Union learning representatives: a really useful research agenda

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A new actor is at work in the field of workplace learning.

Since 1998 Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) have acted to improve learning and training in the workplace. They have been subject to intense scrutiny, by academics, trade unions and government in terms of their explicit role of encouraging workers back into learning, and also over their more implicit role of aiding trade union renewal. Using Martin’s (2008) distinction between ‘merely useful’ and ‘really useful’ knowledge this paper will consider the ULR’s role as a facilitator in adult learning, the policies which have shaped their practices and how research on ULRs can move beyond ‘merely useful’ to ‘really useful’.

Martin (2008) distinguishes between ‘merely useful’ and ‘really useful’ knowledge. ‘Merely useful’ knowledge ‘…is constructed to make people productive, profitable and quiescent workers’ (p8) – it is knowledge that allows people to do the job. By contrast, ‘Really useful knowledge’ is ‘knowledge that is calculated to enable people to become critical autonomous and – if necessary – dissenting citizens’ (p8). It empowers them to question the structures of society.

Drawing on Martin’s observations we can consider research about the ULR which measures the ULR carrying out their role – be that role learning or renewal activities –, or which establishes the conditions that best enable ULRs to carry out that role, to be research which generates ‘merely useful’ knowledge. It helps ULRs do the job but it does not question it. Such research shows us how much learning ULRs organise (Unionlearn, 2008), examines their impact on employer-funded training (Stuart and Robinson, 2007, Hoque and Bacon, 2009), and the conditions which best lend themselves to ULR success (Wallis and Stuart, 2007). It may also critically evaluate other research and question its reliability (McIlroy, 2008). But such research misses the wider picture. In failing to consider the ULRs themselves as actors such research fails to consider what part ULR actions and motivations have in their outcomes.

‘Really Useful’ research into ULRs however goes beyond targets, outcomes and examinations of ‘what’ they do and asks ‘why’ they do it (eg Donnelly &
Freedman, 2008). It explores and questions the world in which the ULR exists. ‘Really Useful’ research allows us to understand the ULRs themselves, their real experiences in promoting and facilitating learning and the problems they encounter. In surfacing the daily experiences of ULRs it makes visible not only the solutions they adopt but also the barriers they are unable to overcome. Implicitly it is critical of those structures which prevent workers from learning, such as funding restrictions or employer opposition (Hollinrake et al, 2008). ‘Really useful’ research may also question existing limitations to the ULR role and make a case for future action that will enable the role of ULRs to evolve, such as the work of Bert Clough, which emphasises the need for statutory negotiation skills as a necessary tool if union learning is to become sustainable (see for example Clough, 2007). Such research enables trade unions to challenge the government’s structures of targets and funding, where ‘merely useful’ research only allows the unions to demonstrate their ability to work within those structures.

Much ULR research contains elements of both the ‘merely useful’ and the ‘really useful’. For example Alexandrou (2007), which focuses primarily on the policy trajectory of the Educational Institute of Scotland union’s ‘Learning Representative’ (LR) initiative and the LR role as brokers of employer-led Continuing Professional Development (CPD), also criticises the structural problems the LRs face within their workplace and union and makes suggestions for the future expansion of the LR role beyond the existing confines of CPD. However such blended research tends to dilute the benefit of the ‘really useful’ approach.

There is an important place for ‘merely useful’ research. Union Learning Representatives are still a new, precarious, phenomenon, and ‘merely useful’ research is necessary if they are to survive. Unlike other trade union representatives, ULR recruitment, training and their subsequent activity is largely funded by the public purse. In exchange for short-term funding from the national Union Learning Fund (ULF) (a budget devolved to the TUC’s learning organisation, Unionlearn, from the DIUS), ULRs must deliver against learning targets set by government. Like adult education institutions dependent for their funding on participation in lifelong learning (Crowther, 2004b), trade unions are at risk of losing their funding if they cannot demonstrate achievement of their lifelong learning targets. Understanding conditions which have previously been associated with ULR success allows them to seek to replicate those conditions in other workplaces, in order to continue to achieve against targets and continue to receive ULF funding. Sustainability of the Union Learning Representative initiative beyond ULF funding, in most trade unions, is still doubtful (Lloyd & Payne, 2006). It is inevitable that Unionlearn and its partner trade unions will comply with the demands of public funding in order to continue to receive that funding. But we neglect the ‘really useful’ at our peril.
Policy, practice & research
Trade union research has a reflexive relationship with trade union policy. As trade union policies change so the nature of the research commissioned by the TUC and inspired by union policies change. At the same time the research itself influences trade union policy. Thus research into the effects of workplace partnerships between management and unions (e.g. Guest and Peccei, 2001, Kelly, 2004) gave way to research into the effects of trade union organising (Heery, 2002, Holgate and Simms, 2008,) and also influenced this change.

The trade union renewal policies of partnership and organising have strongly influenced unions’ learning strategies over the last decade. In 1998, aware of the success of social partnership strategies in Europe, the TUC was looking for ways to develop similar partnership approaches in Britain (Taylor, 2000). Union learning appeared to be an ideal way to develop collaborative working with government and with employers (Munro & Rainbird, 2004b). Union learning was promoted as a non-confrontational issue, one on which unions and employers could work collaboratively as both sides stood to benefit (Wallis, 2008). The partnership policy has won ULRs statutory rights to carry out their role, but it has not won them the right to negotiate over learning in the workplace (McIlroy, 2008). In the workplace ULRs are therefore obliged to continue to practice a partnership approach with employers. They remain dependent upon employer goodwill for time off for learning, for space in which to learn and for the continued right to carry out their ULR role. Thus, the original partnership policy for union learning still influences practice today. Research continues to demonstrate that learning partnerships are a strong indicator for successful learning initiatives (Wallis, 2008).

Within the wider TUC, however the Partnership policy lost favour. Outside of learning, research showed that partnership was failing to make significant gains with employers and was unlikely to lead to membership growth (Kelly, 2004). In its place, the Organising policy, a strategy of sustained recruitment & membership mobilization based on campaigns around workplace discontent, (Heery, 2002) became more influential within trade unions and began to influence learning policy. Research in 2004 suggested union learning could and should be used to support branch organising campaigns (TUC, 2004). Much research now is dedicated to exploring this relationship, ranging from the broadly positive (Moore, 2009) to the overtly negative (McIlroy, 2008).

The consequence of this policy change has not only been for more research exploring this link to be commissioned. It also has consequences for ULRs, who are now not only expected to deliver workplace learning partnerships, but also to carry out membership recruitment and mobilization. They are no longer measured solely in terms of their output against learning targets but also as recruiters for the union. This has had the effect of bringing union
learning into the mainstream of union activity but at the cost of losing what had made it distinctively different from other union roles (Moore, 2009). This emergent interest in ULRs as ‘organizers’ with the concomitant increased interest from mainstream union officials came at the same time as funding through the ULF was being shifted away from social purpose education towards lifelong learning and employability skills.

Trade Unions and lifelong learning
Recent trade union involvement in adult learning appeared initially to fit with Martin’s definition of ‘really useful’ knowledge. Unison’s ‘Return to Learn’ programme, which began in the 1990s, provided ‘students with a second chance of education, to develop study and critical thinking skills and to build self-confidence’ (Munro & Rainbird, 2004a). However the same decade also saw the ascendance of lifelong learning as the dominant policy in the field of adult learning (Crowther 2004b) marginalising the earlier social purpose traditions of adult education (Martin, 2006).

Lifelong learning stresses the importance of individuals, rather than state, taking responsibility for improving their employable skills and earning power (Crowther 2004a). Martin has argued that lifelong learning treats victims of inequality as responsible for their inequalities – they must learn new skills or accept the blame for their circumstances (Martin, 2006). Lifelong learning courses, emphasising skills for employability effectively deliver ‘merely useful’ knowledge, knowledge that enables the learner to work. By contrast the curriculum and teaching methods of adult education - ‘social purpose’ education (Crowther, 2004a p134) - is intended not only to empower learners and the community or class to which they belong but to foster social and political action. ‘…education is political – and ultimately, therefore, ethical’ (Martin, 2006, p287). Social purpose education offers learners ‘really useful’ knowledge and as such has much in common with trade union aims of social and political action. Trade union learning would seem to be a natural partner for a ‘social purpose’ approach to adult education. One would expect ULRs to arrange learning with a ‘really useful’ dimension.

However Unionlearn’s report, which gathers information on union progress against ULF targets, show ULRs arranging more ‘merely useful’ courses (employability skills: Skills for Life, computer skills and CPD) than ‘really useful’ social purpose courses (Unionlearn, 2008). Unionlearn's reports are based on self-reporting by ULRs. Little research explains whether the preponderance of lifelong learning courses is due to ULR choice or the constraints in which they work.

One explanation is that ULRs exercise agency when they arrange and report lifelong learning courses. ‘Really useful’ research by Moore and Ross (2008) has shown that CPD (an example of lifelong learning) is being given a wider interpretation by ULRs than simply traditional employer-organized training.
They cite examples of teaching unions arranging Saturday courses on bullying for teachers, meeting a need expressed by members which the employer was not providing. Other courses described as CPD by ULRs include ‘Recognising and Dealing with Stress; Personal Finance; and Job Skills and Assertiveness for Women’ (430). CPD may also be used as a means of collective organising and recruitment for the union – thus building workplace collectivity rather than undermining it. These courses are described as CPD but fulfill the aims of social purpose education. Like tutors in ALLN (Hamilton, 2008), some ULRs are using their agency to ameliorate the effects of lifelong learning policy for their learners. ‘Merely useful’ research fails to discover this broader picture of ULRs as agents

Another explanation may be that ULRs lack the time or facilities to organise social purpose education. Here ‘merely useful’ and ‘really useful’ research both help us to understand the workplace structures which constrain ULR’s ability to organise social purpose education. A third of ULRs receive inadequate time for their duties whilst other ULRs experience indirect restrictions (no cover or no reduction of workload) on their workplace learning activities (Bacon and Hoque, 2009). Time restrictions, whether direct or indirect, limit the work ULRs can carry out. ULRs are also dependent on employer goodwill for time off for learners, and use of resources with which to learn (Hollinrake et al, 2008). Regardless of personal preferences, ULRs may choose to organize lifelong learning courses because that is all their employer will support. However, whilst ‘merely useful’ and ‘really useful’ research can identify the constraints within which ULRs operate, more ‘really useful’ research is needed to tell us how they respond to those constraints.

The likeliest explanation, however, for the prevalence of lifelong learning courses amongst ULR output is government funding. Funding for ‘merely useful’ lifelong learning courses is readily available to ULRs through ULF (Unionlearn, 2007) unlike courses with a ‘really useful’ social purpose approach. The ULF supports courses to improve employability in line with the government’s lifelong learning agenda. Unions can access these funds to recruit and train more ULRs (Unionlearn, 2007a). To trade unions the delivery of employability courses is a positive benefit for the members whilst the increase in the number of ULRs represents a growth in the number of union activists and a step towards renewal (Unionlearn 2007b). The problem, however, is the lack of consideration about the effect of union-organized employability training on the learner.

In itself, training workers with the necessary skills to increase their employability in an unstable, globalised economy is a worthy – and useful - activity for trade unions to be involved in. The TUC continues to emphasise the importance of going beyond teaching skills for the current job to teaching skills that will improve future employability. It continues to criticise the government’s voluntarist approach to workplace learning. However, the
uncritical acceptance of the hegemony of work-related skills acquisition as the purpose of learning (TUC, 2007b) may be unwise. Commentators argue that the ‘cultural practice’ of lifelong learning with its emphasis on individual responsibilities and personal failure damages the very traditions of collective action that form the basis of trade unionism (Crowther 2004b). Notable amongst these commentators is Forrester (2005) who criticises trade unions for their unquestioning acceptance of the ‘knowledge economy’ (p265) which characterises union learning. He argues that employability skills training delivered by trade unions reinforces ‘employer-designed strategies and new forms of work intensification’ (p264). Rather than mobilising the members through union learning, trade unions may actually be strengthening the employers’ exploitation of the workforce.

However this conclusion is one that considers the effect of lifelong learning whilst discounting the possible affect of the ULR as agent. As yet, too little ‘really useful’ research exists that tells the story of the ‘hidden’ aspects of ULR agency. Like adult educators, they may subvert the agenda of lifelong learning (Hillier, 2008). They may use lifelong learning to build union organisation (Moore and Ross, 2008).They may be genuinely committed to lifelong learning, believing in empowerment through employability. By studying the daily lives, the everyday practices, of ULRs we can make explicit their ‘implicit ideologies’ (deVault, 2000, 485) and understand the ‘why’ as well as the ‘what’ of their actions.

Conclusion
In studying everyday life, we make visible not only the ‘normative’ cultural values that are taken for granted, but also those aspects of lives that are normally hidden (Highmore, 2002). ULRs’ outcomes are well documented, the argument about whether they assist the unions to achieve renewal through Organising and Partnerships or not is equally well rehearsed. However, the activities and struggles they go through to reach those outcomes, information that would be ‘really useful’, are not known. Such research would demonstrate how ULRs practice within the structures of union policy, employer demands and state funding. To study everyday lives of a group of ULRs however, is also to study a part of the wider social story (deVault 2000), in this case that of the impact of lifelong learning policy on adult education. Everyday practices of ULRs are part of the wider story of actors in adult education managing the conflicting demands of the needs of their learners and the requirements of government funding (see Hillier, 2008).

Research into the everyday lives of ULRs would tell us how they respond to the less than ideal situations in which most ULRs work. It would tell us how ULRs without the luxuries of learning agreements or supportive employers carry out their role. It would tell us how they cope, adapt and live with the demands on their role. ULRs are actors and the ULR initiative will stand or fall on how they act. Without their motivation and their agency, government
funding, union policies and academic research will achieve nothing. If understanding does not progress beyond what ULRs do to how and why we will not fully understand why projects fail or succeed and we will not know how to progress when the funding runs out – as it inevitably will. The Conservatives have already promised to end the ULF when they are re-elected (McIlroy, 2008, citing Parl. Debs 2005). If research into ULRs seeks to ensure sustainability of the initiative beyond the current funding regime, then it must go beyond the measuring of outcomes provided by ‘merely useful’ research and explore the detail of how ULRs achieve those outcomes through their everyday activities

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