

The dilemma in TU education

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Over the last thirty years there have been several changes in trade union education provision. In 1963, the approach was:

There cannot be one standard pattern of teaching courses for shop stewards. The need is for a variety of courses to allow for differing circumstances in different industries and differing practices of different unions. The educational needs of individual stewards will vary, and there should be opportunities for individuals to undertake, as occasion arises, such courses as are appropriate to their needs. ('Training of Shop Stewards' - TUC/ British Employers Federation statement, April 1963)

The TUC established its national education service in 1964. Prior to this, some unions were involved in two quasi-national schemes (quasi-national because provision was varied and patchy): one provided by the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC), the other by the Workers' Education Association (via its Workers' Educational Trade Union Committee (WETUC)). There has been a definite increase in both the degree of interest and the role played by the state in trade union education following the establishment of the TUC's Regional Education Scheme initiative, which was to incorporate both WETUC and the NCLC under one umbrella.

Much contemporary discussion about the present and future direction of trade union education has undoubtedly been shaped by the outcome of such earlier developments. In both theory and practice, education for trade union stewards/representatives has been shaped by traditions and core principles of working class struggle that predate the establishment of the TUC education service, if not necessarily by the subsequent more overt interest shown by the state in trade union education.

The centralisation of the TUC education service was to coincide with a steady growth in trade union membership, and the TUC had responded primarily to developments within affiliated unions. It is possible to speculate that the TUC had also recognised the fact that education was not only an increasingly desired feature of trade union activity, but also an area in which it could cement and make more concrete, at a national level, the TUC's influence within the labour movement.

While the questions and considerations of financing a national system of provision were always

an important factor in its development, and while debates about content continued, a student centred approach, with an emphasis where possible on mixing stewards from a variety of different workplaces, ensured that course content was shaped more by the direct experiences of those attending than outcome-based 'standards' could permit. Although TUC education was not a stable, monolithic entity, the content of TUC education courses was not a matter for a government department or minister to decide. But the wind of change in trade union education started with the publication of the Donovan Report (1). Indeed, in relation to trade union education, the Donovan Report stated that:

additional resources [were] required for training of shop stewards as part of a planned move to orderly relations based on comprehensive and formal factory and company agreements.

A TUC policy statement on shop stewards published in 1968 provides evidence as to how they too came to regard trade union education as an important factor in shaping the future conduct of workplace industrial relations:

Employers and educational bodies naturally do not have the same instinct as unions when providing training. To ignore these differences would threaten the basis of continuing co-operation between unions and other parties concerned. Acknowledging them need not prevent the development of agreed general training arrangements. ('Training of Shop Stewards', TUC, 1968, p81)

The above quote demonstrates how, on the one hand, the TUC felt it necessary to defend the longstanding tradition within the labour movement that the education of shop stewards was not a politically neutral affair (and therefore should be facilitated independently of employers) while, on the other, it felt a willingness to accede without a protest at national level to the notion that trade union education could become a vehicle for combatting the 'menace' of 'wage drift' and 'wildcat' strikes.

Throughout the 1970s, trade union education became inextricably linked with public policy which sought to restructure workplace industrial relations by the extension of collective bargaining. The creation of grievance and dispute procedure agreements to operate at workplace level became the core of TUC courses.

The character and content of centrally produced materials reflected this, and have continued to reflect it to this day.

To support the training of shop stewards for collective bargaining, the Government first paid the TUC 'Trade Union Education and Training (TUET) Grant' in 1976, which has subsequently been renewed on an annual basis until 1993. It was intended to provide training for union officials to ensure that they were qualified to carry out their collective bargaining duties, with a view to improving industrial relations and reducing strikes, as stated by Gillian Shephard, as Secretary of State for Employment on 18th December 1992 (2). The minister stated further:

Industrial relations have improved greatly, and strikes are now at their lowest level since records began. At the same time fewer than 50% of employees now have their pay determined, directly or indirectly, by negotiations between employers and trade unions. More and more employees negotiate their pay directly with their employer on an individual basis taking account of performance and skills. In these circumstances the Government believes that there is now no justification for continuing to support this training from public funds.

So the process to stop the TUET Grant had been set in train on 10th December 1992. It will cease to exist from 1st April 1996. This decision by the Government sent shock waves down the spinal cord of the TUC Education Department. Alongside it came the FHE Act, under which FE colleges were to become corporations. TUC education did not fit under any of the criteria in Schedule 2 of the FEFC [Further Education Funding Council. Ed.]. Survival of the TUC Education service suddenly became almost impossible.

In order to resuscitate it, the TUC secured funding under Category A of Schedule 2, under a memorandum on approval of TUC courses in order to provide tariff units of 4 on entry, 10 on programme and 1 on achievement. This is an arrangement under which the Minister has agreed funding for TUC courses, which are now on the list of vocational qualifications in addition to NVQs and GNVQs. These 'qualifications' are approved by the Secretary of State under sections 3(1) and Schedule 2(A) to the FHE Act 1992 for the period from 1st August 1994 to 31st July 1995.

So what the fate of these TUC courses will be after 1995 nobody knows. The Minister may renew it again for another year. But if not, then, unless TUC affiliates find the £7-£8m per year necessary for the courses to run on a full cost basis (3), there is no alternative other than one based on performance, which means competence-based, 'outcome'-directed courses. There is another dilemma - lay/voluntary officers have no vocations; they are not employed as

reps/stewards. Therefore what vocational validity will the courses have?

So the move towards competence-based TU standards is clearly in the context of current, hostile, market-led economic and social conditions. In the words of an education officer of a TU:

NVQs were developed under the Tory regime in response to a deepening economic recession, a view that there was a 'skills gap' and that training the workforce to be more competent would improve competitiveness, and a decline in training by employers . . . The TUC seems to be totally uncritical of NVQs in vocational training and with the added financial crisis in its own services (declining membership) have jumped on the NVQ bandwagon for representatives . . . (4)

The evolution of education in general, let alone trade union education, has not taken place in a political, economic and social vacuum, nor will any future developments do so. It is important to note, though, that much of the philosophy and traditions that have come to underpin trade union education derive from a traditionally socialist analysis. According to this, it is not necessarily the organisation and content of education that has hitherto determined the structure of society. On the contrary it is the structure of society that has determined the organisation and content of education.

However, the current development of competence-based TUC education courses in line with NVQs has much more to do with questions of finance than anything else, much more to do with comparatively recent economic and political developments than with traditional debates and concerns in the sphere of trade union education. It is certainly true that the TUC has a real battle on its hands as stated above, and it is equally true that the question of securing resources to maintain its national programme - whether from public or private funds - is raising some fundamental questions - about organisation, management, resourcing, equal opportunities and their implications, and also about changes in the roles, tasks and skills required of already stressed FE teachers.

References:

1. Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations 1968 (known as the Donovan Report).
2. The Employment Secretary (Mrs G. Shephard, written answer in House of Commons, 10/12/92).
3. TUC Education Committee Report, page 2, paragraph 3 (13/2/92).
4. Response of an education officer of a large trade union to written questionnaire (19/1/94).