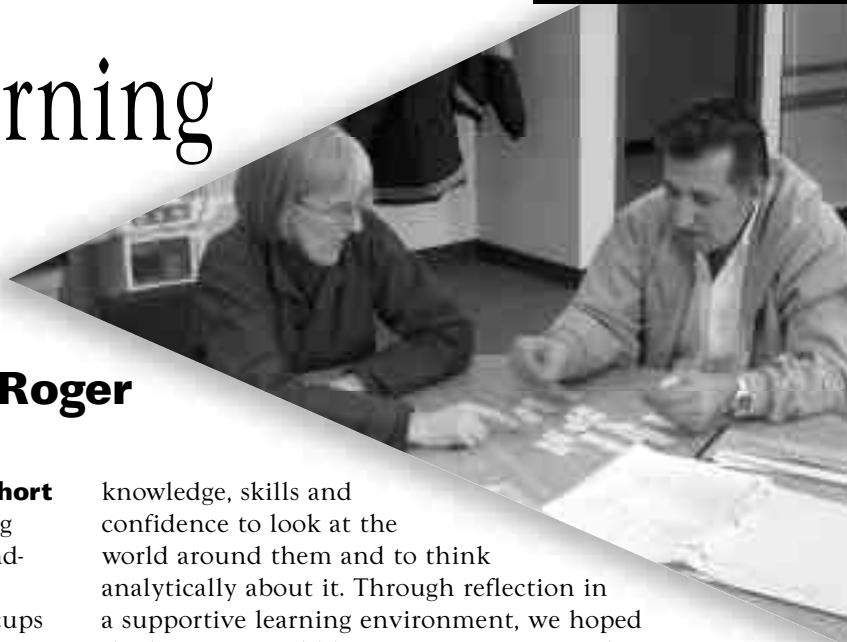# Growing A Learning Environment:

The UFCW Training Centre
by **Margerit Roger**

The UFCW Local 832 Training Centre started short on paperclips but long on dreams. The building had been newly renovated, so the offices had brand-new unmarked desks, the empty bulletin boards begged contributions and the shiny white coffee cups looked terribly obedient in the cupboards.

We walked around the place, trying to imagine what it would be like filled with learners. Excited at the potential, we were aware of the responsibility of growing a labour-based learning centre from the ground up. UFCW Local 832 had negotiated company contributions for an educational trust fund to finance the centre for many years. Now we were ready to open our doors to the members.

The dream was to have a training centre where working adults could access interesting, useful upgrading opportunities that would make a significant difference in their lives. These might be shop steward courses, ESL, adult high school credits, literacy upgrading or food safety courses.

> Often it was the dynamic relationships between elements that were the most revealing and informative, not the elements in isolation.

Whether they were learning to write an essay or a single sentence, we wanted workers to feel safe and respected. We wanted their experience as workers to matter both in content and approach, and wanted them to know that their growing self-confidence and personal development were valuable. Seen another way, we wanted to find ways to make lifelong education enticing and rewarding to workers, knowing that many of the people who passed through these doors would have had difficult experiences with education in the past.

Because we are a labour-based training centre, we also hoped the workers would take their new knowledge, skills and confidence to look at the world around them and to think analytically about it. Through reflection in a supportive learning environment, we hoped the learners would become more interested in contributing to a more democratic society that was good for many, not just a few. At the very least, we hoped workers would feel more able and empowered to deal with challenges in their own lives.

But there was no blueprint for achieving these goals. We had an unusual mix of ingredients to work with: a labour context, a highly diverse group of members, visions of alternative teaching approaches, and hopes of making a real difference in people's lives. Existing models of workplace, vocational or academic education didn't fit, either for structural or philosophical reasons. If anything, we wanted to build a community, not an institution. And so we turned to community development strategies.

Rather than taking "building blocks" from existing sources and importing them into our centre, we based our development on a process of inquiry and discovery that mirrors the reflection/action cycle underpinning transformative education. This wasn't intentional, but rather a result of wanting to develop a responsive learning environment that could address the needs of its members. As it turns out, it not only gave us an excellent decision-making process, but suited our overall approach to learning. We looked around us, asked questions, gathered information from a wide variety of sources, considered it from all angles, and then acted, making constant changes as they became necessary. We didn't rely on external experts, but trusted our own experiences. This helped us to get to know the workings of the educational environment we were creating in its "natural state", while at the same time helping us to build an effective program selection and a strong community of supporters.

Of course, we kept our eyes on the "big picture". We read provocative articles and books, went to conferences and met with other practitioners from across the country to talk about how our ideas might look in practice. We tried to see how our centre fit into the larger context of labour, workplace and adult education, as well as how it might be affected by larger policy changes, market trends or demographic shifts.

> In the end, we used intuition, musings and "eureka moments" as often as we used the results of external opinions or expertise.

To get feedback from union leadership, employers, union reps or rank-and-file members, we used more specific information-gathering opportunities like surveys, organizational needs assessments, focus group interviews, advisory committees and union policy conferences. At the annual policy conference, for example, sixty people elected at the executive level of the union discuss what's working and what needs improving at the training centre. We also drew on our own professional backgrounds and experiences as instructors, facilitators and program planners to implement or change programs.

But without a doubt, some of our most valuable information came through informal, non-academic, non-scientific routes. We discovered those whenever we put aside tidy theories and particular ways of doing things and just took a good look at what we were "growing" at the training centre itself. Suddenly, the facts sprang to life. Spirited discussions over coffee gave us fresh insights into things that happened behind the scenes at the training centre. Finding out about a deaf learner's struggles led us to ideas for supports for other members. Disappointing attendance at an Open House made us aware of faulty assumptions we had about members' interests. A very positive reaction to a workshop on alternative teaching approaches, on the other hand, sharpened our understanding of the role of education in social change.

In the end, we used intuition, musings and "eureka moments" as often as we used the results of external opinions or expertise. This strengthened the centre. Anomalies and disappointments were accepted for what they might reveal, and processes were allowed to unfold. In short, the inquiry process remained fluid and thereby allowed us to create the right kind of programming for our members, not just to offer programming or services that had worked elsewhere. As well, it validated the grassroots realities of the community of learners and teachers for whom and with whom we were growing the training centre.

The "growth" metaphor is not chosen by coincidence. It summarizes the very organic relationship that research and practice have had in the development of our centre. By not editing out information that came from informal and often unexpected sources, practice and research became inextricably linked. The training centre started to seem like an educational ecosystem which not only responded to changes in the external environment, but itself caused changes to which it then had to respond.

Structured, "scientific" research alone would not have allowed us to see some of the interconnections that we found, sometimes in the unlikeliest of places. Often it was the dynamic relationships between elements that were the most revealing and informative, not the elements in isolation. If we had begun with predetermined educational models to prove or dispel, we might have missed exactly those understandings that eventually led us in more productive directions. Nor would we have been as likely to engage in the kind of critical thinking and reflection with others that builds community.

In fact, if we had relied primarily on quantitative research methods to gather and interpret information, we might have been busily removing pieces that didn't "fit" instead of acknowledging them as legitimate and necessary elements in our training centre. To use the ecosystem analogy, we included even the unruly, unexpected "weeds" in our research, knowing that they might in fact be tomorrow's healing plants. In essence then, it was the informal research of the first five years of the training centre that allowed us to maintain a cohesive, consistent relationship between the parts and the whole, instead of removing the parts and examining them out of context.

In five years we've developed a healthy, worker-centred, labour-oriented learning environment that can respond to new needs as they arise, without losing vital links to formal research and external influences. The ebb and flow of programs will match the changes that will come in the form of new learners, issues or theories. As long as we keep listening and looking, we will be able to adapt to what "grows" in our learning environment. ∎

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