



UK Paper from the Learners' Perspective on Cooperation between Trade Unions and Universities

UNISON NW & University of Liverpool, UK

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Introduction

This paper describes and reflects upon the experiences of learners who participated in lifelong learning events organised by the University of Liverpool for Unison Northwest members. It also incorporates the outputs of a series of structured interviews with Unison officials and members. The interviews focused principally upon international development activity within Unison but also covered access to and perceptions of lifelong learning and the outputs are therefore relevant for inclusion.

The University of Liverpool and Unison have aimed to develop a multifaceted relationship which is not restricted to a single area of activity but which ranges across departments and project areas. The relationship grew out of broad based discussions involving the University and other trade unions across the North West of England which explored the potential for the establishment of a Knowledge Transfer Centre. To a large extent these early discussions, and then the subsequent development of collaborative working in the area of University Lifelong Learning (ULLL), reflected the trade union sector's growing belief that its focus should be broadened and developed to respond to the increasing importance of the lifelong learning agenda generally and the problems associated with employer led training for workers (eg. lack of investment, short-term thinking).

Description of the Lifelong Learning Activities

In Spring 2006 the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL) and Unison undertook a series of discussions about the potential to open up ULLL to Unison members. The key issue for any proposed ULLL actions was that it should be responsive and attractive to its target audience – mainly low paid women many of whom have few (if any) formal qualifications. Following discussion, it was agreed that culture could be used as a platform for collaborative activities (thus having the benefit of momentum from the Liverpool European Capital of Culture '08 initiative). Consequently Reading Groups and Art Workshops became the focus of activities. The aim of these activities was to bring work based colleagues together in a non-threatening learning environment and to use their common working experiences to develop learning aspirations and ideas.

The use of reading groups aimed to open the lifelong learning agenda to participants. "Reading" underpins a significant proportion of the ULLL agenda - from Continuing Professional Development or Vocational Training through Continuing Education (CE) to Widening Participation. It is believed that shared reading activities engender critical thinking, analytical skills, the construction of argument and the precise articulation of concepts, emotions and ideas. Critical reading remains not only an essential skill for anyone involved at any level of educational activity, but is also a gateway to all areas of Higher Education and moreover develops skills/knowledge directly applicable in the workplace..

In the case of Unison-University of Liverpool reading groups, the reading group - or shared reading format has been used to build confidence in novice learners with a view to encouraging first steps into formal training and education. It has also been used as a learning environment in which Unison members can come together with work colleagues to network and share work related experiences.

One reading group now operates independently (but is able to draw on University support if required) having had the support of a formal University group leader for 15 months. Another operates with a University group leader and a third is in the process of being established.

The 2 linked art workshops have stimulated strong demand for more structured Art courses and these are in the process of being established - their aim being to use art to stimulate critical thinking and discussion.

The Learner Experience

The University has undertaken a number of evaluation activities to measure the perceptions of the learners to the reading group / art workshop experience and the learning arising from it. These have included written responses to questionnaires and focused individual and group discussion. Unison also conducted a videoed interview with members of the initial reading group. The findings of these evaluations have been supplemented by structured interviews with Unison officials and members who have not participated directly in the ULLL activities but who have been asked to comment on University - Unison collaboration and the lifelong learning events.

(i) Organisation of and Access to University Lifelong Learning

Responses to evaluation/follow up activity reveal that individual involvement in the ULLL activities has been largely due to the activities being championed by an individual Unison member. Less targeted recruitment activities by the trade union can result in comments such as:

"I don't think people realise that these types of things are available, I think people would be interested.."

"People are ignorant to the fact that this goes on and that it's available so they're not going to apply for it.."

"People need encouragement when it comes to education and to know it's there"

Recruitment has been most successful where one individual has actively promoted the lifelong learning events and has made personal contact with potential group members – this has generally been the local trade union officer (Branch Secretary or Education officer)

In structured interviews art and reading groups received a very positive response with requests for more information and negative views expressed about the perceived lack of information filtering to individual members. Comments included the observation that trade unions should be involved in this type of ULLL as without it many of their members would be unlikely to participate.

(ii) Participation in University Lifelong Learning

Without exception (based upon feedback received), the learner's perception of their experience of university lifelong learning has been positive.

"I always feel very inspired having attended the group and since becoming a member have taken up writing"

"I've met other people, mainly who work as I do ...who I would not normally come into contact with"

"Found it all very interesting"

Participants have valued the University input in terms of the rigour and structure it has provided. They have also felt that the University "pushed the boundaries" and encouraged them to step up to a higher level of reading or discussion. Comments included: *"The tutor helped to bring out the poetry"* and one in the art group noted that she felt the most helpful aspects had been *"demystifying modern art – discussion around the paintings in the gallery and the worksheets"*. Another said that she was pleased to be in a tutor –led group that allowed her *"to be(ing) able to admit I didn't know anything about art and to give my impressions."*

Many commented on the value of university tutor-led group discussion allowing for considerable debate and discussion.

They have also valued the contact with work colleagues outside the daily working routine and with union colleagues from other employers. One, who was new to the employer and pleased to have met other work colleagues commented: *"We would not have met at all if we'd not been in the book group"*

The learners' experiences reflect in particular: increased confidence (*"..to read books I perceive as hard"*) and increased skills and understanding (*"like switching on a light"* and *"I believe I will read in a more structured and critical way"*).

Members attending the art group sessions noted: *"I would now feel able to encourage others to come and experience modern art..."*

Comments were also made on the importance of support funding for lifelong learning, as this is often seen to be a barrier to participation.

(iii) Moving on in ULLL

The University's collaborative work with Unison is at an early stage. Feedback to date is providing a platform from which to measure the potential for taking collaborative work to a broader level which would further open up University LLL (ULLL) to Unison members.

An example of the impact that participation has had on one group is as follows:

The first evaluation revealed that group members would not want the group to continue without a University leader (i.e. meetings to be organised by the group itself). Whilst the second evaluation continued to show a preference for a University leader, this was a much less significant issue. After 15 months of formal support the group did move to independent working and a comment was made in the final evaluation that, at the beginning, they “would not have imagined that we would go off on our own”.

This reveals a commitment and willingness to take responsibility for learning which is also matched by individual participants reporting their first steps into new learning experiences eg formal courses or new areas of personal/professional development. One individual interviewed on the video remarked:

“It has helped to build confidence with quite a number of members. We used to have people who didn’t speak much at the beginning, but have come out of their shell a bit more. And it’s made me realise I quite like organising things.”

Furthermore one of the initial reading group participants has travelled to the TULIP Project Conference in Iasi, RO to make a presentation together with a UNSION NW official regarding the value to the learners of participation in such learning experiences.

One of the reading group participants who is a branch officer noted that from her perspective her original motivation had been:

“(I wanted) to bring more active members into the branch, but actually I’ve enjoyed it myself. It’s helped me. It’s brought more of our members into an active position and I’m hoping to get them more involved as union learning reps for the future.”

This comment reflects the nature of the learning activity, in that whilst some may have perceived it initially as only for personal development they have now seen its applicability as learning within the workplace and the spin-off within their own working / union environment.

Conclusions

(i) Effectiveness of the ULLL Activities

The learner’s perspective of the ULLL activities, as reported in the feedback processes, is that they have been very effective. Participation has been reported as an enjoyable and personally enriching, as well as learning, experience. Demand has been expressed for further similar activity and wider dissemination of information about such opportunities.

(ii) Identification of Problems

Two key issues have arisen as potential problems.

Firstly, direct communication with individual union members is essential to promote the benefits of participating in activities. Without this, union members may not realise that ULLL opportunities are available.

Secondly, funding must be made available to support participation.

(iii) Transferability of Experience

The model of ULLL-TU collaboration is transferable to other TULIP partners. Key issues for consideration in setting up such ULLL structures would be:

The Organisation of ULLL Opportunities:

- The selection of University tutors who are able to instil a sense of confidence in the participants alongside a flexible meeting structure which enables a group to assume more responsibility for learning as time progresses. One attendee commented on how she liked the sessions because they were “*dynamic and fluid*”
- Regular evaluation and review in order to monitor activities and to enable effective responses to the needs of the group – whether in terms of content and level of input or delivery timing and format.
- Flexibility of delivery is essential to fit in with the work patterns of the union members. For example most who attended the art group sessions were members of the National Health Service and many worked shifts.

Trade Unions and Universities Working Together

- The need for effective communication structures between University, trade union organisers and trade union members. The University and Trade Union sector share a commitment to learning and the empowerment that this can bring to workers. The mission to deliver this to trade union members must remain at the core of developments.
- Universities and trade unions need to learn about each other's decision making and operational structures to ensure effective collaborative working
- The need for continued promotion and endorsement of lifelong and work based learning at every level of the trade union structure. The educational message can be overwhelmed by the traditional dominance of the pay and working conditions agenda and this could impact upon recruitment to learning events.
- The University sector needs to be aware of its elitist and bureaucratic image (in the UK) within the Trade union sector and should put in place measures to counteract this.