

Learning on the Line: Voices of Garment Workers at Great Western Garment

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A GROWING LITERATURE has examined the conditions of garment work in Canada¹ — its standards, its structural changes influenced by globalization, liberalized trade and technologies, and the impact of these changes on workers, a high proportion of whom tend to be new immigrants and women of colour. In a recent case study of one garment plant,² all of these dynamics were reflected powerfully in the workers' stories of their own experiences. The plant was the GWG (Great Western Garment) company, which opened in 1911 in Edmonton, Alberta. Acquired by Levi-Strauss in 1961, the plant was shut down for good in December 2004. Interviews were conducted with workers — mostly women — to hear their reflections about worklife at GWG/Levi, the nature of the work community, and the plant closing. (These interviews formed only one part of the overall GWG case study, which will be described further on.) Because so many had been employed by GWG/Levi for decades, the

¹Mercedes Steedman, *Angels of the Workplace: Women and the Construction of Gender Relations in the Canadian Clothing Industry, 1890-1940* (Toronto 1997); Roxana Ng, "Homeworking: Dream Realized or Freedom Constrained?: The Globalized Reality of Immigrant Garment Workers," *Canadian Woman Studies*, 3 (Fall 1999), 110-114; Ng, "Freedom for Whom?: Globalization and Trade from the Standpoint of Garment Workers," *Canadian Woman Studies*, 4 (Spring/Summer 2002), 74-82; Lynda Yanz, Bob Jeffcott, Deena Ladd, and Joan Atlin, *Policy Options to Improve Standards for Women Garment Workers in Canada and Internationally* (Ottawa 1999); Charlene Gannagé, "The Health and Safety Concerns of Immigrant Women Workers in the Toronto Sportswear Industry," *International Journal of Health Services*, 2 (1999), 409-429.

²Tara Fenwick and Joan Schiebelbein, "Negotiating Hope: Learning among Immigrant Women in Garment Work," *Conference Proceedings for The Canadian Society for the Study of Adult Education* (London 2004).

Tara Fenwick, "Learning on the Line: Voices of Garment Workers at Great Western Garment," *Labour/Le Travail*, 59 (Spring 2007), 215-240.

workers recalled relationships over time, their responses to changes, and their sense of self at the plant in highly personal ways that contribute a rich insight into garment workers' experiences and meanings of work.

One aspect of the interview analysis, which comprises the focus of this presentation, was the workers' learning — what they learned and how, through their everyday activity and relations as well as through the English language classes held onsite at the plant for seventeen years.³ As part of this analysis, the instructors of these classes were also interviewed. The voices and recollections of the workers were deemed to be so powerful, particularly when read against the instructors' comments, that a dramatic presentation to feature these voices was developed and performed for various audiences, including the workers and educators who had been interviewed.

The drama is offered here in script form. It was entirely constructed from the interview transcripts, and grounded in themes identified through analysis of the interviews: how workers learned to survive and support one another at the plant, and how they participated in social and strategic learning, even what some might call political or 'critical' learning,⁴ that was entwined with learning how to survive and adapt to life within the organization. Workers who attended the English classes over time also described a growing sense of personal worth and identity, which appeared to be balanced in compliance with and even allegiance to the company's hierarchies and the piecework structures controlling their activity. However, the emphasis here is not upon conceptualizing or developing an argument about these forms of learning, but upon dramatic portrayal.

By way of introducing this script, the following pages provide background to its construction and to the overall study. The first section outlines selected perspectives and concepts related to garment work, learning, and solidarity that were brought to the study. The second section describes the study and its intents. The third section provides an overview of the GWG plant context and the thematic analysis upon which the dramatic script was based. The final section describes the process and methods used to develop the script, with some reflection on responses offered to the script by various audiences.

Garment Work and Workers' Learning

The clothing industry, according to Steedman's 1997 study,⁵ has historically produced a job ghetto for women through forces of class, gender, ethnicity, and family, where women's low wages and status became institutionalized in agreements ne-

³Tara Fenwick, "Tightrope Walkers and Solidarity Sisters: Critical Workplace Educators in the Garment Industry," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (forthcoming).

⁴John Bratton, Jean Helms Mills, Timothy Pynch, and Peter Sawchuk, *Workplace Learning: A Critical Introduction* (Aurora, ON 2003); Stephen D. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Theory: Liberating Adult Learning and Teaching* (San Francisco 2005).

⁵Steedman, *Angels of the Workplace*.

gotiated among men. Roxana Ng reported in 1999 that workers in Canada's garment industry traditionally have been mostly women, about half being new immigrants.⁶ Ng and others have argued that in the labour force in general and the garment industry in particular the category of immigrant women has served to commodify them for employers, reinforcing their class position and providing cheap, docile labour characterized by particularly exploitative conditions often permeated with racism and sexism.⁷ Thus garment factories have relied on low wages and pools of cheap labour to ensure competitive advantage. Repetitive strain injuries became common as new technologies and labour process innovations are introduced to maximize production and minimize excess movement.⁸

Yanz, Jeffcott, Ladd, and Atlin⁹ show that many Canadian garment factories had become unionized by the mid-20th century, with the aim of providing workers stable employment, decent wages, and improved working conditions. However, globalization brought a widespread closure of these plants in the 1990s, with a loss of 33,000 jobs in Canada between 1989 and 1993. Garment workers often became forced into precarious employment as home-based workers or employees of small non-union shops, isolated in an unregulated network of "jobbers" that supplied large distributors.¹⁰ Studies conducted by Ng,¹¹ Mirchandani,¹² and others have raised urgent concern over the low wages, precarious marginalization, and exploitation of these women, and the web of market relations that ensures their continued oppression: "We will thus see the increasing use of sweatshops and homebased work, as manufacturers and jobbers compete in the international market for garment production.... Canadian garment workers will face increasingly similar working and living conditions as their third world counterparts."¹³ Even in those plants that remained open in the 1990s, Livingstone and Sawchuk claim that the immigrant women labouring in them were among the most disadvantaged workers in

⁶Ng, "Homeworking," 1.

⁷Gannagé, "The Health and Safety Concerns of Immigrant Women Workers."

⁸J. Gunning, J. Eaton, D. Ferrier, M. Kerr, A. King, and J. Maltby, *Dealing with Work-Related Musculoskeletal Disorders in the Ontario Clothing Industry*, Report submitted to the Research Advisory Council of the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (Toronto 2000).

⁹Yanz et al., *Policy Options*.

¹⁰Leah F. Vosko, *The Last Threat: Analysis of the Apparel Goods Provisions in the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Impact on Women* (Ottawa 1993).

¹¹Ng, "Freedom for Whom?"

¹²Kiran Mirchandani, Roxana Ng, J. Sangha, T. Rawlings, and N. Coloma-Moya, "Ambivalent Learning: Racialized Barriers to Computer Access for Immigrant Contingent Workers," Working paper, Research Network for New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (Toronto 2002).

¹³Ng, "Freedom for Whom?," 79.

Canada, a workforce impaled on the highly gendered division of labour in both the garment industry and in its patriarchal domestic arrangements.¹⁴

What, then, have these workers learned, and what opportunities for learning, if any, have garment factories provided? From a socio-cultural learning perspective, workers develop knowledge, identity, and strategies informally through their everyday activities and interactions. These activities are embedded in relations shaped by the workplace culture and tools, the object and division of labour, and the perspectives of the participants.¹⁵ Therefore, garment workers' learning can be expected to be linked to their conditions of work and to the nature of work communities influenced by those conditions. However the learning of immigrant women garment workers, concludes Ng, has been conceptualized largely from the employers' standpoint rather than from workers' experience.¹⁶ The result has been under-recognition of informal collective and political learning. Emphasis has been upon skill training, largely ineffective because it is delivered in short periods that fail to promote learning, or offered in areas irrelevant to these women, or given with constraints that prevent access by the women such training is intended to benefit. Most training for these women does not aim to help them learn leadership and organizational skills or to learn about worker's rights, or about how to negotiate with employers and other workers around their rights, responsibilities, and obligations, not only in relation to a job, but to the workplace and the larger society.¹⁷

Educators have argued that workers' political and 'critical' learning is important to help generate greater equity and democracy in the workplace. Brookfield, for instance, is concerned to promote workers' critical learning in order to "reconfigure the workplace as a site for the exercise of human creativity," a project requiring a "defensive flexibility" and "a self-critical, self-referential stance."¹⁸ Thus transformation remains flexible and responsive to its (workplace) circumstances, neither establishing a new orthodoxy nor neglecting reflexivity. Welton also promotes a vision for "developmental" workplaces, where critical learning is an "ex-

¹⁴David W. Livingstone and Peter H. Sawchuk, *Hidden Knowledge: Organized Labor in the Information Age* (Boston 2004), 224.

¹⁵Bratton et al., *Workplace Learning*, 61-63. Tara Fenwick, "Tides of Change: New Themes and Questions in Workplace Learning," in Fenwick, ed., *Socio-cultural Perspectives on Workplace Learning* (San Francisco 2001), 3-17.

¹⁶Roxana Ng, "Training for Whom? for What? Reflection on the Lack of Training for Immigrant Garment Workers," The Research Network for New Approaches to Lifelong Learning Working paper #66 (Toronto 2002), accessed at <http://www.nall.ca/res/6Roxana%20Ng.pdf>.

¹⁷Ng, "Training for Whom?"

¹⁸Stephen D. Brookfield, "Repositioning Ideology Critique in a Critical Theory of Adult Education," *Adult Education Quarterly*, 52, 1 (2001), 7-22, esp. 20.

tension of communicative action into systemic domains.”¹⁹ Welton’s vision is based on his reading of Habermas’s notion of communicative action: individuals’ participation in open, empathetic (democratic) dialogue that promotes collective autonomy, self-clarity, and the capacity to defend one’s rights. Through these connective conversations, people find the freedom to voice needs and desires that can shift into a collective will to act. In a similar vein, Livingstone and Sawchuk claim that “learning should enhance working people’s individual and collective agency in the social world and also in the process of representing that world.”²⁰ In studying this critical learning among working-class men and women, Sawchuk shows that it thrives in informal networks.²¹ A certain mutuality and group orientation emerges within stable working-class communities that Sawchuk calls solidaristic networks. He maintains that these networks produce an “enormous surplus” not only of knowledge production capacity but also emancipatory potential. He concludes that social networks can be viewed as an important site for collective learning, not necessarily entirely for resistance and revolution, but for creating interconnections, identities, and spaces of creativity. Similarly, from her study of women garment workers in Toronto, Ng claims that important learning occurs in informal social time together, in coffee breaks in classes or on the job, where she observed the women developing a collective worker identity and informal knowledge about negotiating their lives as immigrants and as working people.²²

Such strong interconnections and their possibilities for promoting social and political or ‘critical’ learning are aligned with notions of solidarity. Among critical educators, solidarity represents emancipatory or critical learning combined with collective action for revolutionary transformation of both individuals’ consciousness and capitalist work structures.²³ Yet solidarity is becoming recognized as a complex phenomenon that may have multiple, more fluid manifestations.²⁴ Baldwin writes that solidarity emerges in a common experience of vulnerability, “a sense of community ... in the face of universally shared risk.”²⁵ Alternate views of solidarity as communicative action or solidaristic networks suggest that the traditional dualism between learning that is transformational or emancipatory and learn-

¹⁹Michael R. Welton, “In Defense of the Lifeworld: A Habermasian Approach to Adult Learning,” in Welton, ed., *In Defense of the Lifeworld: Critical Perspectives on Adult Learning* (New York 1995), 127-156, quotation from 144.

²⁰Livingstone and Sawchuk, *Hidden Knowledge*, 28.

²¹Peter H. Sawchuk, *Adult Learning and Technology in Working-Class Life* (Cambridge, UK 2003).

²²Ng, “Training for Whom?”

²³Paula Allman, *Critical Education against Global Capitalism: Karl Marx and Revolutionary Critical Education* (Westport, CT 2001); John Holst, *Social Movements: Civil Society and Radical Adult Education* (London 2001).

²⁴Daryl D’Art and Thomas Turner, “The Decline of Worker Solidarity and the End of Collectivism?,” *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 1 (2002), 7-34.

²⁵Peter Baldwin, *The Politics of Social Solidarity* (Cambridge, UK 1990).

ing that is subjugating and reproductive may be overly simplistic. An empirical example comes from a study of immigrant women garment workers learning Information and Communications Technology [ICT] skills, in which Mirchandani and her colleagues²⁶ show that learning can be simultaneously reproductive and transformative. Similarly in three case studies of low-income workers, Church and her collaborators draw attention to learning in work as combining “organizational learning,” “reshaping the definition of self,” and “solidarity learning.”²⁷ In this vein, critical learning and solidarity learning are understood to be multi-faceted and internally contradictory. Workers’ learning needs to be appreciated from the workers’ own experiences, and understood in terms of social and strategic as well as political learning, all of which may entwine elements of both reproductive and transformative learning.

Overview of the Study Methods

The case study developed here was precipitated by the impending closure of the GWG/Levi plant, valued as an historic site and largest employer of immigrants in the city, in Edmonton in December 2004. The overall purpose of the study was three-fold: to capture the history of worklife over time at GWG/Levi; to understand workers’ experiences of their work as it was influenced by industry changes and their sense of themselves in relation to their work and workplace community; and to explore the processes and outcomes of workers’ learning on the job and in training programs, particularly the English language classes. The present discussion and the drama script focus on workers’ learning in its various forms.

Thirty garment workers (27 women and 3 men) who worked at GWG/Levi were interviewed in-depth, through open-ended conversations that explored their everyday work and learning experiences. Participants were recruited by open invitation in plant and community networks. In fact, some workers who had been long retired contacted us and volunteered to be interviewed. Thus we recorded workers’ experiences from as early as World War II, as well as every decade since then until the plant closure. Participants’ countries of origin included, besides Canada, China, Hong Kong, India, Hungary, Ukraine, Czechoslovakia, and Italy. All participants had been in Canada for fifteen years or more. Fourteen worked for GWG/Levi for twenty years or more (see Table 1 for participant details). Thus these were largely well-experienced workers who had contributed long years of service to the company. Interviews were conducted in English and Cantonese: all interviews were tape-recorded and filmed. We asked participants to describe their work activities and conditions as these changed over time, the nature of their relationships with

²⁶Mirchandani et al., “Ambivalent Learning.”

²⁷Kathryn Church, Katherine Shrage, Jean-Marc Fontan, and Roxana Ng, “While No One is Watching: ‘Social Learning’ among People Who are Excluded from the Labour Market,” in Peter Sawchuk, ed., *Researching Work and Learning Conference Proceedings* (Calgary 2001), 244-249.

other workers, their involvement in union and other educational experiences, their challenges and the strategies they developed to meet these, and their responses to the plant closure. Most of the women interviewed had been employed as sewing machine operators, though some had also been supervisors or had taken roles in union activities – the three men interviewed had worked as cutters. Besides workers, four workplace educators (all women) who had conducted the English language programs were also interviewed, and conversations were held with managers and human resources personnel.

As is usually the case with research interviews, issues of positionality and language can pose significant limitations to the comfort and openness of the interviewees. In our study these issues were exacerbated by the sensitive timing of the interviews, which were held just prior to and after plant closure. Some participants may well have articulated what they thought interviewers wanted to hear, or what they thought would best serve the plant's interests. Further, while many participants appeared not to notice the camera after the first few minutes, clearly there is a particular level of performance involved in filmed interviews on the part of both interviewer and interviewee. All of these issues constitute limitations of the study.

In addition to the interviews, documents and artifacts were also collected, including historical records, photos, advertisements, and garment products. Observation and film footage was recorded of the plants' operations before it shut down. Historical analysis of this material has been conducted, and a large collection of historic GWG/Levi products assembled for conversion to a museum exhibit. Photos with interview quotes were made into a travelling display that has been presented to labour gatherings, city celebrations, and scholarly conferences.²⁸ The point is that the overall project involved extensive community collaboration and targeted multiple venues and forms of dissemination to educate the public about aspects of the GWG/Levi story. The dramatic presentation and this written overview focus upon just one element: the learning and work-life experiences narrated by the GWG/Levi garment workers.

Learning at GWG/Levi

The organizational context for the study has a lengthy and complex history involving multiple technological and managerial transitions, union activity, and ethnic dynamics. Analysis of these facets lies beyond the scope of the present presentation, but a brief description of the context is provided here as background for the workers' own voices. The Great Western Garment Company was opened in Edmonton in 1911 to capitalize on the growing demand for durable workwear for miners and railway workers in Alberta. Its reputation throughout its history was for

²⁸Some of these photos are now available online through the Alberta Labour History Institute "Help Preserve 100 Years of Labour History," <http://www.labourhistory.ca/default.asp?lang=eng&mode=displaygallery&gallerytype=PA.P149&PageIndex=74>.

benevolent management, progressive conditions, and decent wages.²⁹ GWG/Levi was also the largest employer of new immigrants in Edmonton for many years. The plant was unionized from the beginning: partly to build a marketing strategy targeting union workers, and partly because owners wanted to ensure high standards for worker safety. GWG workers were members of the United Garment Workers of America [UGWA], and later the United Food and Commercial Workers [UFCW] when it merged with UGWA in 1994. The UFCW focused on negotiating wage restructuring, decent shifts, and overtime pay, and improved worker benefits. Sewing machine operators told us that they were paid by the piece until the late 1980s, when the union worked with the company to implement an income system based on a reasonable safe quota tied to a guaranteed wage.

From eight seamstresses in 1911 GWG grew to 600 workers during World War II, when production of military clothing reached 25,000 units per week. By 1953 GWG had moved to a building in the inner city reportedly so that employees with families could be closer to home, and became one of the most technologically advanced garment manufacturing plants in the world.³⁰ By 1960, GWG employed over 1,500 workers in four Canadian cities. Its success attracted attention: in 1961 Levi-Strauss, the largest jeans manufacturer in the US at the time, acquired a majority interest. Changes recalled by the workers employed at the Alberta plant during the 1960s included upgraded equipment and the introduction of time-study engineers: men who measured the workers' task performance, then trained them to reduce their movements to machinelike efficient repetition. In the 1980s the company introduced quality circles and training associated with communications and teamwork for those women promoted to supervisory positions. In 1987, GWG/Levi contracted Virginia Sauve, an independent adult educator with her own company, English Language Professionals, Inc., to provide ESL classes every afternoon after work and on Saturdays. According to Sauve the impetus for the English programs came from a company administrator in the Toronto office, who wanted to do something to reward the workers for all they gave to the company, and because they saw a need. Sauve obtained funding initially from the federal government and then through the Alberta provincial government for the classes, but when government support ended after four years, the company itself continued to fund the programs until the 2004 plant closing.

Many workers said they had been referred to GWG/Levi for employment by their relatives and immigrant agencies. Most said they needed the income, were happy to find full-time employment whatever the conditions, and believed they had no other choice than GWG/Levi, given their lack of English. Once hired, a new sewer was shown how to perform one particular procedure, such as sewing a belt loop. (The making of one pair of jeans had been divided into over 60 discrete proce-

²⁹Catherine Cole, "Garment Manufacturing in Edmonton 1911-1939," MA thesis, University of Alberta, 1988.

³⁰Ibid.

dures.) She might continue this procedure for a few months or several years until she was told to move to a new operation: one worker told us she tacked jeans front to back for 35 years.

The difficult conditions of garment factories, including the numbing effects of repetition and speed induced by piecework, have been reported elsewhere.³¹ In terms of learning, participants in this study reported that their most important skill was to learn how to sew as fast as possible without hurting oneself or making mistakes: both meant losing wages. Seams judged inadequate had to be ripped out and re-sewn without compensation. Women described a balance one needed to acquire between maximum personal speed and minimum errors. One worker who sewed the GWG/Levi logo onto pockets demonstrated a system that she learned of whirling rotation among three machines. Another, frustrated over lost wages waiting for the “sewing machine man” to fix the machines which often “break,” learned how to fix the machine herself. Even after wage structures were changed in the late 1980s from piece-pay to quota incomes, speed seemed to frame the work. Essentially, in learning how to concentrate upon sewing as fast and error-free as possible, workers were learning to turn their bodies into machines feeding the mass assembly production.

Despite the competitive structures of piecework and isolation on individual noisy machines, strong social bonds formed among some workers. Many interviewees described a community of strategic learning and friendships, of non-corporation “teamwork.” Some noted that every person’s success in maintaining the high speed/low error balance helped all to maximize their income. The intimate connections and sense of family were evident at the plant’s closing, which most workers described as very sad — mostly for losing the fellowship of their community.

Four individuals mentioned learning about inequitable division of labour, worker rights, and leadership skills through their involvement in union activities. However, many interviewees reported little interest or involvement in the union. As one woman explained, people were afraid of losing their jobs and did not want to “rock the boat.” Some experienced the union as exclusive (meetings were held in English, with Chinese translation introduced in the 1980s), with forced dues and mandatory attendance. One Chinese woman claimed that she and her friends from China preferred a “moderate” or “middle way” to union challenge in any case, and were irritated at efforts to change structures they believed to be immutable. Many workers maintained that their employer was humane and caring even at the plant closing.

One important site where new immigrant workers’ learning was fostered, along with awareness of rights and tools to communicate these to management, was the English-learning classes. The instructors described the instructional approach

³¹Steedman, *Angels of the Workplace*; Gannagé, “The Health and Safety Concerns of Immigrant Women Workers.”

as dialogic, flexible, and collaborative, building on the learners' concerns and everyday problems to teach language as well as lifeskills and critical reflection. In some ways these classes appeared to become sites of "communicative action" in Welton's³² terms of adult education: a space where workers could laugh and talk informally, away from the pressures of piecework and the demands of extended families awaiting them at home. Individuals said they were recognized and their learning valued in ways they had not experienced before. According to both students and the instructors, the learning groups formed close relationships and an ongoing community — students would not leave the classes even after completing the program.

The classes began to address a range of problems brought by the learners: health and family issues, cultural adjustment questions, employment complaints, civic topics, and citizenship preparation. GWG/Levi also soon saw the English classes as an effective medium for transmitting workplace policies and announcements. The instructors and a few workers narrated anecdotes illustrating ways that learning some English helped individuals to negotiate directly with supervisors to get days off or to confront what they judged unfair treatment. Overall, workers claimed that, through their experiences in these classes, they developed confidence in themselves and practical skills together to negotiate their lives.

Overall, the workers' narratives provided evidence of learning in ways that appeared to have enhanced their personal sense of self-worth, confidence, and collectivity. Social interconnections, recognition of shared social position, some sense of team, and mutual support in negotiating their work and home challenges helped generate what appeared to be a collective identity. The women particularly valued the learning offered in safe supportive circles of dialogue. They came to these circles not only for language-learning, but also apparently for friendship, personal recognition, and strategic life-management information unavailable elsewhere to them — and perhaps also, as one of the educators pointed out, to enjoy a space of renewal and rest. In addition, workers learned to negotiate and survive the numbing demands of piecework: complying with and even trusting the company as a benevolent 'family', in their words, but also finding small sites of resistance, both covert and overt. These narratives echo the findings of others³³ that there is not a clear *either-or* distinguishing transformative and reproductive learning in the workplace, but unexpected continuities and blurred disjunctures between them. Workers defended for themselves, within the limits of industrialized garment production, a viable space for earning the best income and establishing conditions they thought they could obtain given their position as women and/or as visible minorities who could not speak English. Their primary learning seemed to be through social connections reminiscent of Sawchuk's conception of a solidaristic network,³⁴ where

³²Welton, "In Defense of the Lifeworld."

³³Mirchandani et al., "Ambivalent Learning"; Church et al., "While No One is Watching."

³⁴Sawchuk, *Adult Learning*.

workers developed capacities and support to survive and sometimes confronted oppression with minimal cost to their livelihood and safety. The sad ending to the story when the plant suddenly closed was not just about losing their jobs, but about losing the home that the plant had become.

Developing the Drama

The dramatic script was created initially to present the study findings to a scholarly meeting (the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education at Congress 2005 in London, Ontario) in what was hoped would be an engaging and provocative approach. Some explanation of the process involved in constructing the drama is warranted. First, it should be clarified that *all* text in the drama is taken directly from the actual interview transcripts, with some minor alterations to remove repeated or broken phrases. No additional text was written to supplement transcript excerpts. However, it should be emphasized that the selection and assemblage of these excerpts represents a high degree of construction, directed by a particular perspective used to interpret the transcripts. This is partly why so much background has been provided in the preceding pages, to illuminate as far as possible the interpretive hand guiding the dramaturgical choices that produced this script.

Second, the dramatic script was assembled by one person — myself — and I am at best naive and untrained in drama and scriptwriting. The original performers were not trained actors but volunteer graduate students in education at the University of Alberta, some of whom were performing drama for the first time. I chose a ‘reader’s theatre’ format, where performers tend to remain seated and read the text in character, believing this might be a straightforward undertaking suited to amateurs like ourselves. (Some action was added, partly through the suggestions and improvisations of the graduate student actors. This action was entirely invented, based on the stories in the transcripts.) What I did not fully appreciate were the issues involved in constructing coherent storylines and engaging, consistent characters — issues that performing artists have since pointed out to me comprise weaknesses in the present script.

Third, two choices made in assembling the script particularly affected its construction. Four voices were created to present composites of the GWG/Levi workers; that is, excerpts from various transcripts were collapsed into each one of the four voices. Given the focus here on workers’ learning, the fifth role was devoted to an educator, collapsing various excerpts from the educators’ transcripts. I also chose, within a rough temporal progression from the war years until the 2004 plant closing, not to follow a strict chronological sequence; instead, incidents from different time periods are juxtaposed without much attempt to contextualize, historicize, or otherwise analyse them. This choice was to maintain focus on the workers’ personal experience of these events.

The process of assembling the drama began with the themes from the interview analysis. The flow moves roughly from introducing the workers’ reasons for com-

ing to GWG, to exploring the dreary worklife conditions, the incidents and processes of social and political learning, the varying experiences of union activity as well as supervisory training, the intimacy and connectedness experienced in the English classes, the outcomes of confidence and self-worth claimed by some interviewees, and finally the devastating loss they spoke of at the closing of the plant. Perhaps the most important and almost painful part of the script assembling process, for me, was ultimately choosing excerpts that seemed to ‘play’ best dramatically. A broader sweep of events seemed more appropriate for performance than a deeper focus on one nuanced aspect, and clear or dramatic stories were selected over transcript excerpts presenting more difficult-to-access reflections. Much was left behind that might normally have warranted close analysis in a research report. I also found that the script began to take a shape of its own as a narrative arc (or so I thought) began to form, focusing on the tensions involved in learning at work and the balancing act of both educators and student-workers.

The experience of presenting this drama merits a final comment. We (myself and the volunteer performers) decided to present it in front of a large screen against which were projected historic photos taken from the GWG archives. We also used the sounds of the sewing machines and factory bells throughout the presentation, and opened and closed the drama with a recorded song. I believe all of us were surprised by the amount of rehearsal required to attain even a modest level of performance quality. Our first presentation was to the GWG/Levi workers and educators who had been interviewed, after which we held a dialogue for their response, suggestions, and permission for us to present their portrayals to others. This event became perhaps the most unexpected and powerful reward of our study: the workers seemed absolutely delighted. They laughed, they pointed out themselves and their friends in the portrayals, they elaborated the stories touched upon in the drama, they shared different meanings and emotional responses to the portrayals — and most important, they stressed one message: we want people to see our story. They also requested that we remove any negative reference to the GWG/Levi company and management.

Our academic audience at Congress appeared appreciative, and some challenged us for not taking up a more robust critique of the labour process, the company, and educators’ complicity in the exploitation of garment work. After that we began to receive requests from immigrant service agencies to present the drama to their staffs. The responses there were compelling and immediate: audience members said they identified closely with the portrayals and the issues, and the drama became a launching point for powerful discussions around workers’ learning, educators’ roles, and agency supports. Our final presentation to an arts-based conference in educational research was an exercise in humility. We made the mistake of filming a DVD of our live presentation without understanding the different nuanced distinctions and demands of theatre and film. While kind, the audience helped us to realize that aesthetic presentation is a field of its own, and that researchers aspiring

to incorporate arts media into their dissemination of findings ought to develop knowledge of fine arts, or collaborate directly with artists.

Overall the experience of developing and presenting findings in the form of a reader's theatre dramatic script has offered challenging learning. A drama engages viewers with an emotional power and immediacy that moves quickly into a dialogue of key issues, so that viewers' different perspectives are thrown into sharp relief. Further, the experience of constructing the drama has provided a unique interpretive pathway into the data, yielding fresh insights about the workers' learning. The juxtaposition of vastly different audience response has revealed multiple meanings and opposing perspectives at stake among those committed to improving worklife conditions and promoting workers' learning: educators, academics, immigrant service professionals, managers, and workers. Finally, the experience of performing these workers' voices, reading their words aloud again and again, brings a new appreciation for the subjective worlds within these words. These are complex people, not just subjugated victims or reproductive learners, who, within the often exploitive conditions and social interconnections of their worklives, develop strategy, resilience, and strength.

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Table 1. Study Participants: Actual names of GWG/Levi Edmonton factory workers and ESL instructors interviewed for this study, listed in sequence of start year of employment

Name	Job(s) held	Start-End year	Country of origin
Emily	Operator, special machines	1928-1931	Canada
Emma	Operator, supervisor	ca. 1938-1941	Canada
Nellie	Seamstress	1938-1946	Ukraine
Helen	Operator, single needle machine	1939-1942	Canada
Norah	Seamstress	1940-1941	Canada
Beulah	Presser, cutter	1942-1947	Canada
Assunta	Seamstress	1943-1945; 1965-1966	Italy
Mary	Seamstress, supervisor	1951-1978	Ukraine
Elizabeth	Seamstress, supervisor	1957-1997	Hungary
Sau Mah	Seamstress, inspector	1960-1999	China
Mee Chan	Seamstress	1962-1970	China
Chee Luck	Cloth spreader, cutter	1963-1999	China
Sum Yuk	Seamstress, inspector	1963-2002	China
Annette	Seamstress	1965-1966	Canada
Joyce	Material handler	1965-2004	Canada
Hana	Seamstress	1968	Czechoslovakia
Jo-Anne	Seamstress, instructor, supervisor	1969-2004	China
Tommy	Cutter	1969-2004	China
Julie	Seamstress	1973-2004	China
Sarojni	Distributor, supervisor	1974-2004	Fiji
Bhubinder	Seamstress	1975-2004	India
Virginia	Seamstress, supervisor	1979-2004	China
Suet	Seamstress	1979-2004	Hong Kong
Giuseppina	Seamstress	1980-2004	Italy

Shirley	Seamstress	1981-2004	China
Meena	Examiner	1981-2004	India
Janet Cardinal	Seamstress, receptionist	1988-2004	Canada
Hua Hu	Seamstress, cutter	1989-2004	China

Instructors

Virginia Sauve	Instructor, director of ESL program	1987-2004	Canada
Bev	Instructor, ESL	1987-2004	Canada
Judy	Instructor, ESL	1989-1996	Canada
Hilary	Instructor, ESL	1990-1995	Canada

“Working the Line — People in My Heart”

A Reader’s Theatre Presentation

based on work experiences and learning of garment workers
at the GWG/Levi clothing factory

Woman 1 — garment worker, new immigrant (Asian)

Woman 2 — garment worker, new immigrant (European)

Woman 3 — garment worker, new immigrant (East European)

Woman 4 — educator (English as Second Language) and narrator

Woman 5 — garment worker, Alberta-born

SCENE ONE

Actors stand facing audience, in front of stools.

Four are in a row in middle, in two pairs. The fifth is Down Right (Woman 4 — Educator). All except Woman 4 wear aprons.

Silence. Then bell — all except Educator whirl around, sit on stool, heads down, back to audience. Educator goes over to her stool and sits, facing audience. Machine sounds up.

Projected on large screen behind actors — photos of GWG factory, early days. Photos of early Edmonton. Projected photos continue to change throughout the presentation, showing GWG workers at the machines, at lunch, at company picnics, union activities, etc.

Actors turn around quickly to face audience only when speaking.

Woman 1: I walk to there. When I get there, punch the timecard, punch these papers, punch those papers, then I go closer to sew station to wait for bell.

Woman 2: Of course you couldn’t go up until the bell went and you got to your machines and you got your work. A bundle girl would bring the work. We would get quite upset if the bundle girl didn’t bring the work on time because you just wanted to work.

Woman 1: I sew clothes, sew till coffee time and then I stop, go to washroom 15 minutes. Go back to work then until 12 p.m. Eat lunch. Afternoon 3 p.m. again is coffee time. Drink something, go to washroom. Then work again. 4:30 work is done.

Woman 2: You went by the bells.

Woman 5: My first day at work was a revelation. All I could see was a sea of sewing machines. At each one a bent-over operator was working as if her life depended on it. All the operators were women. No one was saying anything.

Woman 4: Mass assembly operations are mind numbing. You cannot afford to think of anything but *one*, get it done right get it done fast, *two* don't hurt yourself. And you cannot afford to let your mind wander. And so the mind loses its ability to think.

Woman 1: The first day, standing there, the feet were all swollen. I didn't know how — after work — didn't know how to walk.

Woman 3: Everything was dark, the floor was dark, the walls were dark, there was no daylight, artificial light. You didn't get out of your chair.

Woman 5: And I remember being hot in there, there was no air-conditioning I know that. I hated it, it was an awful place. I just couldn't be shut up like that, it was like being in jail almost. Because I was *sitting* at a, at a, at a *machine*.

Woman 2: I remember it being stuffy. You would see layers of dust every day, layers of — well not dust, but you know the dust from the sewing ... Fuzz, yeah that's it. And it would cover everything. Even your clothes.

In next section, as each woman faces audience to speak, she remains facing audience.

Woman 1: Why I went there to work? Because I had to make a living. I had a husband, daughter coming to Canada, I need to earn money. When I first came here I didn't know many things so I went there to learn.

Woman 3: Why did I go into sewing factory? I immigrated. I felt I was second-class citizen, not much money, language problem. Not much luck. The working environment, the work is very suited for women to work. Of course if your education was higher this isn't very good. But in terms of us, not much skill then.

Woman 4: These women, it's the sacrificial generation. I've long witnessed that the first generation of immigrants very often knowingly sacrifice their own life experience to make things better for their children.

Woman 2: The reason I worked there is my grandmother was a seamstress, my mother was a seamstress so they sort of pushed me into, “Oh yeah, get a skill, you know?”

Woman 1: I don’t know anything. Where would I go? Luckily there was a sewing factory. Everyone worked here.

Woman 3: GWG, all of us co-workers always say that it is the United Nations. The largest nation is Chinese people. India there are quite a lot, Vietnamese. Next there are Polish people, Italian people, Portugal people, Africa people, Laos people, Philippines people, Ethiopia people, Japanese people ...

Woman 5: When you finish school grade twelve, what does a girl do in those days? The only jobs that were available was GWG — for an inexperienced, twenty-one-year-old girl with no education.

All women whirl around, bend over — back to work.

Woman 2: Blue jeans in those days, the dye job was very bad and at the end of a shift, your hands would be absolutely blue.

Woman 3: You’d come home you’re blue, you would be blue from head to foot, your clothes, all would be just blue ... you’d come home you’d try to wash all that off ... It’s a wonder our blood wasn’t blue (*laughs*).

Woman 4: Piece work is very dreary. It’s very tiresome. You’re doing the same thing over and over and over again.

Woman 2: The stuff comes out from the cutting room all in pieces in bundles. The bundle girl distributes to each operator the pieces and you have to keep on going because you couldn’t stop for anything. If you didn’t finish your bundle the next person could not start the same bundle. This is how it was. And so, it was hard work.

Woman 5: We were just doing our little operation and we weren’t concerned how long it would take to make a pair of pants and I doubt if anybody told us either.

Woman 3: The bar tack was my specialty.... And there was another girl I used to compete with. See how many more bundles I could do than her.

Stay facing the audience.

Woman 2: *(to Woman 3)* At first I did one year sewing belt loops. Then they trained me to sew the crease. I have worked — four years, about. Sew the crease.

Woman 1: *(to Women 2 and 3)* I started work 1989, November 20. Sewed jeans waist. Sewed jeans waist many years.

Woman 5: *(to Women 1, 2, 3)* I started working at GWG in 1965. I was a bundle girl. Matching fronts and backs together of jeans. I'm still doing the same thing now. I've worked here for 35 years.

Woman 3: *(to Women 1, 2, 5)* I started working there in August 13, 1963. I was an engineer — I thought, this will just be for a few months. *(all laugh, nodding)* I worked there until March 29, 2002. Worked for 38 years.

All turn back to audience to face machines.

Woman 4: When you're trained in just one little specific seam you can't go and sew a pair of pants. You're not much use any place else. So they were limited to their jobs and that's I think, the management knew that.

Woman 2: You didn't have time to get up and look around to see what everybody else was doing, you were there to do your work. *(aside to audience)* Some of the women, they wouldn't even take time to go to the washroom. They were just givin' her, you know.

Woman 3: Everybody was in a hurry sewing, because the faster they sewed the more money they made. I almost took this finger off because I got it caught in the guide and I — trying to go fast, you see — and the finger cut. But I kept on working, they put a bandage on it and that was about it *(laughs)*.

Woman 5: And don't forget if you made a mistake you'd get the bundle back and you could rip — you might rip for a few hours a day — so you wouldn't get paid for the ripping and you would have had to redo it.

Woman 2: Even if you were five minutes early, waiting for your machine, you couldn't work on the repairs. You had to do them within your working hours and of course if you had repairs then you didn't produce very much.

Woman 1: And sewing machines keep breaking. After sewing machine get fixed you start working. But wait for fix. It waste time, so you can't earn money.

Woman 3: About the sixties they brought in production engineers from the States. Every little movement is studied. Every little pick up and they tell you with which fingers too. They stood for hours and days and months of this stop watches and their little benches.

Woman 1: (*shrugs*) If you told me be faster, it was alright. If you told me go slower, that was alright.

Woman 5: I would have done whatever I was told because I was raised that way, I had a very strict mother and I was used to doing exactly what I was told and when I was told and how I was told. So I would never have challenged anybody on anything — and I remained that way for too long in my life.

Woman 2: You had no control, no control at all. You didn't even keep track of your own work, they told you what you did. It was all up to them. You had to trust they were honest.

All in unison: You had no control over anything. (*Stay facing audience.*)

Woman 2: You just were there — *doing*.

Woman 3: (*to others, who nod as she speaks*) But there was lots of friends. Like when we came here we just fit in — no problem at all. In our line most of the woman are from my country. And we work together, it's a nice atmosphere.

Woman 1: Working, you have to learn right. You have to give into people. It's not that you do good and the other people doesn't do good. You can't, just because you know something, be proud. You have to go slowly so that everyone can follow you together.

All in unison: Teamwork.

Woman 5: Everyone has to help each other. You work together. I make clothes and you done this and someone fixes the sewing machine. We all have to help each other, but we don't talk about it.

All turn backs to audience to face machines.

Woman 2: They put us on officers' army shirts — fine materials. The material would get all bunched up in the machines. We couldn't work, we couldn't produce and we were still paid by the piece work. So we started to complain and nobody was

listening. We were told, it's war time. So one day we were just sitting there waiting for the bell to go after lunch and somebody said,

Woman 3: I think we have a solution here. When the power comes on we'll stop it. Maybe they'll listen to us.

Woman 2: So one of us went to the place and pulled the thing down.

Woman 3 gets up, goes to left wall, pulls. Silence — sound of machines stops.

Woman 2: Within minutes there were officials, managers, mechanics, union representative ...

All others, including Woman 4, put on jackets, swarm Woman 2, with backs to audience.

All in unison, shouting variously: What happened? Why?

Woman 2: *(stands on stool)* OK all we want is to put us on time work until we can pick up speed. And then we can go back on piece work. This way we can't even have enough to pay our board.

All huddle.

Woman 2: *(continues as she steps off stool, coming down stage to face audience)* So anyway, between the union and management they came to a deal. And we got paid time work a little while! But if we weren't so scared we would have realized that they couldn't fire us, all of us.

All in unison: Because then they would have come to a total standstill.

Machine noise starts up again. Back to stools, backs to audience.

Woman 4: The union was never the immigrant women — well, they were immigrant women but they weren't the Chinese women. They never did want to go to the union meetings. They didn't feel they belonged there.

Woman 1: Didn't know, didn't talk about the Labour union. When they had a meeting you came to the meeting. When we worked we didn't talk about the Labour union issues.

All in unison: Didn't talk about it. *(Remain with backs to audience.)*

Woman 4: How did they feel about their union? That it took their money and didn't do much for them.

Woman 2: They had to pay their union dues and I — it was a horrible job, nobody wanted it. So of course, dumb me ... I stood on the stairs with all the names and if they were paid up to date or how far behind they were. This union lady from Winnipeg came and said if they didn't pay up they would be fired, right on the dot.

Woman 5: (*to Woman 2*) I don't think the union had too much clout in those days. "Why do you want a pension? You know you've got a husband that's supposed to support you. You're just here like a secondary job, just a little fill in with your little spare time. What else would you do at home?"

Woman 4: But I think a lot of these women didn't want to rock the boat so they just went along.

Woman 1: As workers our target is to work and earn money. Sometimes that is pretty bad, but that is it. After all, we are the immigrants. We have a few Canadian workers. They are never satisfied, always. They have high power, the pressure is on. We're all like, whatever, whoever, work is the same. They always want to ask for reform, but can't reform. So what can change? So don't do it.

Woman 4: They're happy to have a job. So the union really had it made.

Each woman stands from stools, takes off apron, and moves to right or left side, as Woman 2 delivers the following speech. They take on supervisor role (in front of Educator). Woman 1 is the only one left sitting.

Woman 2: Before long, I guess because I talk a lot, they asked me to be supervisor. So of course I couldn't be in the union anymore. When you're supervisor you're in the middle of the workers and you're in the middle of the top level. You're in between there, sandwiched. It was quite stressful.

Woman 3: The supervisors were given courses for, how happy are you in your work? And your attitude towards everything.

Woman 5: My goal was to train the people, working like a team. But not every supervisor wanted to do teamwork because that's more work for you, because you have to really concentrate on people. Some supervisors only care for, how much I can push out, how much I can push out.

Woman 2: By the time I finished, they were looking for people with professional training in production, in supervision, in the business end of it which I didn't have any (*shrugs*). I was just a farm girl who went to work.

All supervisors go back to their stools and put aprons back on.

Woman 1: Everyone had to use English. Supervisor know — Chinese not know English. You watch, he use gestures to talk you, then you understand what he say.

As Woman 4 speaks, the machine noises shut off, the others gather the stools into a semi-circle.

Woman 4: The English classes began to be held every day after work, and on Saturdays. The company were great — gave us the rooms and tables and even built these wonderful cupboards for all the materials.

Woman 1: Since I went to learn English that I learned, I know a lot more things. It helped me to become more ambitious.

Woman 4: It was a sharing time. All during the day they were push, push, push, push, then they'd go home and cook dinner and do laundry and all the other things and so they were tired. But that was precious time that they could sit down with one another and laugh and talk and be.

Woman 1: They tell you, talk in Chinese if you don't understand — then they taught us.

Woman 3: They taught you about work things. Teach you how to talk, how to repair the sewing machine, how to write, they wanted you to learn things.

Woman 4: They had questions about you know, what's this pap smear thing we're supposed to get every year and why should we get a mammogram? And they brought personal things about their families and their fears, their concerns. There was a great deal of information giving ... about the community, about the country. We had mock elections ...

Woman 1: I get very good education there you know, they make sure you know, you get — all the tools what you needed for, and — I'm very happy and I'm very appreciated.

Woman 4: They were part of a circle of women, they learned about themselves, they learned about Canadians, they learned that people would listen to them, they learned ways of expressing themselves.

Woman 2: A lot of the people whose English got better they would interpret for problems at the plant and things like that. As so there was a respect of people in the English classes. They would be used by other employees to get the real message from union meetings and stuff. Because people would go and they wouldn't understand to full and so then they would be like check it out in classes.

Woman 3: (*stands, walks to Down Right facing audience, arms folded*) And also then, you know, some of the supervisors I think didn't trust the English classes, because they'd see how people would bring things up from the classes.

Woman 2: (*stands, walks to Down Left facing audience, arms folded*) One of the supervisors said, oh, they're getting lippy ... the workers, because they could talk now.

Woman 4: The real question was what difference are these classes making in people's lives, how are their lives better because they're participating in the English class?

Bell. Machines start up again, stools returned to factory pattern, aprons on as Woman 5 talks while she puts on her apron. She does not sit.

Woman 5: About 1970 they were going to cut us down from twelve cents a bundle to less. LC and I, because we did the same job, we were side by side, she says, Are you gonna take that? and I says, well I gotta work. She says, well I gotta work too, I gotta son to look after, but I'm gonna walk out. Then she said, I think you and I should *both* walk out and leave them stranded. So this is what we did.

Woman 4: At that day and age the ladies' garment unions were not as powerful as the men's workers unions. They were classed as like, oh she's got a husband.

Woman 5: Our floor lady at that time — boy I'm tellin' you, she was mad. She says, you can't walk out! And I says, we're walking out. So we did. (*laughs*) So they came to Woodward's after I got my job, they came to Woodward's and told me, Would I please come back and work at the GWG? And I said, no way! No way. I had already started at Woodward's for seventeen dollars a week and I knew I would *get* it every week, it wasn't just — whatever you earned, that's what you got.

Woman 2: Being involved in the union it sure opens your eyes. A lot of them didn't even know they had rights — They were kind of in their own little cocoon there — Like, come on you girls, you have a lot more rights than what you think you do. Because you come from a country where you have no rights.

Woman 5: When I went back in 1988 I think I was a little more educated on my rights. Because I was older and I'd learnt things over time. I wasn't going to get treated like I was there in the sixties.

Woman 4: When we came into the plant the women were on piecework. And after several years of the English program, the union felt that the workers had enough English to understand negotiating a process to get off piece work onto wage employment.

Woman 3: (*stands as she talks, steps down stage to face audience*) I got involved in union because I wanted to help people, I mean, to make difference. To make difference in people's life. And to change things. The more you get involved the more you get the stuff for the people. We can have a vision.

Woman 2: I was a different person after I went through lots of training and studying books myself, which gave me more knowledge to be a better leader. As people learnt that they had more rights, they stand up more to their supervisors. — “Listen, if you don't help me” — like talking to a supervisor — “I can go and talk to management.” It was a learning process, and then they would teach their friends. They got more and more confident.

Woman 1: Machine break, you run to another machine. Once fixed it breaks again. You keep running back and forth and you can't earn money. So — (*stands*) I fix machine. The stupid sewing machine man screamed, but actually, he doesn't know how to fix it. Luckily he didn't scream at me or else — (*walks down stage to stand beside Woman 3*) I would have screamed at him to death.

Woman 5: I was the union president for five years now. I was a little bit intimidated my first time I went to a meeting — these big people and me so small. I don't know what they were talking about. But (*stands*) I can see they're warm to everybody and it was — (*walks down stage*) it was OK. (*pause*) I can say whatever I want, you know.

Woman 4: (*stands as she talks, to walk slowly Down Right in line with others but apart*) In _____ the women bargained successfully for wage payment, and the old piece rate pay was abolished for good. In _____ the women finally did get their pen-

sion. Which was a hugely freeing thing for the women, and they were extraordinarily pleased that they were now being paid a wage.

Machine sound turns off. All women slowly turn backs to audience to face the screen. Projection—news story of plant closure. Throughout the following, photos of exterior of plant, gatherings of workers outside. Song comes up with slides, then Woman 1 turns, and starts.

Woman 1: When I heard the plant was closing I was very upset, I was crying. Yeah, that was my second home, you know. I been educated, I been—I know more, more, more things like ever I can have.

Others turn and silently and slowly hug one another—Woman 4 joins this. After speaking her last line, each woman picks up her stool and walks off stage.

Woman 2: I love working with GWG. I'm going to miss it a lot actually.

Woman 3: It was like suddenly the family, it was suddenly breaking up.

Woman 4: So many other people, everybody was crying when they heard the news.

Woman 3: In terms of myself I feel that GWG has given me a lot of opportunity help, like letting me study, working as a supervisor, and gains were very good. It let me help my family atmosphere so it was better. I could get my three children through university so it's very good.

Woman 5: Our factory is like a big family they say. They really encouraged me, they really respect us workers. They really care for us.

Woman 4: I feel that these women in some way live in me and I in some way live in them. And there's a sisterhood.

Woman 1: All those people in my heart. I never forget them.

Final photo—group of GWG women sewers standing arms about each other—Maria Dunne song up.

Woman 4: My philosophy of workplace education is that you're like a tightrope walker. You try your best to serve the interests of the individuals that are in the class, the company and the union and you try to keep those things in balance and if you're good you can. I can't say that I've ever fallen off the tightrope. Well, come really close.