

‘What could trade union education look like in the 21st century?’

We print below a summary by Colin Waugh of a discussion document with the above title drafted by Norman Crowther, NEU National Official Post-16 Education, with responsibility for Further Education and Sixth Form Colleges.

PSE readers are invited to comment on the document as summarised here. Or to read the full document, which contains some arguments omitted from the summary, please contact cwaugh1@btinternet.com.

UK unions now face a lot of challenges.

Along with other measures, the development of a valid form of trade union education is crucial to how unions should respond to these challenges. Such a form would need to be more coherent than the forms of TU education that exist at the moment.

A necessary condition of such development is that those seeking to bring it about should investigate the history of trade union education. This history is relevant to the present because a key cause of the current lack of coherence is a disagreement over the nature and purpose of TU education that dates back to the early 1900s.

In that earlier period this disagreement took the form of the opposition between, on the one hand, the Workers Education Association (WEA) and Workers Education Trade Union Committee WETUC and, on the other, the Plebs League and the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC). The present-day successors to these organisations are, respectively, the WEA (characterised by Norman Crowther as ‘liberal’) and the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), which shares an approach with Unite (characterised by Norman as ‘radical’).

Neither of these traditions is superior to the other.

The present character of TU education stems from unsuccessful steps taken by the TUC in the 1960s to resolve the conflict between these two traditions. It comprises two main strands: the skills training of lay organisers, and the system by which, under Department for Education control, Union Learning Reps facilitate members’ access to broader forms of post-compulsory education. There is room for debate about the value of this second strand. (Norman characterises the overall approach supported at present by the TUC as ‘functional’.)

The provision made by different unions today commonly brings together some elements of the liberal, the radical and the functional. However, this ad hoc interaction does not ensure overall coherence in the field of TU education, and this in turn hampers the ability of the TU movement as a whole to address current challenges.

There needs to be research that investigates both the current practice of TU education at a grassroots level and the views of learners, tutors, managers of providing centres, union education officers and general secretaries. The possible relations between TU education and lifelong learning more generally need also to be considered.