

Doing Literacy

by **Linda Wentzel**

I ran into a former co-worker the other day and she asked me if I was still “doing literacy.” I told her I was currently laid off, but, yes, I was still doing it. I don't know how much longer I will be able to say that, but for now, to loosely quote my friend, *I'm doing literacy*. I work for the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour (NSFL) as a Workplace Education Coordinator. Like most labour literacy activities, ours have been funded through a series of grants from HRSDC. We all know what happened to those this year. Our federation revised the funding application twice only to be denied funding on May 1 this year. It was a slow and painful death.

I have been working for the federation for 7^{1/2} years and am laid off on a regular basis. I try to plan for it financially. The harder planning is the mental or emotional reaction to the layoff. It's hard to accept that what you do is so undervalued that you are dispensable on a regular basis. It's even harder when you are the one who administers the program and must tell your colleagues that it's time to lay yourself off. When that happens you also lose the daily contact with the office that tells you what's happening and where and how the literacy project could enhance those activities. Being left out of the loop, even by chance rather than design, really sucks! I must point out here that the federation certainly values what I do and can bring to the organization. It seems to me that it's society as a whole that undervalues literacy work. If not, surely we would be able to fund a program instead of running projects on an ad hoc basis.

I am not telling you this to get sympathy, but to explain that this is how you will live if you choose to become involved in literacy work, even if you work for a labour organization. You must get used to periods of layoff, whether you have the option to return to your original job or choose to keep working for nothing. There are times when the layoff will be a long one and if you can't go back to your original job, you must go on Employment Insurance benefits. I've done both. I usually opt for the 'working for nothing' scenario so that I can keep building projects and planning strategies.

One of the ways the federation has tried to organize its literacy project is to build on work we have already done and to write funding applications with a clear vision of where we want to be in the future. We have tried to make short-term project funding work for us in the long term. We wait every year for the call for proposals.

I struggle with what to tell you about my work. The easy part is the excitement of getting a program up and running, writing curriculum or helping a committee integrate literacy issues and clear language and design into their work. The hard part is the frustration I feel when trying to write a proposal for a project to meet a need our affiliates have identified under grant criteria that are increasingly stringent. It's also hard to tell unions that I can support them until our funding runs out and then they will have to cope on their own. Most times I tell them to call me at home. I am a proud union member. I believe that people should be paid a fair wage, with benefits, for the work they do. Yet I constantly work for nothing. I work more hours than I get paid for, when I am getting paid. Why? Because I love it! Literacy is my great love and my great addiction. Once you have this addiction it doesn't let you go. I often compare myself to my father, who was a sailor, and the way he related to the sea—it's either in your blood or it isn't. Literacy is in mine. ■

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is a member of CAW 1944 and has been on secondment to the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour since 1999. She has been a shop steward, a recording secretary and chair of a Women's Committee for her local. Linda lives in Lunenburg with her husband Greg. They have two grown children, Jason and Jora.

Linda has a diploma in fine arts (1970) and a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Interdisciplinary) (2003) from the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design. Currently, she is enrolled in the Master of Adult Education program at St. Francis Xavier University. Linda says, "The program is self-directed and is challenging me to cope with all the issues that adults face when they decide to go back to school. I believe the experience is having a positive effect on my daily work."