The AFSCME Family Scholarships: Children of AFSCME members look at their parents' lives in the union

Helena Worthen
Labor Education Program, Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations
November, 2007

WORKING DRAFT

Abstract
The conditions that favor learning in a community of practice, as proposed by Lave and Wenger, can be used to surface and interpret learning in a labor union. The stories of learning to which these conditions are matched are drawn from essays written for the AFSCME Family Scholarship competition by sons and daughters of union members. The writers reveal how they have witnessed their parents at work as they encounter problems, learn to engage with the union, and in some cases, become more active and take on leadership roles. The effective community of practice for learning appears to be greater than the membership. Paradoxically, although a dominant theme of these essays is fear of job insecurity with consequent loss of access to healthcare, the stories told about situations in which lines of conflict are clearly drawn, such as strikes, are reported as positive learning experiences. Lave and Wenger’s list of conditions that favor learning can be used both to evaluate and to strategize learning, but the last two on that list are particularly difficult to achieve. Ensuring that the learning achieved through participation has use value both to the individual learner and the union requires resources and a leadership structure that many unions lack.

Introduction
Learning as seen through the eyes of the next generation

A labor union can be described many ways – by its constitution and by-laws, by its history, by its relationship to the employer, by its membership and their work, by its role in our legal and political system. This paper explores a union as a community of practice, a concept developed by Lave (1996), Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998) and Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) to explain how people learn in an organization without direct instruction, through participation. A community of practice forms a social context within which a community replicates its knowledge and function as people learn...
through participation. Lave and Wenger (1991) propose that certain conditions characterize a community of practice in which learning takes place. These are: the learning is legitimized by the community, the path to learning is transparent, it is supported by the leadership, it increases in intensity as it goes along and it has use value to the community. This paper uses essays written by high school seniors about their parents’ experience in their unions to develop a portrait of the union as a community of practice and to explore, using the conditions proposed by Lave and Wenger, how people learn in that context and what conditions are most difficult to satisfy.

The essays which are examined in this paper were not written to be analyzed for this purpose. They were written as part of applications for a college scholarship awarded by AFSCME, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, a national union of over 1.1 million members. Every year ten four-year scholarships, each worth $2,000 per year, are awarded. Between 650 and 700 applications are submitted each year from every area in which AFSCME represents workers, from Puerto Rico to Alaska to New York. The prompt for the required essays is, “What does AFSCME mean to my family?” The prompt does not directly ask for a description of learning. Any description of learning in these essays, therefore, is incidental to the main purpose of the essay, which is to demonstrate that the applicant is deserving of winning a scholarship.

Nevertheless, narratives of learning appear frequently. Events occur, typically a problem; people react and act; actions change the relationships among people; they take on different roles; the children observe and comment on this. These narratives occur often
enough and with enough detail so that one can pull them out and look at them separately.

Then, we can ask some questions. About the individuals, we can ask: Who is learning? About the community, we can ask: What is the effective community for the purpose of learning? What are the conditions for learning that we see here? Nor do all of the conditions proposed by Lave and Wenger need to be in place for any learning to occur. In addition, each of the conditions can go wrong: learning can be delegitimized, access to expertise can be obstructed, progress toward competence can be diverted, devalued or discouraged, learning can occur but have no use or application. Lave and Wenger’s list, in other words, can also be used to diagnose a community of practice that is dysfunctional with regard to learning.

Many questions can be asked of these essays. Union leaders could ask one set of questions, organizers another, labor historians or employers could ask still others. My particular interest, as a labor educator, is to surface and study the way in which the union itself as an organization provides an experience of learning. After all, although a union lives or dies on the activism of its members, it is not primarily a school. Education in a union is usually subsequent to some strategic goal such as organizing, mobilization, contract bargaining or enforcement. It is usually short-term, focused and limited to a small proportion of the membership. The union is viewed as a vehicle for action and power, not for learning. But if we can surface the characteristics that enable the union itself to promote learning, learning can become intentional and strategic.

The essays viewed as a data set
These essays constitute a unique data set which would be extremely costly and virtually impossible to recreate. It is particularly valuable for the purpose of studying learning. Data sets about learning are often generated by teachers, which gives us the social context of the classroom, or by parents or psychologists, which gives us the social context of the family. In both of those cases, the person learning is the child. In this case, the social context is the workplace and the person learning is the parent and evidently, through self-reflection, the child who is also the author. However, unlike data sets about training in the workplace, these essays are not about acquiring job skills, they are not from the employer’s perspective, and they are about the experience of indirect learning without instruction, not learning with direct instruction.

Four characteristics of these essays as data stand out for a cautionary note. One is that these applicants are writing to a prompt that predisposes them to express their view of their parent’s union positively. Another is that they are self-selected by access to information about these scholarships. Third, these are young people who expect to go to college and can manage the deadlines for the various documents, including this application, that go with a college application. Finally, they are dependents of people who are middle class and working class at a time when constant economic pressure on public sector work has been intensifying. Jobs are eliminated, workload escalates. This means that these young people are often worried dependents, grateful to the union for job protections but anxiously vested in the way these job protections form both the floor and the ceiling of the security and stability of their families. As dependents, they can see the
problems; as children, they do not have the background and education to see the solutions.

Since 2001 I have been a member of the committee of ten to twelve people that reads and evaluates these applications. Members of the committee always comment that it is an emotional experience. The applicants report how parents deal with cutbacks and layoffs, political interference from elected officials, retaliation for whistleblowing, problems getting appropriate tools, work-related injuries, violence, and strikes and job actions as they impact family life. Some essays describe a parent working in a non-union job, sometimes two at once, the difference getting a union job makes, and the fear of falling back to non-union work (which usually means losing healthcare access) that is implied in the threat of layoff. These are all part of the portrait of this workforce.

Selecting the essays to be studied

In 2004 the committee, recognizing that the portrait of the workforce contained in these essays could be studied to produce information about the membership and the union, added a sign-off to the application which an applicant could choose to complete, giving permission to AFSCME to reprint in part or in whole their essays, and to identify the authors by name. With permission from AFSCME to study the essays and write about them, I began by randomly taking 250 applications from 2005 and 2006. From those, I sorted out the applications on which the applicants had completed the sign-off. Of the 250, there were 84, or about one third, with the sign-off.
I then re-read these essays, looking for stories about learning. I found that about one fifth or 18 of the 84 essays, while they contained stories, did not contain stories that could be said to be about learning. A story of learning had to include some kind of change in an individual’s actions or point of view due to some experience. Examples of passages of text that do not represent learning are the following:

For my mother to be able to go to work every day and feel at ease and content is a blessing.

AFSCME provides my mother with a safe, clean and minimal stress free work environment. They are there to make sure work conditions are comfortable so my mother can do her best work possible.

Of the 66 that contained reports of personal change and learning, 18 were written about fathers, 33 were written about mothers, one was about a brother, one was about a grandmother, four apparently have both parents in AFSCME locals and nine were hard to identify. For example, there might be a story about learning but it was not clear whether the parent who was learning was the member or the spouse of a member. On the one hand the predominance of essays about mothers reflects the fact that AFSCME represents many agencies in the public sector where there has always been a door open wider into the workforce for women than in the private sector. But on the other hand, it suggests that children observing a parent at work might have more to say about the way a union provides some stability and security for a more vulnerable female parent. Girls writing about their mothers was the majority of essays (26); next was boys writing about mothers (11), girls writing about fathers (10) and boys writing about fathers (10).
Table 1. Applicants and parents by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender of writer</th>
<th>Gender written about</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Fathers</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Fathers</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undetermined</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, because the sample is skewed by the sign-off, the most that can safely be said about this distribution is that it is likely that more descriptions of the union as an organization in which people learn are written about mothers than fathers.

**The emotional impact of the essays:**
**Understanding them as complex and composite texts**

One explanation for the emotional impact of these essays, in addition to the actual details of the stories, may be that the applications themselves are complex texts. Each one is made up of five parts: a cover sheet which includes the identification of the parent or guardian who is an AFSCME member; a transcript of grades and high school activities; a transcript of SAT or ACT scores; at least one letter from a college counselor, job supervisor or family friend; and the essay. In each text, in other words, we see the applicant judged by a school, a testing agency, and a supportive adult. Then we see the applicant describing or often judging his or her parents in the context of their work. The shift of perspective, from focus on the applicant to focus by the applicant, is often a jolt.
and gives the application a third dimension. In addition, the entire packet exists to be judged, not just on the basis of grades or financial need. In practice, the element that breaks a tie in the competition is how well the applicant grasps the realities of the parent’s worklife in a union environment. Thus each application is where three acts of judging intersect.

Another explanation is that they are “long stories” not in the sense of being more than two to five pages long but in the sense that these writers, who are seventeen and eighteen years old, often begin their stories by reaching back ten years, to when they were in third or fourth grade and just beginning to understand what their parents did at work. This means that the stories cover a span of many years during which many changes may have taken place and that the writers, whom we might assume to be too young to be paying attention, have in fact been witnessing attentively what their parents may have thought, or sometimes hoped, was invisible to them. This arc of time gives the stories the weight and gravity of biography, suffused with the anxious concern of a usually proud advocate.

But this is still taking each application individually. Reading 700 of them over a period of weeks, year after year, inevitably produces a mental representation of them as a single text. After all, these applications, and especially the essays, are both individually and collectively a response to the question “What does AFSCME mean to my family?” The essays of a particular year tend to share some experiences in common – the 2001 strike in Minnesota, for example, or the wave of layoffs in 2004 in New York State. Recently, for example, there appear to be fewer stories of new organizing and new hires, and more
stories of battles with a legislature. Thus each year’s harvest of applications produces a whole text made up of 600 to 800 shorter complex texts, a composite annual variation on a recurring pattern initiated by a question.

The step from additively interpreting 84 texts individually to interpreting them as a single continuous text, continuous in effect with the 3,000 or 4,000 texts that I had read over the past six years, required reaching out to the work of another theorist. I drew on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), the literary theorist, who viewed all texts as responses to other texts. Bakhtin, Lave and Wenger and another theorist on whom I will draw in the last section of this paper, Yrjo Engestrom, all worked or work in the general tradition of sociocultural theory, which treats learning as an engine of both small and large-scale social change and focuses on the mediation of social interaction by language. Bakhtin’s theories as a set are called “dialogism” by Holquist, his translator into English and editor, who comments, “[Bakhtin] argued early and late that what a person said was meaningful to the degree his or her utterance answered a question” (Holquist 12). A single question generated these texts. Experiencing all of a year’s essays as a single text produced in response to a single question, a model story emerges, like the archetypical hero’s journey that the folklorist Joseph Campbell created (Campbell 1949) after studying hero stories from many cultures.

The model story presented below is not actually one of the stories that the applicants wrote. However, it has the general features that become familiar in these stories: routine work, a difficult boss, an initially invisible union, a friendly co-worker, a change in role
when the mother decides to help other people and becomes more active, and finally a
transformation from a shy person who wouldn’t say boo to anyone to someone standing
up in front of a meeting to talk, all seen through the eyes of a child, probably a daughter,
and circumscribed by what the child understands. It goes like this:

My mother used to be a very shy person. She wouldn’t say boo to anyone. She
just wanted to do her work. This one boss started riding her. It was making her
upset. One of her co-workers said, “Why don’t you talk to the union?” My mother
didn’t know what the union was. She talked to the union lady and they helped her.
They even went with her to talk to the boss and explain what was happening.

The “union lady” solves the mother’s immediate problem, but the mother has learned
something and decides to use what she has learned:

They moved my mother to another position where that boss didn’t bother her.
Then my mother talked to the union lady and said she would help some other
people. I would come home and find her on the phone talking to people about
their jobs. She started to go to union meetings. One time I went with her to a
union meeting and people were very nice to me. I saw my mother stand up and
talk to the whole meeting about something. I never expected to see that.

The model story lacks the detail, omissions and inconsistencies that characterize
authentic stories. But it can be compared with an authentic story like the following:

We live in Arizona, a so-called “right to work” state… About four years ago
many changes occurred in the office where my mother works that she felt directly
challenged her and her colleagues’ professionalism and that were leading to what
eventually did turn into a witch-hunt of the employees that had been hired by the
previous administration…Not knowing where to turn they found solace and
understanding in their union…my mother then joined the union and has been a
member ever since… I remember when the problems began at my mothers’ work
and I remember how upset and depressed she was about the whole situation. She
couldn’t sleep at night and couldn’t focus on anything else. At one point she was
convinced she would be unjustly fired and was very worried over losing not only
her income but also most importantly her health benefits for herself and her
family... I would also like to mention that my mother and I became very involved in the presidential campaign this year through the Democratic Party.

Or this one:

...From the time I was two until age nine, my mother was often away from the house, attending union meetings. My brother and I would often accompany her to these meetings, carting our fast-food bags and whatever new plaything that came with it. The meetings consisted of loud and large words I didn’t understand…One meeting in particular lies imprinted in my memory forever. A man was bellowing loudly at my mother. In an instant she had the entire conference room behind her, at her defense. ...That night I felt ethereally lifted to a greater sense of realization as to what it means to be a human and interact with others. I was profoundly proud of my mother, and in awe that she had made such infallible connections with the people in her union. ... I recently learned that while I was admiring her friendships and character, she organized the first ever AFSCME at the University of Minnesota…and helped break a ten year string of wage freezes.

The two authentic stories can be compared with the model story in a matrix:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model story</th>
<th>First authentic story</th>
<th>Second authentic story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Member not active in the union (unaware of union)</td>
<td>Mother is a non-member in a right-to-work state.</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult employer triggers union contact</td>
<td>Challenge to professionalism of workers; witch-hunt, upset, depressed, couldn’t sleep</td>
<td>Ten years of wage freezes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention and help from union leads to solution to individual problem</td>
<td>“Found solace and understanding in their union”</td>
<td>Mother becomes involved in organizing, part of collective effort to solve problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding union as general support system, member offers to contribute</td>
<td>Joined union and has been member ever since</td>
<td>Mother perceived by children as often away from house on union business, unavailable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child witnesses member’s personal development in union</td>
<td>Mother and writer have become active in electoral politics</td>
<td>Child appears to have learned what mother was doing; “I was profoundly proud of my mother...”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In all three cases we see the stubborn employer and the individual parent who becomes involved. It is very typical of these stories that they begin with a problem and that the
problem is then collectivized – shared, acted upon by the community. In the first authentic story what makes an impression on the child is the difference before and after in the mother’s emotional state; the child and the mother appear to be learning at the same time. In the second story the mother is already active but the child has not understood what the mother was doing; when the child attends the union meeting and sees the mother, presumably in the middle of a debate, get the support of others in the meeting, it is the child who experiences the revelation. In both of these stories the child is observing the parent take action, remembers the emotional impact of that moment, sees (and in the first case) joins the parent acting upon a larger stage, and reflects on something she has witnessed.

**Central themes: job security, danger and pride**

The stories in the essays circle around three general themes: job security, danger at work, and pride in the parent’s work. Among answers to the question, “What does AFSCME mean to my family?” job security comes first. In these essays, loss of a union job is fearsome because it means loss of access to healthcare. The average essay (not just the 66 essays that include learning stories) explicitly lists the more common well-patient services like orthodonture, trips to the emergency room, and glasses, but then only too often goes on to describe serious chronic illnesses, beginning with asthma, diabetes, and scoliosis and then continuing to mention conditions afflicting members of their family, younger siblings or a disabled parent. Shadowing the gratitude to the union for negotiating healthcare benefits is a pervasive awareness of how precarious employment is
for most people. The two are connected. In their eyes, the union is what stands between
them and this precarious edge. “I don’t know what we would have done,” is a common
phrase. Gratitude for security and fear of insecurity are two sides of the same coin. As
one applicant wrote, “Every working person dreams of one thing, job security”

Other stories are about the physical danger their parents are exposed to at work:

When I was around the age of five, my father got a call on Christmas Eve, and the
crew needed him out immediately to help clear the roads in one of the most
violent snow storms Indiana County had ever seen. I was terrified and my mother
was as well.

And this:

As an Equipment Operator II for the D of C, my father must operate a semi-truck
and trailer rig in sometimes hazardous conditions of ice and snow to deliver about
95,000 pounds of food and equipment to different prisons in the state. Sometimes
he has been stuck out on the road for three days or more because of the weather.
He is also required to work side by side with inmates in the warehouse when he is
operating the loading equipment before and after deliveries…

Yet a third group talks about political interference:

AFSCME has given my father a method of defense to use when elected official
have attempted to push through their own agenda, not necessarily with the best
interest of the City in mind. When my father has stuck with following ordinances,
he has had his job threatened. However, due to his membership in AFSCME, they
cannot fire him without just cause. Being in AFSCME grants my father the
security to not be afraid of politicians and their agendas, where someone not in
AFSCME would fear of his/her own job security. AFSCME allows my father to
due his job to the best of his ability, instead of having to bow to the view of
politicians.

However, a theme that connects all the stories – and this undoubtedly contributes to the
emotional impact on the committee of readers – is pride and a sense that what their
parents do is deserving of respect from employers:
My mom, a teacher’s aide…had never worked in a job supported by a union
before…most recently her own job and pay were negatively affected by
administrative decisions at the school. My mom and other teacher aides were very
upset and felt de-valued as employees by this. They went to their union
representative who held several meetings with the aides. Union representatives
listened to their concerns and gave experienced advice to the aides. After several
discussions and a vote, the union representatives brokered a deal with the
administration that not only gave them their salary adjustment back, but got their
deal sweetened with some extras. My mom was exhilarated….

This last story, which is also a story of the mother’s learning witnessed by the child,
makes a good transition to considering how people learn in their unions.

**A union as a community of practice**

The concept of a community of practice as a theoretical context for interpreting the
learning that occurs within a community without direct instruction was developed by Jean
Lave in the process of researching learning as a form of apprenticeship among street
tailors in Liberia, West Africa, in the 1970s. The argument was presented by herself and
Etienne Wenger and published as *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*
in 1991. In 1996, Lave wrote:

> Learning is an aspect of changing participation in changing “communities of
> practice” everywhere. Wherever people engage for substantial periods of time,
day by day, in doing things in which their ongoing activities are interdependent,
learning is part of their changing participation in changing practices (150)

This describes learning within a community of practice through day after day
participation in interdependent activities. The aspect of “interdependence” is key. Almost
all workplaces involve people in more or less interdependent activities; within a union,
interdependence is the difference between a live, strong union and a weak one. But the
term “practice” is also important. A practice has a purpose, a common discourse,
participants and a timeline. Because a practice is ongoing or repeated, a community of practice has a past, a history and a future. It has internal structure and organization through which its cooperative relationships are arranged. Within the community, people have different relationships to the practice. The community has an edge, a boundary; there are people who are inside the community and people who are outside. It forms the context within which the practices of that community must be interpreted (although not the only context).

Learning as a situated social activity is explicitly contrasted with learning as the transmission of information from one person to another. Lave criticizes standard theories of learning that treat learning as something that takes place inside the minds of individual people:

Theories that reduce learning to individual mental capacity/activity in the last instance blame marginalized people for being marginal…The logic that makes success exceptional but nonetheless characterized lack of success as not normal won’t do…A reconsideration of learning as social, collective, rather than an individual, psychological phenomenon offers the only way beyond the current state of affairs that I can envision at the present time… (1996, 149).

Lave and Wenger draw on case studies from five communities of practice to put forward their concept of how people learn through participation. These case studies (the original work is by Jordan, Goody, Hutchins, Marshall and Cain) describe the midwives of the Yucatecs in Yucatan, the street tailors of the Vai and Gola communities of West Africa, quartermasters on a helicopter transport ship in the US. Navy, butchers in a union-represented retail grocery, and participants in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Lave and Wenger view this learning as an apprenticeship. An apprenticeship is defined as learning
that takes place through work, with no direct instruction but with close association with a more expert partner, by progressive integration into the core activities over time, fully transparent and legitimized by the experts and the community, and serving as a way of “working out the contradictions of social reproduction” (Lave and Wenger 1991, 58).

Each case study raises a question that Lave and Wenger apply to the others: How do people learn without teaching? What is the curriculum of everyday practice? What does the flow of information among participants in a collective task tell us about access to learning resources? How is learning defeated or distorted? (84). These same questions can be asked of the AFSCME stories.

**The conditions for learning in a community of practice, applied to the AFSCME stories**

To apply the conditions for learning in a community of practice to a union context, I will now turn to a set of AFSCME stories that tell about experiences of strikes. If we think of confrontations between employers and employees at the workplace as a continuum, a strike represents the maximum possible confrontation while a relationship between the two still exists. In the model story, the trigger for the learning through participation was a problem at the workplace, a less severe problem than a strike. But strikes, or the preparations for a strike, recur among the essays. When stories of strikes appear in the AFSCME stories the learning that takes place through participation in the strike is always the focus of the story. “I believe that going on strike is a good way to get your point across,” wrote one applicant. This learning is also presented as a positive experience:
frightening, since the family’s security and healthcare are at risk, but positive nonetheless. Here is an example of a strike story:

My dad has been involved in 2 strikes for the Department of Human Services of the last few years. Even though I don’t live with my dad, I still could feel the impact of the strike. I knew that when the strike was going on, that even though he was not getting paid, he was fighting for what he felt would benefit his family in the long run. The work and effort that is involved in the strike is a lot like you are working. He still got up in the morning and got ready for work just like any other day. You try to schedule who is going to be where, and when. You stand out in the cold and rainy weather and carrying signs, showing what it is that you are fighting for. All this was so that my dad and all the other AFCSME members would get the pay that they deserve, and the benefits that are so valuable to all the families.

Placing this writer’s version of the strike experience against Lave and Wenger’s conditions for learning through participation produces the following matrix:

Table 2. Conditions for learning matched against authentic story

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition for learning</th>
<th>Quote from story</th>
<th>Condition present or absent?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning is seen as legitimate by the total community of practice</td>
<td>“..showing what it is you are fighting for…”</td>
<td>Strike is a product of the union decision, collectively undertaken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole process is visible and transparent to the participant</td>
<td>“..a lot like you are working..”</td>
<td>The strike activities have been standardized and communicated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The process is supported by the leadership</td>
<td>“You try to schedule who will be where and when…”</td>
<td>Someone in authority arranges the schedule which is enacted collectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A structure of participation increases in intensity, with overlapping sources of expertise.</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Unknown: it is not clear what happens after the strike to enable participants to re integrate their learning into the day to day work of the union.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use value to the community</td>
<td>“…even though he was not getting paid…. the pay that they deserve, and the benefits that are so valuable to all the….”</td>
<td>High immediate use value; the success of the strike depends on the ability of the membership to carry it out. But use value later?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While keeping in mind that this story is written as part of an essay the purpose of which is to win a scholarship for the writer, not to provide a full description of a strike, there are still observations that one can make. The conditions for learning are included, for the most part, in this description. First, the strike is seen as an honorable, orderly and legitimate activity. Second, it is seen as an opportunity to clarify what is important, “what it is you are fighting for.” Third, it is very much a collective, rather than individual activity; people are engaged “for substantial periods of time, day by day, in doing things in which their ongoing activities are interdependent,” as Lave put it. What this comparison exposes, however, is the probable lack of something that many unions find difficult: how to build on the learning that takes place during a strike. To bring back the learning acquired during a period of high mobilization and integrate it into the housekeeping routine of the union is extremely challenging. This requires “a structure of participation that increases in intensity, with overlapping sources of expertise,” which means resources and a leadership pyramid that is broader and more complex than most unions can support. In the communities of practice that Lave and Wenger studied, this structure was sometimes explicitly organized and sometimes absent. In order for it to exist in a union context, it has to be part of a deliberate strategy and dedication of resources. Reintegrating what has been learned through an experience of high activism such as a strike into the union’s ongoing functioning is extremely difficult.

Other strike stories illustrate these conditions even more vividly. In the following story, the writer witnesses his parents picketing during a strike that took place soon after 9/11.
Whereas most of the essays mention the need for access to healthcare in a potential health crisis, the stepfather in this story is in the middle of chemotherapy for colon cancer:

In June of 2001, my stepfather was diagnosed with colon cancer… to make matters even worse was the 9/11 tragedy that our nation faced and then the end of September was when the AFSCME Local Union decided to strike because of health care and wage issues. Both my parents walked off their jobs to show support and solidarity to the union and the members that they so strongly believed in. My stepfather would go from his chemotherapy treatments to walk the picket line and my mother was also walking the picket as well as working part time to assist our family since both of their paychecks would cease. My stepfather felt weak and tired and if the strike were to last too long they would have to pay the premiums of the insurance or face the $1000 fee of each chemo treatment, what a horrible position they were in plus trying to stay positive on the 60/40 odds my stepfather was given for survival. …The president of the local learned of their situation and stated that the union would stand behind my parents 100% in the way of anything they could do to assist. Having that support just made my parents commitment of solidarity even stronger. “Crossing the picket line” was definitely not an option for my parents!

In this story, as in the previous one, four of the five conditions are fulfilled: the legitimacy of learning experience to the total community, its support by the leadership, its transparency to the participants, and its use value to both the community and the individuals engaged in it. Again, the strategic advanced building on this learning, the intentional incorporation of what is learned from the strike experience into the collective effective functioning of the union is either not observed by the writer, or absent.

**What is the effective community of practice for the purpose of learning?**

These essays give us a way to discern how much beyond the membership the effective community of practice for learning extends. This allows us to ask where to draw the
boundaries of the community of practice. “The union” for this purpose is apparently not just the bargaining table or the bargaining unit or even the membership; it includes family members. The community’s ethic of solidarity is communicated at the dinner table:

Dinner time in my house is a time for the family to get together....my father, who is a “waste manager” for the city …but we all know him as Trash-Man. As shop steward....we get to break in on the “wheelings and dealings” between [his fellow workers and management] each vying for the maximum benefits... These dinner sessions have been important lessons in life, learning that people have different perspectives on things...shaping how we interact with each other and whether or not we can successfully cohabitate...As recent as last summer contract negotiations for my father’s job and the jobs of his band of trash collecting forces, were in limbo... I have never seen my father so worried. Keeping his job was top priority and of course, cutting costs is always a priority of an employer, so the struggle to keep jobs along with the benefits and perks we had grown used to was a balancing act the Ringling Brothers would have trouble keeping up. In the end, the contracts were renewed, dramatic envisions of food stamps were put to an end....The things most others wouldn’t see I have been given the opportunity to contemplate...

Unions encourage the involvement of children and families in traditional ways that are often dismissed as marginal to the purpose of the union, but in these essays, when we read about children who attend union meetings and listen in while eating their supper out of bags, they remember what they hear. They also go to conventions, parades and picnics and remember what they see. They volunteer at their parent’s workplaces and share their parent’s work experience:

Another benefit of my mom getting a job at the veterans’ home is that I have found myself volunteering much more often. … I mostly keep the members entertained during their spare time. For example, I played guitar for a blind member at the home who loved music. A member who had lost an arm and both of his legs had many talks with me about the dangers of alcohol and drugs, but he also talked to me about his point of view on hate…One Sunday morning right after lunch we had a long conversation about hate. During this conversation he
told me, “Hate is baggage. Nothing comes from hate except violence. And violence only causes more hate.”

More often than one might expect, they do paid work part-time alongside their parents:

For the past four years of high school I have been hired to help my mother set up her breakfast room. I have to get up at 5:30 every morning to make it to school so I can help set up…[this schedule] makes it unable for her to sleep past 5 am and I have always wondered why she never switched to a different career earlier in life since the times were so harsh.

If the community of practice extends beyond the edges of the union membership, the workforce, or the bargaining unit to include the children of members, this gives us a very different picture of “the union” than the picture that includes only the leadership that negotiates and enforces the contact. That narrow view of the union leaves out two very important constituencies: the general membership and their families. Leaving them out means that their witnessing of what takes place in the workplaces on which their welfare depends is disregarded. This would be like saying that a son or daughter is thought to be either unaware of what happens to a parent at work or else unable to understand what happens to a parent at work. The evidence from these essays is that they are neither unaware nor unable to understand what is going on. From the point of view of the intentional design of a community of practice for the purpose of learning, therefore, deliberate inclusion of the children of union members in educational as well as celebratory activities should be part of an overall educational strategy. To take this one step further: what matters is that these sons and daughters learn in their role as witnesses. Of course, one does not have to be a blood relative of someone to be a witness. These children have friends and their observations of the worklives of their friends’ parents is
reciprocated. When we assume that what takes place at work is known only to the employer and the employee, we are underestimating the role of these witnesses.

**Why learning in the union is problem-centered**

Virtually every story written by an applicant describing learning begins with a problem, as in the model story. This is not accounted for in Lave and Wenger’s theory of learning through participation in a community of practice. However, it can be explained by drawing on another approach from the tradition of sociocultural theory, that is, activity theory. The primary articulation of activity theory came from Yrjo Engestrom (1987) and has been elaborated more recently by Roth (2007) and Kaptelenin and Nardi (2006).

Activity theory links the various tools, resources, rules and customs that make an activity possible in a system driven by a motive, targeted towards an outcome, and enacted by people who are in one way or another selected to perform the activity from a community of others. The system moves forward toward accomplishing its purpose depending on the rules and customs (which includes laws, regulations, traditions, etc.) and the tools and resources (which include actual tools such as technology or money as well as cultural tools such as language) available to it. The relationships among these links is diagrammed in Graphic #3. When there is an alteration in one of the links, all the relationships change (Roth 2007). That is, when a new tool is added to the resources that the people pursuing the activity can put at the service of their motive, their power becomes greater. Conversely, when the rules or customs change, either to their benefit or to their disadvantage, their power changes.
I would argue that when the parents described in these essays encounter a problem at work – the boss who unfairly discharges someone, a safety issue that doesn’t get taken care of – what is happening has to do with the rules of the workplace. If a smoothly functioning workplace can be understood as a truce between employer and workers in which both sides have agreed to a contract, explicit or implicit, which provides each with what they accept as a fair deal, then a disruption of that contract by an action on either side changes the rules under which the workplace is functioning. A change in any one of the components of the activity system may disadvantage the party affected, but it also opens new spaces for action and therefore learning through participation. In these stories, problems such as these that disadvantage the parent of the writer of the essay lead that person to look for help. That help then introduces the person to the resources and process of the union. This is the moment at which the problem which appeared to be an individual problem becomes collectivized.

Viewing the problems that trigger participation in the union community of practice through this lens suggests an explanation for the paradox that the writers of these essays exhibit repeatedly. On the one hand, the greatest anxiety comes from the risk of job loss and consequent loss of access to health care. On the other hand, problems ranging from harassment to job dissatisfaction to going on strike, in which employees and employers stand on opposite sides of a line and the power relationships between the two are clarified, result in the most emotionally engaged reports of positive learning. If job insecurity is what is most feared, why are problems that lead a person to seek the help of the union to confront the employer reported as positive learning experiences? To resolve
this paradox one has to think of the “problem” not so much as a change in the rules as an unmasking of the rules. When a problem arises, the real insecurity of all jobs, even union-represented jobs, is exposed. At the same time, however, the resources of the union become available, which means that the greatest fear is confronted at the same time as the resources to oppose it, if it can be opposed, are made available.

Conclusion:
A strategy and a standard

The AFSCME Family Scholarship essays give us a picture of learning through participation that, while not the intentional primary topic of the essays, could not be approached by a survey of members or by interviewing union leaders. They show us a community of practice that extends beyond the union. It is replicated by peripheral activities such as the parades and picnics that seem secondary to the core activity of representation, by dinner table conversations, by overheard telephone consultations and kitchen table strategy sessions. The writers apparently sometimes join their parents at work, sometimes as volunteers, sometimes for pay. The essays reveal the writers as witnesses to good and bad experiences that parents – and employers -- may assume go unobserved. Children also observe the distress and worry on the one hand and the frenetic activity of the steward who brings her telephone work home on the other hand. Above all the essays show children who see their parents as deserving, competent and valued, and consequently make no bones about reacting when they see their parents disrespected at work.
The five conditions for learning by participation provide both a basis for an educational strategy and a standard for evaluating the potential for learning within a union. A strategy devised to match these conditions would be more long-term than most union education, including direct instruction labor education. The purpose of the strategy would be to strengthen the community and clarify the practice. Many of the elements of this strategy would cut new ground in established unions. In order for an education strategy to be seen as legitimate by the total community of practice, access to it would have to be seen as fairly distributed, without favouritism. In order for the whole process to be visible and transparent to the participant, it would have to be publicized, probably debated, and explained as part of a general orientation for the novice. In order for a process to be supported by the adepts – who would include more than the governing leadership, since expertise in many areas of union leadership involves specialization – it would have to serve the purposes of replicating both the governing leadership and specialization.

The last two conditions, both of which are not often addressed in the essays, are the most challenging. In concrete situations, they become increasingly difficult as the learner approaches positions of leadership. The pyramid of union leadership is often narrow and resources, especially time, are limited. Creation of a “structure of participation that increases in intensity, with overlapping sources of expertise,” suggests the need for more coordinated resources than most local unions have. Effective coordination would have to cross political boundaries to include other unions, government agencies, workers’ centers and community based organizations. Even harder is the condition, “the increasing knowledge of the learner has use value to the community of practice.” This means that
the individual who has experience of activism, which might mean working on or leading an organizing campaign, carrying a court case, or leading a strike, needs to be able to bring that learning intact back into the union and integrate it into the cycle of elections, contract bargaining and contract enforcement that is the routine work of the union. Providing an opening for this is beyond the capacity of many unions.

But here is a story from one of the essays that describes a mother who was able to bring what she learned back to the union. The daughter is complaining that her family is disrupted by her mother’s participation:

… Our family life became more unusual than ever; our phone was ringing off the hook every single hour of the day. My mother’s pager constantly buzzed and she was stopped in supermarkets by other employees to ask her questions or advice on a problem that they had. I was embarrassed beyond belief because my mother speaks English but not very well. Her verb tenses were off and she would mix up nouns and adjectives when speaking to her fellow employees…My mother, though her work with AFSCME, is an example of someone who always pursued her dreams. She is an immigrant who overcame poverty to come to the United States and thirty years later, she is a successful labor leader who is an advocate for patients and nurses. She is a model citizen for immigrant nurses to speak up on issues and working conditions that need to be addressed. …

Here is someone, seen through her daughter’s eyes, for whom the union as a community of practice worked, who learned through her participation in it, and who has continued to be able to apply what she has learned. Often the credit for this kind of success story is given to the individual who achieves it. The approach to situated learning proposed by Lave and Wenger suggests that some, if not equal credit belongs to the community of practice which supports and shapes it.
REFERENCES


