their children with their homework, as well as reading newspapers more effectively and being able to budget more capably. In his experience, many adult basic level workers enroll in programs because they realize they made mistakes as youths when they left school prematurely. Voluntary participation allows some students to achieve success. Chad also reflected that a thirst for knowledge helped workers decide on a learn-

ing path. He noted that those individuals who stayed engaged academically after they quit school by continuing to read and do budgets often do better in training programs as adults. Individual needs assessments prepared after initial interviews helped instructors handle different skill levels in the classroom as did making sure that everyone felt comfortable. In his opinion, both employers and employees get a lot out of formal training programs.

On the subject of informal learning, he noticed that the learners he recently worked with for a local school board started reading the cleaning liquid bottles they were using more closely. As well, these workers even increased their union activities as a result of their enhanced reading and literacy skills. He felt that some students may even aspire to become supervisors themselves or even a teacher's aide. In his opinion, the formal training they registered in provided an organized focal point for the informal training. These learning opportunities 'stick' together. He firmly believed that natural curiosity triggers informal learning, as does a desire to enhance one's self esteem. Furthermore, he went on to say that by asking a co-worker how to do something not only leads to a new work skill but also it enhances one's communication skills in general.

Watching and observing are the ways to learn the unwritten atmosphere of a workplace. Written acknowledgment is important in regard to rewarding and promoting initiative such as notices in a newsletter. Some employers provide cash bonuses when an employee invents a part or process which enhances productivity. People learn how to do their job



better through informal learning. Asking questions, doing research and learning by doing, trial and error, are informal learning methods.

Another instructor, Paul, who teaches mathematics in a native community felt that formal programs allow workers to better themselves – both in the workplace and in their personal lives. In fact, even the ability to help their children with their academic pursuits or even in their own banking transactions are benefits that often become realized. His students' specific goals involve writing their 'journeyman ticket' tests as electricians, cooks and roofers. In his opinion, motivation is a key factor why some students are successful and others are not. Equally important is their ability to show up for all or at least most of the classes. Different levels of academic ability can be handled by finding the 'middle ground' that they can all relate to. Both employers and employees want 'better' employees.

Informal learning occurred with his students; particularly in regard to blueprint reading and safety manuals which had to be done on their own. The employees met together to learn different specific skills such as roofing caps. Leadership skills emerged when one student began going to court with other people to translate and explain legal terminology. The Reserve Band Office has a housing unit that provides jobs to the workers to help them learn how to construct and maintain the units.

Mentorship was encouraged since watching experts was part of a cooperative and sharing attitude that prevailed on the Reserve. Formal and informal training were connected when the students were required to utilize their math skills by doing project estimates and calling suppliers from home for material quotes such as how much a bundle of roofing shingles cost at different outlets. Necessity triggers the need for learning informally in order to get a certain job done. For example, people get curious and want to look up information on the Internet as a result.

Paul also went on to talk about the tacit skills students have learned. These included use of tools and the correct way to hold them as well as reading plans and determining the right tool for a particular job. The unwritten rules and values of a workplace are learned through observation and patience while one determines 'the ropes' such as where to sit when eating lunch. Appreciation of achievement can be given in various ways. As Paul put it, credit and acknowledgement can be given by allowing workers the opportunity to use their new skills such as when the log feeders at the pulp and paper plants learned computer skills and were able to compete for jobs at different plants. Advancement in their career was a benefit for employees and becoming a better employee helped the employers. Observation is the best way to learn something informally at work.