

Countering the hegemony of neoliberalism in the workplace: A freirean analysis of the contribution of union-led learning to enhanced worker participation in the UK

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Countering the pedagogic hegemony of neo-liberalism in the workplace: A Freirean analysis of the contribution of union-led learning to enhanced worker participation in the UK

Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to critically assess the degree to which current union learning strategy and practice in the UK can become a catalyst for greater activism and participation by their members in the workplace and beyond. To this end, the paper seeks to draw on the rich heritage of pedagogic theory and practice in adult education writing to bring a fresh perspective to a key aspect of industrial relations.

Findings

Utilising the radical perspective of Paulo Freire, the article critically analyses the key elements of current union learning strategies in the UK. The paper concludes that union pedagogy strategy not just often raises members' awareness, as Freire would advocate, of their 'subordinate' position in society, but potentially also genuinely equips them with the skills, knowledge and understanding to challenge that position through subsequent union activism and, therefore, greater participation in decision-making in the workplace. Union facilitated learning, it is argued, can also develop the skills and knowledge necessary to increase members' job security.

Design

Through a meta-analysis of the current literature on the role of union learning representatives, learning centres and the context of that learning, the paper seeks to enhance our understanding of how such initiatives in addition to upskilling workers also lead to members' greater

enlightenment with respect to the asymmetric power relations within the workplace and society. Using a conceptual model devised by the author from Freirean theory, this potentially increased awareness of their position in the organisation and society leading to greater levels of subsequent activism and participation by these learners is then critically assessed.

Originality

To the author's knowledge, this is the first time that a Freirean analysis has been applied to this key element of contemporary trade union strategy and practice. In particular, the study seeks to also go beyond most studies of union pedagogic approaches and focus also on the learner's journey and how this may imbue a propensity to become more active in the union and, therefore, the workplace.

Introduction

As the labour movement in Western Europe continues to attempt to counter the ongoing hegemony of Neoliberalism, the incursion of globalisation in the workplace and, more latterly, the implications of Brexit (Mason, 2016; O'Grady, 2016; Eaton, 2018), this article reflects on the degree to which union-led learning initiatives in the UK could potentially help address these challenges by means of enhanced worker participation in organisational decision-making. In that, union-initiated learning could result in motivating more members to become union representatives and, therefore, alter the balance of power in organisations through stronger and more effective collective consultation, negotiation and individual representation channels. That is, for workers undertaking union facilitated learning to have more 'ownership' of the processes and outcomes of decision-making in their employing organisation. As Mayo notes, the whole 'concept of participation has been appropriated in a neo-liberal context even outside the sphere of production, in the larger public domain' (1993: 3). As Mayo further counsels, neo-liberal

hegemony legitimates a pseudo-participation in the workplace that renders workers' input into decision-making to 'tea, towel and toilet issues' (ibid.). Through a qualitative meta-analysis of the extant literature, and utilising a model based on the radical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1972), the study critically assesses the work of the unions in promoting lifelong learning as a catalyst for more equitable worker participation in the workplace.

For most commentators, the role of trade unions remains the promotion of economic equality in society and the protection of workers' rights in the workplace (Hayes and Novitz, 2014). In last twenty-five years, however, the unions in Britain have also developed an extensive network of union learning representatives (ULRs), trained to give advice and guidance to employees and employers in the areas of training, development and lifelong learning (Stuart et al., 2010; Green and Henseke, 2019). Where, for instance, the work of ULRs in supporting members to develop skills for life, such as numeracy and literacy, has been recognised as also bringing about greater confidence among workers who have often been let down by the education system (Unionlearn, 2006, 2016, 2019).

The focus of Freire's (1972) critical analysis of contemporary education practice was the emancipation of the people, the oppressed, through educational enlightenment. For Freire (1992), the key flaw in conventional education is that it helps perpetuate the dominance of the oppressor over the oppressed. A key aim of this study is to test the efficacy of Freire's perspective in analysing current pedagogic praxis within the UK union movement.

The discussion in this paper is also informed by the rich heritage of radical adult education practice, itself underpinned by Freirean philosophy and which, as Foley argues, encompasses a greater understanding of 'hegemonic and counter-hegemonic learning in any context' (2001:71).

Conceptually, the analysis draws on a model developed by the author. Through a Freirean lens, the discussion critically reviews the industrial relations debate over the extent to which the unions' pedagogic strategy has been 'incorporated' (Rainbird and Stuart, 2011) within a more dominant Government and employer-led learning agenda. Critics argue that incorporation weakens the associated impact of union learning on worker participation in the workplace (ibid.). The article concludes that, given the current political economic environment, there is a necessity for a more pragmatic, skills-focused pedagogic approach by the unions in terms of members' learning. However, a level of 'enlightenment' (Freire, 1972) of their condition is still possible within that strategy. Therefore, a Freirean analysis of union learning reps' activities, the effectiveness of workplace learning centres and the learning journeys of members also highlights that for some of those members this results in a subsequent drive to potentially become more active in their union and their employers' decision-making processes.

Pedagogy as a radical tool: A Freirean perspective

The focus of Freire's critical analysis of contemporary education practice was the liberation of the people, the oppressed, through a radical pedagogy that awakened their consciousness of that oppression. Freire was critical of the whole nature and efficacy of mainstream education within the current Capitalist system. He argued that education was based on a social order where the 'oppressors' have an inalienable perceived right to own more because of their own 'efforts' and 'courage to take risks' (1972:35). Whilst, under the current system, the oppressed, without such perceived attributes, are socialised to accept their place in that order. For Freire, this situation is underpinned by the pedagogic logic of a conventional education that helps perpetuate the dominance of the oppressor over the oppressed, and continued passivity of the worker where:

‘The teacher talks about reality as if it was motionless, static, compartmentalised and predictable. Or else he expounds on topics completely alien to the existential existence of the students’ (Freire, 1972: 44).

Through this pedagogic model, the teacher ‘narrates’, and the student remains a mere ‘depository’ for the ‘knowledge’ that the powerful in society deem valid, necessary and that cannot be used to challenge their privileged position. This pedagogic process is based on the unquestioned ‘banking’ of information, such as it is, by the learner and as the norm for the educational relationship between students and teacher. In contrast, for Freire the radical educator must develop an emancipatory pedagogy that is premised on ‘problem posing’ methods of education which see teacher and student as equals. Students are confronted with problems that relate to their real-world experiences, but also crucially require a critical understanding of the political context of those problems. By adopting the approach Freire suggests, education becomes ‘the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination’ (Freire, 1972: 54). Crucially, the radical teacher must act as ‘an extension’ to the ‘subjects’, the workers or students, they engage with when passing on skills and knowledge (Freire, 2013). It is the educator’s role as a radical communicator to, in authentic dialogue with their students, strive also to raise their consciousness through that pedagogic interaction.

For Freire, context is key in empowering people through education. As he observes:

‘**Integration** within one’s context, as distinguished from **adaptation**, is a distinctly human activity. Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality **plus** the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality’ (2013: 4, emphasis in the original text).

Whereas as passive players, people otherwise merely ‘adapt’ to the continuing existing state of their oppression. This means that their capacity for self-fulfilling integration is never realised

by most people. Rather they continue to be manipulated by an elite through ‘organized advertising, ideological or otherwise’ (2013: 5). This leads to men (sic) being ‘unable to perceive critically the themes of their time, and thus to intervene actively in reality’ (ibid.). Because of this, for Freire, most ‘oppressed’ people are prevented from reaching their potential as more enlightened and self-determining individuals (1972, 1992).

Insert table one here

The nature of adult education and its relationship to trade union pedagogy

The history of workers’ education reflects a heritage rich in the tradition of self-help and enlightenment, driven very much by the labour movement. The early 19th century in the UK saw the development of mechanics institutes focusing primarily on scientific and technical learning. In addition, as Holford notes, ‘working men’s colleges developed from 1840 onward, aiming to provide social, political and economic, as well as practical, instruction (1993: 15). Around this time the Cooperative movement also started to provide education classes for its members (ibid.). Subsequently, the trade unions developed their learning services to become a key vehicle for the pedagogic advancement of working people (Clough, 2007, Fisher, 2017). For Nicholls, since the advent of mass industry, ‘education for survival and liberation became the order of the day’ (2017: 18). As Clough further notes, particularly from the later nineteenth century, union learning strategy has not simply been about improving skills but also activism; citing the famous British trade unionist Tom Mann, ‘whose education gave him the knowledge and skills to agitate for an eight-hour working day’ (2012:7). This paper seeks to determine the degree to which union education still has the potential to equip workers with the knowledge, skills and awareness to increase their role in decision-making in their organisation through the collective.

An influential international body of literature also exists on the nature of adult education, with a pedagogic approach underpinned by radical thinking in terms of emancipation through learning that is very much informed by the seminal insight of Freire.

For instance, in her critical review of the philosophy of adult education, Merriam argues that the mainstream utilitarian view of education is based merely upon ‘a description of what is going on in adult education.....[and a simple]..definition of the adult learner and the learning process’ (Merriam, 1977: 196). In contrast, a more radical pedagogic philosophy, ‘provides a framework, a structure or set of basic assumptions and principles from which one can view the entire field of adult education’ (ibid.). For Foley (2005), adopting a more radical perspective also involves recognising the class dynamics of adult pedagogy. For instance, in an earlier critical review of the context of pedagogy, Foley alerts all radical educationalists to the need for a firm understanding of the class bound and oppressive nature of the Capitalist labour process endured by most workers (1999:194). Applying this radical pedagogic approach has benefits for disadvantaged workers. Gallo’s report on an innovative programme of literacy learning with immigrant workers, for instance, is significant; in that she stresses that success is based on consultation on learning methods with learners and it being a fully participative process of learning. A pedagogic model that includes learners’ views is in stark contrast to the more Taylorist pedagogy often utilised and designed to address ‘deficits in learners’ knowledge and behaviour, rather than recognising learners’ strengths and capabilities’ (2002:51).

This article seeks to draw on the more enlightened, critical understanding of learning outlined above. For instance, by acknowledging that the adult educators, who are instrumental in facilitating union members’ learning, should be seen as working ‘for emancipatory social change and whose work engages with the learning dimension of social life’ (Foley, 2001:72).

In this way recognising, as key exponents of radical pedagogy have emphasised, that union based learning should be seen as forming part of the ‘multidimensional and complexity that is adult education’ (Merriam cited in Saudelli et al., 2012:4; Gambina, 2017). For instance, as a radical educationalist, Lazarus’s critical analysis of one of TUC Unionlearn’s primary activities is instructive for the study that follows. Lazarus recognises the primary Freirean aim of enhancing workers’ numeracy, literacy (and digital) skills, however, this is for him not in itself emancipatory. Rather, for Lazarus, emancipation is only more likely achievable when these ‘technical skills’ also lead to a greater political awareness on the part of the learner (2017: 125).

The unique nature of adult education discussed above is also stressed by trade union educators. Recognising the role of union education in embracing critical pedagogy or ‘popular education’, Seal asserts that ‘fundamental for educators is to give students, trade union activists and people in general the tools to undo, rethink and challenge their received wisdoms about what constitutes knowledge and education (2017: 39). Seal advocates a radical approach to adult education which is in stark contrast to the ‘banking’ tendency still evident in most educational settings (idid.).

This sentiment is echoed by Westerman, principal of an adult community and union college in the North of England. For her, in adult and union education, ‘the pedagogical approach is one of participation, where the individual is part of a learning community that has a vast range of experience to share. Learning becomes a joint and dynamic process within which students and tutors are challenged, even disturbed, by the views and knowledge of others’ (2017:232).

A more participative approach to adult learning, as Newman in his highly influential study suggests, requires a certain type of learning contract. In that, whilst a learning contract exists between the union and the tutor, and another between the participants and the trainer, there exists a third contract between participants and their union. Further, it is in facilitating this

radical pedagogic contractual arrangement that the tutor's influence on learning outcomes and union efficacy is crucial:

'The third contract is essential to the continued success of a union. If the interaction between a union as a sum of its members and a union as an organisation is vigorously and continuously democratic, then the union will be able to resist domestication by the employers, governments and its own peak bodies and, when necessary, will be able to engage in radical action' (1993:269, cited in Fisher, 2017: 32).

Fundamentally for Newman, the role of the trade union educator is to continually maintain, re-assess and re-establish this contract (*ibid.*). In terms of 'resisting domestication', and in resonance with the incorporation versus critical engagement debate (Rainbird and Stuart, 2011) in the industrial relations literature, Fisher highlights that who funds union learning can also be contentious. The concern being that, when training or education is state funded, the philosophical and, therefore, radical elements of that education becomes diminished in favour of more practical and non-critical learning (2017: 26).

In reviewing the union learning process, Rae's view of the role of the union reps is illuminating. Where for Rae, certainly in the union representatives' day to day role of advising, organising and supporting members as activists, it can be argued that by necessity all union reps are 'informal' educators (2017:142). This perspective on the generic role of the union representative is of value in the assessment of the more specialised role of the union learning rep that follows. Similarly, Bond's (1999) study of the distinctions between participative and non-participative adult learners, in the context of what motivates union members to take up education, is also pertinent to this study.

In this context, Brandt's (2001) insightful analysis of the 'sponsoring influences', such as economic, societal and institutional change, that impact on workers' literacy is revealing.

Brandt tracks the learning journey of an American union member turned activist. Her study revealed that the literacy skills and knowledge of any activist can be seen in a state of continuing flux, both in ideological and technical terms, for which any union pedagogic strategy, and assessment thereof, must take real account. In closing this section, Shawchuk's (2003) study of 'progressive' unionism in Canada, and its stated commitment to members' education, is equally instructive. Sawchuk studied workers on a union-initiated computer learning course. He concluded that this workplace learning can become a catalyst for broader worker participation and understanding. Where those initial work-based skills can lead to learning that is 'more systematic, multi-faceted, expansive and efficient in making use of a wider array of social resources' and potentially resulting in social and political change amongst working class people (ibid.: 638-639).

In addition to the insight derived from the sources above, the synergy of the concepts and analyses of Gramsci and Freire, utilised by several radical educationalists (Mayo, 1999; Leonard, 1993), has been specifically drawn on in the discussion. Leonard (1993), for instance, argues that Gramsci offers a perspective unhindered by the Marxist orthodoxy of economic determinism, thus allowing us to critique and challenge the hegemonic nature of the prevailing current economic philosophy of neo-liberalism as an alternative form of economic determinism. Furthermore, and of value in the context of this paper, Mayo (1999) notes the continuing negative influence of neo-liberalism on adult education, again in relation to the givens of market efficacy that underpins that education. From these critical sources, the author developed a conceptual model (See table one above) to test the effectiveness of a Freirean approach in analysing union learning, and its contribution to greater employee participation in workplace decision-making.

The methodology

Typically, meta-analysis is a method for analysing large sets of quantitative data to establish occurrences of statistical significance or correlations between variables (Bryman and Bell, 2007: 322-23). However, meta-analysis is now also being used more for qualitative research and is the approach adopted for this study. Nienabar et al.'s (2015) research on trust relationships in the workplace was found to be of particular value, in terms of: identifying sources, the criteria for the choice of sources to analyse and the coding of the subsequent data. An initial review of the literature on union learning highlighted several key areas of focus in the extant research:

- The context of union learning (e.g. Government learning strategy).
- The role of the union learning representative.
- The learning agenda as a strategy for union renewal.
- Union strategic learning design and delivery (for instance the efficacy of learning agreements and learning centres).
- The views and experiences of the learners.

The sources for the subsequent in-depth analysis of the literature were drawn from:

- Review reports on the union learning fund.
- Review reports on the work of TUC Unionlearn.
- UK academic studies on a broad range of trade union learning activities.

Reports and articles were assigned to the main themed areas initially identified. From there template analysis (King, 2004) was utilised to identify sub-themes within and across those top-level categories. Crucially, for this study, Merriam and Bierema in their discussion on the foundations of 'critical education' highlight how, methodologically, 'critical theory has been embraced by adult education as an important lens to analyse learning dynamics and environments.

[Where] critical theory helps us do three important things: it gives us a framework for critiquing social conditions; it challenges universal truths or dominant ideologies and it seeks social emancipation and the elimination of oppression' (Merriam and Bierema, 2013: 215). Utilising the model in table 1, the objective of this article has been to adopt a similar lens to Merriam and Bierema in critically assessing the pedagogic work of British unions.

The model was applied in the final template analysis to establish the degree to which a Freirean approach could aid our understanding of union learning and its impact on employee participation. To this end, the research objectives of the study were to:

- Critically assess to what degree the learning agenda has enabled unions to link their strategy and purpose nearer to the overall needs and aspirations of the UK workforce.
- Critically assess the extent to which that praxis is a 'dialogic' relationship between the union and their member.
- Offer an alternative perspective on the future potential of learning with respect to union renewal and influence in terms of facilitating increased activism, through workplace participation, amongst members.

Reviewing the data

Context and union strategies

Arguably one of the most successful initiatives by the union movement in the UK in recent years has been the development of a network of dedicated union learning representatives (ULRs). Traditionally, certainly since the last war, the focus of union learning had very much been in terms of training activists (Holford, 1993). The emergence of New Labour in the late 90's however, with its mantra of 'education, education education', provided the impetus to refocus on members' learning as a key function of union activity, both to attract and retain

union members (Clough, 2007). This was despite unions generally at that time having a 'passive' [seeing it as a management function] or 'defensive' [in terms of jobs] approach to involvement in training (Costine and Garavan, 1995). Furthermore, as Bacon notes, since the formal recognition under the 2002 Employment Act of the ULR's right to statutory paid time off, their role has grown to encompass giving advice on training to members and employers, organising learning and promoting its value in the workplace (2013:254). A key propellant for the union learning project has been the establishment and subsequent ongoing support by governments of union learning funds (ULFs). The ULFs have allowed unions to bid year on year for resources to initiate and run learning projects. Significantly, Australian adult educationalists have questioned whether similar funding initiatives to the ULF could enable unions in their country to address key numeracy and literacy and other learning needs amongst members (Brown and Yasukawa, 2009; Yasukawa et al., 2011). Reviews of the ULF have consistently reported that, when based on a stable industrial relations environment and trust between parties, learning projects can result in positive outcomes in terms of learner engagement and benefits to the organisation through improved productivity (Stuart et al, 2010; TUC, Green and Henseke, 2019). It is of note that the Workers' Education Association in the UK, in addition to the TUC, has also made a long and significant contribution to union learning with its distinctive approach to learner-centred teaching (Holford, 1993; WEA, 2018). The signing of learning agreements between employers and their unions has similarly been a key outcome of a commitment to a joint strategy for learning (Wallis and Stuart, 2007). Despite this success however, the ULF as Marsden (2017) has reported remains under political threat from Neo-liberal forces.

The union learning agenda has had criticism from other quarters. Stuart and Cooney question both its mode of delivery and 'the weaknesses inherent in a supply-side strategy for vocational

training and skill development' (2008: 347). Indeed, for some critics learning agreements with employers have consigned unions to a more junior role in those partnerships, certainly in terms of power and influence over employer strategy. McIlroy questions the efficacy of union learning strategies as a vehicle for union revitalisation. Rather, for McIlroy, the evidence available on union pedagogic initiatives points to the TUC as occupying the role of 'state agent' for learning, and the notion of social partnership remains rhetorical until employers are legally required to bring learning within the collective bargaining agenda (2008: 297). More recently, Keep and James (2012) have questioned whether union-facilitated training really does equip workers with new skills and knowledge that could make a tangible difference to their working lives. Given their key role in the learning process, the efficacy of the ULR, and whether their work aids the revitalisation of the trade unions has also attracted criticism in the academic literature. Hoque and Bacon's (2008) study, for instance, found only a weak link between ULR activity and recruitment of new members. Similarly, for Payne, 'within the trade union movement, some officials and lay officers view the lifelong learning agenda as a diversion from issues of worker rights, benefits and pay' (2001: 386).

Despite this criticism, other research reports a 'union mark-up', where union-initiated learning is often linked to improved pay and conditions (Stuart et al. 2015). Further, Warhurst et al., specifically with respect to increased participation, argue that new activists were being attracted to the role of ULR, 'believing it to involve less confrontation' (2007: 19). Significantly, 'there was evidence of ULRs going on to take up other, broader representational roles' (2007:19). Likewise, contrary to criticism, other research suggests that the learning agenda is allowing the unions to establish some degree of collective bargaining over learning objectives (Stuart and Wallis, 2007). Furthermore, research has revealed that learning has enabled the unions to utilise these new resources to better organise and support their members

more generally, suggesting an opportunity to revitalise their broader position in collectively representing their members in the workplace (Hollinrake et al., 2008; Heyes and Rainbird, 2011; Findlay and Warhurst, 2011; Stuart et al., 2012).

Of equal note, Kirton and Greene in their study of a ‘women in the union’ course, and echoing the inclusive ethos of learning promulgated by radical educationalists discussed earlier (Gallo, 2002; Westerman, 2017), revealed a the pedagogy of union education that ‘emphasises active student participation and sees the tutor as a facilitator’ (2002: 174). In this type of radical pedagogic approach, a hierarchical relationship between tutor and student is, generally, far less in evidence (ibid.). As Munro and Rainbird (2000a, 2000b) similarly observed, the notion of this type of member-centred learning has been the lodestar for UNISON’s flagship ‘Return to Learn’ (R2L) programme for members who too often have been previously let down by the educational system in the UK. Both courses are provided by the WEA. UNISON’s recent recognition for its excellent pedagogic practice (UNISON 2017) is evidence of this ongoing ethos. As Sutherland stresses, the philosophy of its education programme is built upon:

‘Not simply developing the skills and competences for task-specific, job-related purposes of a short or medium-term nature but developing learning which provides real choice in employment and lifestyle’ (2000: 189).

Further, as Munro and Rainbird suggest, R2L has and remains for many members a springboard for ‘learning as a lifetime activity’ (2000: 178) and, crucially, also gives ‘members more confidence to become more active in the union’ (2000: 186). Heyes and Rainbird (2011) more latterly note that UNISON’s aim of ‘widening participation’ links specifically also to their equality agenda and seeking to promote a culture of learning in the workplace. The notion of merely ‘banking’ unchallenged ‘knowledge’ (Freire, 1972, 2013) is not, therefore, a part of the ethos of UNISON’s education strategy.

Rainbird and Stuart (2011) have usefully developed a conceptual model that captures well the two competing perspectives on union learning. Their ‘incorporation thesis’ highlights critics’ views on the limitations of union learning; in that, as funding is primarily provided by Government, and learning initiatives rest more on successfully making a business case to employers, it is these ‘partners’ whose interests are most served. In contrast, Rainbird and Stuart’s ‘critical engagement’ thesis suggests that unions have far more equity in these pedagogic partnerships, despite the restraints of an ongoing neoliberal agenda set by Government. It is further argued, from a critical engagement perspective, that the learning agenda does give unions some leverage in dealings with employers, organising in the workplace and appealing to new members and, crucially in the context of this paper, encouraging greater activism. Similarly from a critical engagement perspective, recent union initiatives based on the parallel success of the ULR, to grow a network of ‘union trained’ equality reps has its roots in equipping those reps with the ‘practical’ skills and ‘radical’ knowledge to challenge fundamental injustices in the workplace (Moore, 2011).

The role of the union learning representative (ULRs)

As noted above, the ULR remains an integral part of the success of recent union learning initiatives (Hoque and Bacon, 2011). The ULRs can often be ‘trusted intermediaries’ (Clough, 2010: 510), uniquely positioned because of the relationship they are deemed to have with members (Moore, 2011: 74). Significantly, Saundry et al.’s recent quantitative analysis of a large-scale survey of ULRs’ views and experiences utilises Rainbird and Stuart’s model to test the validity of those two schools of thought. They conclude that:

‘Our analysis refutes the notion that ULRs are merely managerial ‘foot soldiers’. Not only is there little evidence that managerial support is a major influence on the impact of ULR activity, there is a strong and consistent association between the conduct and infrastructure of

negotiation over training and the extent to which ULRs affect learning outcomes, the profile of the union and the recruitment of new members' (2017:16).

This distinction, conceptualised in Rainbird and Stuart's model (2011), between a more utilitarian learning strategy and union agency as a means of going beyond that has parallels with Freire 'banking' concept versus a more egalitarian approach to the purpose and sharing of knowledge. Whether union agency in terms of their pedagogic strategy actually extends to raising real awareness among union learners, however, will be a key feature of the analysis that follows. Courses such as UNISON's 'R2L' and 'women in the union' suggest that a degree of subsequent learner enlightenment may indeed be possible. Returning to the role of the ULR, Bacon (2013) makes an interesting observation that, although a consistent relationship between their presence and the take up of training remains sometimes unclear, they may play a 'sword of justice' (Flanders, 1970) role in the workplace. In that:

'Employees who are traditionally less likely to report receiving training (for example, older workers, part-time workers, lower occupational groups, and workers with lower-level academic qualifications) are more likely to report training in workplaces with ULRs present' (Bacon, 2013: 254 – comment added).

Conversely, Hollinrake (2016) offers insight into the efficacy of the ULR, concluding that union strategists often have unrealistic expectations of what these 'volunteer helpers' can actually achieve. Employer support remained for her a key barrier to ULRs' greater effectiveness. This said, Hollinrake's overall research findings support the central role that is played by the ULR in facilitating members into learning.

Cassell and Lee are another of the few researchers to delve below the more macro and meso drivers and outcomes of union learning and their findings on 'the potential impacts of the ULR

initiative' are equally revealing. Cassell and Lee's research reveals a pedagogic strategy that promotes the principles of self-development and self-directed learning. Furthermore, their research highlights that the learning opportunities pursued by union learners are not solely bound by the perceived needs of the organization in which the individual works. Rather the ULR provides access for members to both vocational and non-vocational learning activities in response to the individual's self-diagnosed needs. Crucially, for Cassell and Lee, not only is the physical location of learning shifted through the use of learning centres, but the individual learner is defining learning in the context of their trade union, rather than in the context of the employment relationship (2007: 790).

Learning centres and learning agreements

As a place for learning, union-coordinated, learning centres, based in the workplace, figure quite prominently in the existing academic literature and other evaluative studies. Hoque and Bacon's matched survey of managers and ULRs reveals a general agreement on efficacy of learning centres for workplace learning (2011). These findings on this type of work-based learning are also supported by Saundry et al. (2011) in their study of ULR activity in one region of the UK over a two-year period. Indeed, research by both Perrett and Martinez Lucio (2008) and Shelley (2007) suggest that, in addition to the worker focus, learning centres also offer a potential route for greater engagement with learners in the local community. In addition, the facilitation of a learning centre by actual ULRs can be a highly effective vehicle for member learning. As Bond (1999) notes, one of the key challenges for union learning initiatives is to 'sign up' the reluctant learner. The ULR, empathetic to their members' learning needs is, therefore, one element of the union's unique 'offer'. Getting potential learners to 'drop in' at a non-threatening learning centre is another key role of the ULR. Echoing Gallo's (2002)

findings, this function of the ULR is particularly crucial when the aim is to engage with potential numeracy and literacy learners. As Cassell and Lee also report:

‘Individuals are accessing learning opportunities on their own terms and progressing their own development needs in a safe environment. Learning centres also enhance the collective nature of learning, in that individuals are learning alongside their union colleagues..... An obvious additional advantage of learning centres is that a high number of learners can access them at large workplaces’ (2007: 791).

Paralleling this ‘partnership’ approach, Stuart and Wallis (2007) highlight that a range of review reports and academic literature note the importance of trade unions negotiating learning agreements with employers as part of ensuring the effectiveness of union-led workplace learning. Jameson’s research further illustrates the participative potential of union learning agreements in allowing the union access to job re-design strategies and for those to be part of the negotiated outcomes for that learning. These type of learning agreements also help manage organisational change whilst avoiding redundancy through staff redeployment (2012).

The learner experiences and views

Warhurst et al.’s review of the Scottish ULF usefully concludes that there are three types of possible learning: for personal development, job-related and to enhance employability (2007:26). However, as McIlroy and Croucher (2013) rightly counsel in the context of this study, such union learning, largely funded to supply skills for a neoliberal labour market regime, is unlikely also to be ‘emancipatory’. This highlights one of the areas of paucity in union learning studies. That is until we know how the actual learner experiences and views learning in the workplace, to what degree has any learning the potential to be other than job

oriented? One of the few studies so far to address this knowledge deficit is Ross and Moore's (2016) investigation of the union-facilitated worker's 'learning journey'. It is through this greater focus on the learners' experiences that we begin to capture the unique pedagogic approach to learning missing in most other texts and which resonates to a degree with the increased potential for participation within Freirean praxis. As they explain:

'A further motivational dimension of union learning is a tendency to use tried and tested adult education methods such as reflecting on experience, working with others and learner-centred methods and curriculum. Adults learn for complex reasons and need to know why they are learning Learning which encourages critical reflection is essential for social and individual action and change and would appear to be ideally suited for trade union learning' (2016: 458).

Furthermore, and specifically in terms of greater worker participation in the workplace and beyond, for Moore, union-led workplace learning has the potential to encourage 'democratic citizenship' among learners (2011: 74). Ross and Moore's analysis of the subjective nature of discourse in their interviews with union learners was revealing. The fact that a ULR rather than a manager was promoting learning as a 'conversation of equals' proved motivational for many respondents. In addition, in Ross and Moore's study, more participative adult education approaches were specifically valued by learners; as one learner reported 'you're not spoken to – you're spoken with but not spoken to'. Finally, the identification with fellow learners in terms of class and collective solidarity was evident in the political narrative used by interviewees to articulate learning as 'empowering' (2016: 459-460).

The political nature of learning for some of the union learners interviewed by Ross and Moore is clear. Caution needs to be taken in that Ross and Moore's research is based on a small sample. Furthermore, this is one of the few examples of employee relations researchers utilising

particular interview techniques and discourse analysis to better understand the ‘real nature of learning’. However, that a lot of the union members in Ross and Moore’s study saw themselves as working -class, and that collectivism was an element of this which they linked to their learning, resonates with the discussion on radical adult education above (Foley, 1999, 2005) and is therefore still significant.

For Moore, a key element of the union learning project is the propensity of some learners to become ULRs and develop subsequently into other roles (2011: 94). This significant pedagogic outcome is further substantiated by her finding that many came from a cross section of members not well represented in the ranks of the activists – for instance, young, women and BAME members (2011: 75).

In line with Gallo’s (2002) research on adult education, Heyes (2009) has also reported on the key work that the unions are doing with migrant workers to enhance their language skills and thus enabling them to be generally more empowered in the workplace. This example of working with disadvantaged workers has clear significance in that learning can now be seen as something far more than purely functional and vocationally based but, it can be argued, has a direct impact on greater workplace equality of opportunity. Whether union learning initiatives that focus on disadvantaged workers leads to heightened political and social awareness amongst those workers, in a Freirean sense is harder to establish. Nonetheless, many of the most successful learning programmes have been based on equipping the type of members cited above with better numeracy and literacy skills (Unionlearn, 2006; Green and Henseke, 2019; Unionlearn, 2019). In contrast to radical educationalists’ legitimate concerns over the emancipatory potential of key skills learning (Lazarus, 2017), it could be argued that by facilitating increased self-confidence through such learning allows potentially a more critical insight into their environment, and the motivation to effect change within that environment.

Crucially when learners were asked by Ross et al. (2011) to report on their experiences ‘in their own words’ the potentially radical element of union learning becomes more apparent. Extracts from those interviews reveal expressions of ‘self-belief,’ ‘political education’ and ‘challenging existing values’ which chime well with a Freirean pedagogy (ibid.). As they summarise:

‘The reflexivity of union learning and its location in the workplace can provide a space to discuss employee relations in the workplacewhich in turn can also provide pathways to unionisation, activism and politicization’ (ibid., 2011:5).

Discussion and conclusion

A Freirean view of context

Hodder and Edwards offer insight through their conceptualisation of the ‘essence’ of trade unions as vehicles for greater worker participation, where they posit that they, ‘face three directionstoward the market; as agencies of class; and in relation to the societies in which they are embedded’ (2015:846). Certainly, a key theme in the literature is that a more pragmatic ‘market oriented’ approach to union learning, as Brigford and Sterling (1988) note, appears to dominate the union learning agenda. This said, can it be argued that there are in reality two pragmatic goals in play: activist training to satisfy the organisational needs of the union and member training for vocational skills to satisfy the employer and the funders. If so, with reference to table one these pragmatic goals do not seem to resonate with a Freirean pedagogy. However, if we argue that union learning is both unitarist and pluralist in its objectives this ambiguous position might be reconciled.

For instance, Cassell and Lee note that, ‘organisational learning initiatives can be based on unitarist assumptions’ (2007: 790), where both the individual and the organisation are seen to

benefit from the learning pursued. However, for Cassell and Lee, the organisation, usually manifested in the role of the line manager, has the prerogative to determine what those learning opportunities are' (ibid.). Vocational learning dictated by management is a good example of this unitarist controlled learning. Conversely, many of the sources cited above demonstrate both the unions' ability to set the learning agenda within that occupational context and, crucially, to go beyond a more pragmatic objective. With reference to table one, therefore, we can see real elements of a pluralistic union pedagogy that has resonance with their other role of 'agencies of class' (Hodder and Edwards, 2015). Similarly, as Foley (2005), argues this more pluralist approach to learning highlights the significance of class with respect to radical pedagogy and its promulgation.

As other writers (Munro and Rainbird, 2000a, 2000b; Sutherland, 2000; Ross and Moore, 2016) have noted there are, therefore, more pluralistic opportunities for members to pursue broader non-job-related learning, some with the potential to realise levels of self-enlightenment, 'conscientization' and a greater propensity to become active. It is here that we might argue that learning becomes the marriage of different objectives and outcomes as posited in table one and a channel towards greater employee participation in the workplace.

Resonating with Brandt's (2001) important focus on the contextual effects of 'sponsoring influences' on union learning strategy, Payne (2001) also emphasises globalisation as the 'context' for lifelong learning. Furthermore, Payne highlights the potential for involvement in that pedagogic strategy by unions to 'reflexively' address some of the commensurate pressures on working conditions that this economic and culture phenomenon has brought. Crucially, Grayson (2016), in his historical analysis of working class solidarity in North England during the corporatist period in the UK, demonstrates that with a supportive ideology of political and economic aims, a 'popular workers' education' through a more radical Freirean pedagogy is

possible. Given the advent of Labour's National Education Service (Rayner, 2017), with its commitment to lifelong learning for all citizens, and a key role recognised for the unions, this remains a real possibility for the future of union driven learning. Nevertheless, as it stands with respect to most union pedagogic strategy and literature in the current economic and political climate, the learners' views remain largely absent in discussions on pedagogic strategies between unions and management.

A Freirean view of the ULR and learning centres

Reflecting on the degree to which table one captures the union pedagogic model, poses the question, 'What Freirean role does the ULR play? That is, what is the ULR's 'radical' function beyond the nonetheless important 'ambassadorial role' (Clough, 2012), and as an 'informal educator' (Rae, 2017) in the workplace?

While not actually providing teaching, it can be argued that ULRs play a key role as an inspiration to other learners. In the sense that ULRs' pedagogic engagement with learners is that of 'equal knowers,' certainly in its organisational context, they facilitate learning for members through empathic interaction to uncover their learning needs. Also, it can be argued that this discussion is, in line with Newman's influential model on union learning contracts (See Fisher, 2017), to some significant degree 'dialogic' and most definitely not hierarchal in nature (Foley, 2001). The validity of the ULR's input in this pedagogic process is that very often they have undertaken their own learning journey (Shawchuk, 2003; Moore, 2011; Ross and Moore, 2016) and now offer advice and encouragement to others based on that experience (Hollinrake, 2016; Saundry et al., 2017).

Seen thus, the ULR may also assume the role of the ‘organic intellectual (Gramsci, 1971) of the shop-floor. While engaging with members to take up learning, ULRs are also therefore examples of how that learning can be the first step into activism and perhaps greater enlightenment. As Gramsci argued, ‘all men (sic) are intellectuals’, tasked in this context with providing a ‘counter [educational] hegemony’ to the dominant common-sense view of neo-liberalism of today. To what degree ULRs can effectively play a part in challenging current pedagogic hegemony remains a key theme of the research. In this context, and despite the necessary caution over sample size in her ‘narrative’ analysis of activists’ motivation, Moore’s findings are also instructive. In that, as she reports, a sizeable minority of the activists she interviewed saw their aim being ‘to transform society’ (2011: 157) through direct participation in decision-making. Crucially, for Moore, the activists in general in her study were not ‘imprisoned’ by the ‘structures and ideology of neoliberalism’ but their narratives revealed an element of ‘agency’ to counter this hegemony (2011: 166). What is indisputable is that from the early days of ‘bargaining for skills’ (Dundon and Eva, 1998) in the 1990s, the union learning agenda has created a network of many thousands of new activists (Marsden, 2017). A network of ULRs whose presence and influence, it can be argued, have challenged the conventional way learning was previously identified and delivered in the workplace. Similarly, this army of ULRs have helped address the ‘disaffection of non-traditional’ learners with little confidence in ‘formal education’ (Ball, 2011).

Many of the review reports from Unionlearn also highlight the pedagogic efficacy of the learning centre (2006, 2016, Green and Henseke, 2019) and emphasise its unique features. The value of a work-based learning centre is seen to include as being: a drop-in centre; socially facilitated by a tutor with mixed learning groups and thus able to effectively deliver numeracy and literacy, ICT training and offer broader learning opportunities. To revisit Cassell and Lee’s observation that ‘learning centres also enhance the collective nature of learning, in that

individuals are learning alongside their union colleagues' (2007:791), is to capture a Freirean based pedagogy that allows workers to be more equal and collegiate in their learning. Crucially, a learning centre is where learning is facilitated by virtue of their union membership. With reference to table one, in this context Freire might argue that neither union nor management should 'own' the learning but rather the workers. Furthermore, in Freirean terms, as self-determining learners and 'knowers', Ross et al.'s (2011) findings that members really value 'learning spaces' such as the learning centre is significant.

The learning journey

Findlay and Warhurst (2011) note that, while the evaluation of ULF rounds has focused on the number of ULRs trained or learning leading to qualifications, learners' broader needs are overlooked. Similarly, in the incorporation versus critical engagement debate (Rainbird and Stuart, 2011), members' views on learning have rarely featured in the analysis of union revitalisation. So, both funding-focussed reports and the academic debate over union macro-learning strategy have neglected to a degree the real issue: the overall needs of the members, and in the context of this discussion, how learning can lead to greater employee participation in workplace decision-making. As noted above, here Ross and Moore's (2016) focus on the learning journey offers a unique insight into members' experiences and expectations and the scope to frame that insight in Freirean terms. Similarly, UNISON's R2L programme for Munro and Rainbird illustrates 'a radical initiative aimed at grassroots membership' (2000b: 237).

Furthermore, while Cassell and Lee (2007) acknowledge the unitarist argument of shared outcomes for employer and employee in union partnerships on learning, Ross et al.'s specific reference to raising awareness through union-led workplace learning has clear ties to a more pluralist if not radical Freirean 'conscientization' process underpinned by a specific union pedagogy. As they note:

‘Learners value informal inclusive, participative and reflective learning (which are all key elements of Freirean pedagogy) ...in contrast to their prior experiences of school and traditional teacher-pupil relationship (which are very much in the narrator and banking tradition)’ (2011: 5 – comments added).

Crucially both Ross and Moore (2016) and Ross et al (2011) offer unique pedagogic insight in this analysis of the emancipatory potential of union learning. Methodologically, by adopting a ‘narrative’ approach to their research they can capture the real learning aspirations of the workers, which their analysis would indicate are both vocational and self-developing. Therefore, it is here perhaps that a pedagogic model based around Freire and Gramsci could allow union strategists to formulate a learning plan that better serves their members but also aids the aim of revitalising the union movement.

In conclusion, Clough’s (2007) multi-source review suggests that whilst emancipation is a traditional aim of union learning, it has been overtaken in recent decades by a more pragmatic need to also demonstrate ‘added value’ to employers and the key funder, the Government. From the discussion, using a Freirean analysis of that context reveals the ongoing hegemony of market-led learning in the UK. However, is it as clear as a simple dichotomy between banking of knowledge versus self-awareness?

For instance, any learner’s first experience of national vocational qualifications which by their nature, certainly at level 1 and 2, are a demonstration of competencies, is very prescriptive. Nonetheless, in terms of union learning programmes, and of potential development, it can be argued that for many learners this initial introduction acts as a springboard to more fulfilling and enlightened learning and subsequently greater participation in workplace decision-making. Similarly, while the State continues to underplay this key educational challenge facing the country, the unions have made a central element of their pedagogic strategy to address

members' literary and numeracy learning needs with no little success (Dromey and Monks, 2017). Therefore again, should the unions really be accused of mere 'incorporation' (Rainbird and Stuart, 2011; McIlroy and Croucher, 2013) or rather, given the current balance of power, be credited with adopting a more pragmatic approach to satisfying many of their members' immediate educational needs?

To this end, we have seen from the preceding discussion that reports on union learning have focussed more on targets in terms of the 'banking' of knowledge by learners and the efficacy of ULRs and the ULF in that strategy. Some more academic studies, in contrast, have looked at a range of elements that make up union learning. Furthermore, other commentators have criticised the extent of 'adaptation' (Freire, 1992) of the unions in that process and learning's subsequent limited contribution to union organisation and renewal. However, utilising a Freirean perspective has provided a window on what can also be argued is a strategy of 'integration' (Freire, 1992) by the unions. A window which highlights the uniqueness of a union pedagogy based upon student-centred teaching and the key role of the ULR. Furthermore, a Freirean perspective has facilitated a focus on the actual views and experiences of learners largely ignored by other macro-level studies. Overall, in the context of this paper, a Freirean analysis has also highlighted the potential propensity of learners to become more participative in their union, and their employing organisation, as part of their pedagogic 'journey'. To this end, the discussion has drawn on the rich heritage of radical pedagogic theory and practice in adult education writing to bring a fresh perspective to this key aspect of industrial relations. This is not to ignore, as Brandt's (2001) highlights, the current political and economic 'sponsoring influences' that have moved the balance of power in society towards employers and, therefore, limit the emancipatory potential of union learning.

Nevertheless, in closing, to better understand this potential for greater worker participation in organisational decision-making through the collective, what is required is for future research on union learning to spend more time asking learners about their aims and aspirations rather than simply recording them as learning outcomes and qualifications attained. That is, a more ‘dialogic’ (Freire, 1992) approach to the union learning agenda is needed. It is here, perhaps, that the notion of the ‘essence’ of trade unionism could be usefully tested through the conceptualisation of Hodder and Edwards (2015), certainly in the context of how radical, adult, educational pedagogy’s relationship with identity, ideology and activism could reside within their model. Furthermore, reflecting on how to redress the current imbalance of power in most workplaces, through the recruitment of more learning-inspired activists, Hollinrake’s (2016) candid account of the effectiveness of ULRs is prescient. In that Hollinrake also suggests that this is an opportune time for union strategic decision-makers themselves to reflect on what form of pedagogic model would best suit both their learners’ needs and these advocates of learning who play an integral role in that endeavour.

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