Learning for revival; British trade unions and workplace learning.

Keith Forrester  
School of Continuing Education,  
University of Leeds  
Leeds LS1 5JT  
U.K.  

k.p.forrester@leeds.ac.uk
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Against a background of declining union significance and falling membership, this article reviews the recent development of trade union workplace learning in Britain. It is argued that the dominant framework within which this learning is currently undertaken is one of ‘employability’. Instead of an employability framework, it is suggested that an educational framework informed by ‘democratic citizenship’ better serves the need for unions and their members to engage with changes within the workplace and within the wider socio-economic environment.

Everywhere it seems, trade unions are facing difficulties. A substantial literature on the problems now exists on unions in for example, Britain (Waddington & Kerr, 1999; Kelly, 1999; IDS, 1999), Europe (Martin & Ross, 1999; Waddington, 2000, 2001), Australia (Peetz, 1998) and elsewhere such as in the United States of America (Hurd, 2001). Few unions in late capitalist economies are seen as exempt from these problems. Suggested solutions to perceived problems differ and are shaped by a variety of particular factors, such as historical contexts, institutional settings, union influence within the employment relationship, union structures and identities and the changing characteristics of employment (Frege and Kelly, 2003; Hyman, 2001; Waddington, 2000). Despite the particular national contexts of these problems, there is widespread recognition of the damage and challenges posed by government and employers' adoption of neo-liberal practices within an increasingly competitive global environment (Harrod and O’Brien 2002). The weakened collective bargaining power resulting from the dramatically changed structure of international capital together with managerial offensives designed to weaken union collectivism has contributed to this decline. Although few blueprints for recovery are available, there is general recognition that 'if unions are to win the support of the non-union workforce, they will need to invest considerable efforts and resources in
persuading employees that a union will make a difference to their workplace' (Charlwood, 2002.488). Taylor agrees and concludes that trade unions 'can be expected to develop new roles as service providers, mutual aid societies and learning organisations' (Taylor 2002.10). This article will focus on one of these areas; namely, the turn towards workplace learning by British trade unions in recent years. For British unions in general and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in particular, the promotion of learning opportunities for their members has emerged as an important success story. Developing the learning careers of trade unionists is cited as an illustration of 'the modern role for unions' and represents an 'ambitious and innovative agenda’ (TUC 1998) for future activity. This promotion of union learning represents an important strategic initiative by British unions to address the current constraints and challenges posed by wider global socio-economic forces. In contrast for example, to the situation in Germany, Spain or Italy, British unions exist within a weak national institutional landscape. Like their counterparts in Australia and North America, unions in Britain significantly depend on their organising and membership mobilisation capacities at local workplace level and potentially, their ability to build coalitions with civil society. Expanded membership and participation through the promotion of workplace learning represents a novel approach in addressing these strategic problems of renewal.

The first section of the article will provide a brief descriptive overview of these union learning activities in recent years. It will be argued that the focus on learning has represented an important and dynamic new area of trade union organisation and activity at workplace level. The 'new framework for education', as the TUC puts it (TUC 1998,
9-8), has resulted in a variety of innovative initiatives and it will be suggested, is buttressed by an impressive array of statistical evidence. An important additional feature of the trade union emphasis on learning has been the political repositioning of trade unions and the TUC in particular, as important players in the government's lifelong learning policy agenda and institutional arrangements.

The second section of this paper will examine the dominant conceptual framework underpinning this development of learning opportunities and services for union members. It will be argued that the notion of 'employability', with its uncritical focus on skill formation, has resulted in an undue narrowness of the learning agenda. This has resulted in marginalising important aspects of trade union activity in pursuit of their wider societal objectives and aspirations. It will be suggested that a broader framework - democratic citizenship - better situates current and future union concerns, incorporates 'missing themes' and provides a stronger analytical coherence for the 'new framework for education'. A shift from employability to democratic citizenship incorporates such concerns as well as engaging with the wider social forces of change within which trade unions and their members exist and seek to understand and influence.

Methodologically, this article draws upon evidence from a variety of sources. The authors’ involvement in trade union education over a number of years provides an important source of data from a number of collaborative educational programmes and projects with different unions. Involvement with two unions on three workplace union learning projects compliment these teaching activities. Secondly, small evaluative studies
on workplace learning developments have recently been concluded for three unions. A three-year qualitative study of a union’s learning representative network has just begun and will explore the experiences, contexts and tensions characterising the work of these lay representatives. Finally, the article uses union material and documentation collected by the author in recent years.

New Learning for New Times

In the politically difficult period of the 1980s and 1990s, issues associated with vocational education, training and more generally, with lifelong learning, were of increasing importance for British trade unions (Forrester and Payne, 1999). The 'skills crisis' that increasingly dominated policy and institutional reform of the Conservative governments during this period provided the trade unions with an important avenue for coming in from the political wilderness of the Thatcherite period. Support for the new national system of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) for example, provided additional avenues for trade unions to appear and be seen once again, as legitimate players in an important arena of labour market policy. The launch in 1994 of the 'new unionism' (TUC 1994) was aimed at 'shaking-off outdated practices and transforming the TUC into a modern, progressive organisation which campaigns on behalf of trade unions and working people' (TUC 1994-9). In the second half of the 1990s, there was a perceptible shift in trade union educational activities away from this dominant policy-driven institutional agenda to a wider focus on 'learning'. While 'the learning society' and 'learning throughout life' was a feature of TUC commentary in the 1980s, the promotion of lifelong learning by the new Labour Government towards the end of the 1990s
encouraged the TUC to be more expansive and confident of the possible contribution by
trade unionists to this key policy objective. ‘Taking the lead on learning' was an
important theme as 'high profile action on learning may assist recruitment and
organisation amongst groups under-represented in trade unions, but with most to gain
from the new agenda - including young people, part-time, casual and low paid workers'
(TUC 1998·14). The role of collective bargaining over learning issues was seen as being
'considerable' (ibid. 6).

Within a relatively short period, learning had emerged as a major concern for trade
unions. As the TUC stated in 1998, 'Until recently however there has been little union
involvement in the skills formation and the access to such training' (ibid. 7). By the end
of the decade, 'learning services' was seen as a major source of 'added value' for 'new
unionism'. Alongside the ‘traditional’ workplace lay representative education such as
health and safety and shop steward training, has emerged a focus on membership learning
and significantly, non-member involvement. The Bargaining for Skills project (renamed
Learning Services in 2001) encompassed a myriad of local workplace and regional
initiatives designed to involve members (and non-members) in learning activities that
prioritised basic skills, provided vocational awards and until recently, extensively used
Individual Learning Accounts. By 2002, the trade unions and the TUC in particular, had
moved significantly towards its aspirations outlined in 1998 to 'locate unions at the centre
of the learning agenda, raise expectations amongst members, and encourage institutions
to recognise that unions seriously are key players in the learning world' (TUC 1998·22).
In the increasingly fragile political relationships between the trade unions and the Labour
government in the early years of the current decade, the 'quiet revolution' as the TUC describes its learning agenda, has been seen as a significant success. Union involvement in the University of Industry - or Learn Direct as it is now called - and the embryonic network of Learning & Skills Councils are testimony to the growing authority and contribution provided by unions to important areas of government education policy, especially in the area of the 'missing millions' of leavers outside the traditional reach of the more mainstream formal providers. Underpinning the rapid expansion of the TUCs Learning Services network throughout the country has been significant sums of project funding from agencies and government departments within this country and from the European Union.

A good illustration of this political and educational success is the cluster of union learning projects funded through the Union Learning Fund (ULF). Started in 1998 and funded by the (then) Department for Education's Employment, over £20 million has been made available to trade unions to, in the main, develop and promote innovative learning activities within a partnership framework 'that contribute towards the creation of a learning society'. Supported by statutory rights to paid-time off from work, the predominant focus of the ULF projects over the three years has been the training and support of learning representatives (62% of all projects), an access/equality (sic) theme and thirdly, basic skills (32%). A central element of 'building this union capacity to create the new learning culture' (Antill et.al. 2001-65) has been the development of union workplace learning representatives (ULRs). The statutory support for ULR activity covers analysing learning or training needs, providing information and guidance,
arranging learning or training, promoting the value of learning and finally, consulting with employers on such activities. To date, as the TUC reports (TUC 2004), some 7,500 workplace union learning representatives have signed up around 60,000 employees 'into learning'. It is estimated that there will be 22,000 ULRs in 2010 'bringing as many as 250,000 workers into learning'. Some 3,500 union learning representatives have been trained over the last two to three years. From a recent survey (TUC. 2004b) mention is made of the 'positive impact on membership levels' by 59% of ULRs and on the positive perceptions of their union by members and non-members by 69% of respondents. 30% of ULRs are new to union activism.

From the available evidence, it is difficult to dispute the view that 'learning' has emerged as a major concern and focus for activity for the trade unions and the TUC with significant implications for the financial, organisational and 'modernising' role of unions today and tomorrow. Less certain however, are the conceptions and assumptions underpinning the notion of a specific trade union contribution to 'workplace learning' employed in these activities. Exploring these issues will be the focus of the next section.

It will be argued that a perspective that views learning as a self-evident benefit to members and employees risks narrowing and constraining the variety and more importantly, the social purpose of the learning.

Employability Learning.

The emergence of 'a real political will to create a learning society' and the 'new framework for workplace learning' (TUC 1998.5) remains situated within the historically strong theme of the 'yawning learning divide in Britain' (TUC 1998b). Widening
participation, guidance, childcare facilities and financial support towards tuition fees and
study costs are suggested as contributions towards addressing this learning divide. In
addition to the promotion of lifelong learning as an essential element of the 'new
framework', there are other formulations which have been 'updated'. Employability is the
new focus that legitimates and drives the new lifelong culture. The new lifelong learning
culture, argues the TUC

'. . . is about enabling people to acquire the competence and confidence
to enhance their employability and to increase their career chances in a
world of rapid changes in markets, technology and work organisation.
(TUC 1998:5).

Other ‘updated’ formulations contributing towards the development of a learning society
include the promotion of ‘shared commitments’ by the trade unions towards other
partners. These shared commitments involve commitments from the employer (to invest
in job-specific as well as personal development learning), the employee (to own and
control their learning throughout their working lives), the State (to provide lifetime
entitlement and support for employees) and from the unions (to promote, negotiate and
deliver learning to their members) (TUC 1998:5).

In the Union Learning Fund literature, these recent ideas are developed further. The
(comparatively) substantial funding available to unions from the government are only
available for the development of 'innovative' learning schemes 'which promotes learning
in the widest sense, and builds a strategy for competitiveness, employability and
inclusion' (DfEE, 2000-2). 'Innovative' learning in the context of the ULF requires the
development of partner relationships between the unions with other organisations and secondly, requires initiatives that do not include their traditional education programme for workplace lay-officials. Analysis from the three rounds of ULF indicate employers and employers associations were involved as partners in over half of all ULF projects (Antill et.al. 2001·Annex D). Despite the widespread debate surrounding union and employer partnerships (Kelly 1999, Martinez Lucio and Stuart 2001, Terry 2003) trade union workplace learning is increasingly undertaken, and encouraged, within an employer partnership relationship.

The ideological nature of employability with its emphasis on consensual, business focussed and corporate success objectives sits comfortably within employment partnership arrangements. For trade unions however, partnerships remain a risky business. There is a real danger, suggests Terry (2003. 469) of partnerships possibly being a form of corporate level 'political exchange' whereby unions forego significant opportunities for challenging managerial decisions in exchange for recognition of their procedural and institutional standing. Such relationships, others have argued (Kennedy 1995, Rainbird 2000 ) with specific reference to the public sector union Unison, do not necessitate ignoring differences between the employer and trade union as is demonstrated by the learning initiatives from Unison. Notwithstanding the situation in isolated unions, the expansion of union workplace learning is being strongly encouraged within partnership relationships that, in the ULF framework at least, 'builds a strategy for competitiveness, employability and inclusion'.
The focus on 'employability' within trade union workplace learning activities is not particular to the trade unions. It is part of a widespread and contested restructuring narrative of radical, neo-liberal changes within the labour market, in the nature of work and even, in the nature of capitalism itself (Carnoy 1998, Leadbeater 1999). Despite the existence of a wide ranging debate on the reasons behind Britain's economic decline (Ashton and Green 1996), it was the education and training system that was highlighted as they key determinant explaining the absence of relevant skills, knowledge and attitudes needed for a successful ‘modernised’ economy. Developing and fulfilling employees learning potential so the argument goes, is a key element in the generation of economic well being and economic competitiveness. As Avis (2000.196) ironically notes, ‘We are to become responsible for our own actions as individuals, investing in our own development thus increasing our capacity as social capital’. As has been commonly pointed out, it is from within this policy trajectory here in Britain, the European Union, Australia and elsewhere, that the promotion and discourse of 'lifelong learning' and employability acquires its resonance (Field 2000, Forrester 2002, Crowther 2004). The distinctiveness behind such visions, as Avis points out, ' is the way in which social justice, equity and social inclusion lie at the heart of its project' (Avis 1998·254). The unlocking of learning habits and aspirations for the Labour government in Britain is seen as central to the promotion of the 'new workplace', wealth creation and of society as a whole. Central to this new labour narrative is the importance of enhanced participation in workplace learning as a key component of new forms of solidarity predicted on trust and a sense of belonging. Economic healthiness through a knowledge-based workforce enhances social cohesion. A concern for equity and ‘fairness at work’ is the new agenda
replacing outdated notions of confrontational employment relationships and traditional structures of power, inequality and exclusion. A more humane, caring workplace, it is suggested, is one that can actively compete within the global economy (DfEE 1998).

However, the collapsing of concerns such as social exclusion, co-operative working relationships and greater equity with the drive for increased competitiveness is fraught with ambiguity and tensions. As Avis suggests more strongly;

'The danger of such an evacuation of politics is to deny its presence. Such a project that proclaims its interest in social inclusion and justice but which has nevertheless placed in a hegemonic position the desire to modernise British capitalism is contradictory.' (Avis 1998:261)

As will be argued below, the current direction of union learning risks being ensnared within such ambiguities and tensions.

**From workplace to societal concerns?**

The sections above have suggested that a discourse of employability characterise the new educational framework adopted by the trade unions in recent years. There are obviously perspectives other than employability that could provide the framework, priorities and aspirations for trade union involvement in 'the learning society'. The TUC itself has hinted at such possibilities when it writes of 'a learning society is about developing active citizens with the skills to learn and to participate in a democratic society, within their workplace and local communities.' (TUC 1998:5). Instead of employability providing the rationale underpinning the 'new educational framework', there is a serious case for examining the parallel or rival claims of citizenship.
Interest in citizenship learning has made somewhat of a comeback in recent years. It is now commonplace to find citizenship used to legitimate education projects from across the political spectrum. More recent and generous understanding of citizenship that moves beyond legal status and entitlement stress the notion of membership together with a number of other related themes such as belongingness, independence and equality, participation and shared existence and identity (Coare and Johnston 2004). Not surprisingly, given these attempts to locate understandings of citizenship within the very logic of modern society, multidisciplinary studies of citizenship are often situated within a variety of powerful socio-political forces and processes such as economic globalisation, mass migration, disruption of the nation state system and multiculturalism. As Scobey (2001.16) notes, citizenship 'is at base a story about globalisation, but one that is specified in different ways from differing national, ideological and disciplinary vantage points.' As its appeal increases, so do the critical studies that explore the wide-ranging and often, contradictory understandings and practices associated with citizenship (Lister 1997, Coare and Johnston 2004). Sharp divergences of opinion for example, have characterised the adult education approaches to citizenship. These have included the conservative and pragmatic traditions which have tended to leave unchallenged the socio-political societal context, the liberal perspective with its emphasis on personal intellectual development and the development of an informed, critically aware citizen and thirdly, the radical traditions that situated citizenship within understandings of class, inequality and social reproduction. Martin (2003) warns though that it is not accidental that recent
intellectual and practitioner interest in citizenship is occurring within a restructuring of welfare, the state and of economic activity.

The linking of lifelong learning with citizenship issues is neither an original idea nor a far-fetched suggestion. As mentioned earlier, the TUC too has identified citizenship themes as an essential feature of 'the new framework for workplace learning'. However, despite British trade unions recognising that they 'have been at the front of movements which challenge inequality and, economic, social and racial injustice' (TUC 1998a-2), these campaigns have not been strongly reflected in the learning priorities or initiatives of trade unions or the TUC. They, together with more general citizenship themes, are increasingly marginalised within the drive for 'employability. While agreeing with Waddington (1995) that British unions have implemented wide-ranging reforms in adapting to the changed circumstances of the 1990s, we also share with him his questioning of whether these reforms- from our perspective, in the area of lifelong learning- address all the challenges facing unions. It is not simply an issue of too exclusive a learning focus on the workplace. The workplace for trade unions will always remain a central arena of attention. Basic skills, vocational qualifications and career aspirations are legitimate concerns for trade unions, given the historic 'learning divide' and failure of British employers to seriously and systematically address skill formation strategies (Keep 1999). An explicit citizenship perspective however could situate such issues and strategies within a wider critical focus on productive and socially useful work that involves a variety interest and identity groups (Usher et. al.1997.49). Absent however from current employability considerations is this engagement with the changing organisation and conceptions of what is to be understood as 'work' and the social,
gendered and political relationships shaping waged labour. Workplace learning initiatives by trade unions, in contrast to those promoted by employers or outside learning professionals have been traditionally situated within a particular socio-economic context that has stressed the unequal and conflictual nature of waged labour. The rise and promotion of workplace learning today moreover, is occurring in a period when the traditional Taylorist dichotomy between thinking and doing, or conception and execution, is some suggest, increasingly outdated. Instead, the shift from an employee's ability to perform to one which emphasises a willingness to perform sees employee subjectivity as less of a problem - as under Taylorism - and more of a resource. Workplace learning initiatives that stress problem-solving, continuous-improvement and self development might well serve the trade union objectives of addressing the ‘learning divide’ but also may be part of wider employer-designed strategies and new forms of work intensification (Thompson and Warhurst 1998). Old-fashioned issues of control, recast in more modernised versions of employee commitment, loyalty and identification, could be the sub-text of many workplace learning schemes. After all, as a recent five-year research programme on the ‘Future of Work’ concludes, ‘command-and-control systems are still very much in evidence in Anglo-Saxon economies, and probably more widely than ever’ (Nolan and Wood 2003.173). Recognising that employee experiences and knowledge is seen as the new capital resource by employers leads to recognising the contested nature of workplace learning. 'Developing the potential in each and every one of us' can be seen as a seductive drive for increased economic efficiency and profitability. Usher et. al. make a related point when they advocate the need for a ‘critical vocationalism’. As they suggest,
In place of crude socialisation processes into workplace discipline and an enterprise culture or an uncritical assertion of human capital theories, there might be an emphasis on a democratisation ‘in work’ and ‘out of work’.

(Usher et. al. 1997.47)

In the 1970s, ‘Democracy at Work’ was once a major educational campaign of the trade unions (British Broadcasting Corporation 1977) with many thousand trade unionists participating in evening meetings, day seminars and local workplace study circles. ‘Modernised’ to fit current circumstances, trade union citizenship learning activities might, once again, engage with themes of democratisation ‘which takes account of difference and diversity as well as inequalities inherent in production and consumption in the uneven movement towards ‘post-Fordism’ ‘(Usher et. al.1997.47).

Linking changes in understandings of ‘work’ and ‘employee relations’ with those in the neighbourhood, city, region and global level becomes today, less of a choice in union learning and more of an essential part of making sense of immediate, local and personal circumstances.

Learning initiatives then, that derive their integrity, ideas, coherence and enthusiasm from notions of democratic citizenship instead of employability, strive to encourage connections between societal changes with, in this instance, the workplace. The so-called new politics of production, with its emphasis (in some workplaces, at least) on creativity, initiative and learning becomes the entry point for critical considerations of workplace learning rather than the hidden sub-text. Linking the economic to social and cultural
considerations becomes possible when considering the often contradictory processes of self-formation and the contribution of employment as a primary or at least, continuing basis for this self-formation. By contrast, an ‘employability’ driven perspective risks reducing ‘personal development’ as an objective of trade union education to an uncritical exercise in strengthening chances of promotion or career development. Important as are these considerations, a distinctive trade union perspective could move fruitfully beyond such ambitions and situate personal development, for example, within a critical analysis of ‘post-Fordism’ and/or ‘consumerist’ perspectives. Muckenberger and his colleagues (1995), in their European review of the future for trade unions, push this line of thinking further when they observe that:

The old trade union paradigm unquestioningly adopted society's distinction of roles with workers on the one hand and consumers, residents and citizens etc. on the other. This mechanism inevitably led to an indifference on the part of the trade unionists and workers to the social effect of their work. At the same time this distinction in roles was a prerequisite for the specific life-styles and styles of working during the phase of full employment (ibid. 17).

Despite the mistake of identifying only one ‘old trade union paradigm’, the study is correct to highlight the ‘unquestioning’ (as Muckenberger and his colleagues put it) element that appears currently to characterise—in the case of this paper—much of union workplace learning activity. Instead of encouraging and designing learning initiatives that critically examine ‘the learning company’, the ‘knowledge economy’ or ‘the smart
workforce’, there is instead a hive of activity and pressure on union learning representatives to enrol employees onto N.V.Qs, sign-up for Individual Learning Accounts (until withdrawn by the Government) or to participate in Learn Direct provision. Information Communication Technology (ICT) skill developments are important learning opportunities – as are NVQs and Learn Direct courses – but in and by themselves, perhaps should not form the substantive focus of considerable trade union learning activity and effort. On the other hand, developing these ICT skills by union members as part of a project designed to critically examine company performance or to establish linkages with other international groups of employees or trade unionists does begin to fit within a distinctive union learning perspective.

A key characteristic of union learning initiatives informed by democratic citizenship is the focus and concerns arising from divisions between people. Associated with a focus on divisions and diversity – within the workplace, the community, over gender and over ethnicity – are a number of interrelated themes such as discrimination, de-industrialisation, interculturalism, inequality and new forms of solidarity. It might be possible that a preoccupation with ‘employability’ could address such themes. Analytically, politically and practically however, the emphasis is on closing down such an agenda, of uncritically working within existing divisions and of focussing inwards rather than outwards towards broader constituencies, partnerships and fresh alliances around common agendas. A learning perspective informed by ‘divisions and differences’, for example, provides a more imaginative and politically innovative basis for linking community and workplace audiences around the recently launched TUC
‘Tackling Racism’ educational workbook. Racism is a feature of most workplace and is appropriately an important focus in union education courses. Linking, exploring and supporting workplace union learning strategies to combat racism with outside community concerns offers fresh opportunities that might incorporate learning around different histories and cultures, xenophobia, identities, ‘asylum seekers’, tolerance and human rights. The joining of ‘employees’ with ‘citizens’, conceptually and organisationally, strengthens the critical and political opportunities for trade unionists to deepen and broaden their existing anti-racist educational and campaigning activities.

As suggested earlier in this article, discussions about learning (for what, with whom and for what purpose) exist within wider societal debates involving issues of significance, relevance and direction. The dominant ‘employability’ perspective currently legitimating much workplace union learning activity, it has been argued, is too closely aligned to the claimed needs of an ‘enterprise economy’, assumptions about skill deficits, pushes to improve efficiency and productivity and mantras about ‘economic survival within an increasingly competitive environment’. Adherence to such a perspective minimises the critical dimension to much learning, is unduly inward focused and narrow in content and results in trade unions accepting educational burdens that properly might be seen as the responsibilities of the state or the employer. The overlapping, but essentially different ‘democratic citizenship’ framework for union learning by contrast, encourages this engagement with the changing nature of work and working relations but more importantly, encourages the reformulation of trade unions as societal actors rather than workplace partners. Participating in wider discussions and activities informed by
changing and contested conceptions and practises of citizenship, prompts this wider resonance with possibly, new audiences and alliances. The challenge is the linking of the workplace concerns with the radical changes underway in the lives of members and those outside the workplace. Muckenberger et.al. (1995.29) envisage 'a citizens union in a civil society'. In a similar vein, Casey (2003. 620) argues for an approach to the learning worker which 'may generate not only improved work practices but may generate links between lifelong learning, societal democratic citizenship and civilised organisations'.

Conclusions:
Few unions in Europe have historically operated in the indifferent or hostile legal environment that characterises the situation facing British unions. Unlike in many other countries, the health of unionism has traditionally depended on the bargaining power of local, sectoral or occupational groups of workers. Local organisation has been a paramount aspect of industrial democracy. The recent promotional efforts and activities around workplace learning by British trade unions are considerable and, as suggested in the introduction to this article, is an key aspect of ‘new unionism’. The formulation and delivery of a new union agenda which is attractive to 'new' groups of members and which moves the initiative away from employers are important contributions in the strategic development of fresh forms of interest aggregation (Waddinton.2000). The development of union learning can be seen as a major and novel element in this attempt to reverse years of decline. Much of this effort over the last 2-3 years has been of an organisational nature that has centred on the recruitment and training of these new workplace lay officials. From the early limited evidence available, it has been suggested that much of
this union learning is conceived and promoted within an employability framework. The exception to this general trend, as noted earlier, has been the case of Unison. It is not coincidental then, that a forceful advocate of a wider more expansive and ambitious conception of union learning can be found from Jim Sutherland, the recent Director of Education and Training for Unison;

On the issue of citizenship, trade unions have historically been in the vanguard in the vanguard of social change. If they are to continue to be in the forefront of creating a thriving democracy with cultural wealth and economic health they have to ensure their strategies on workplace learning contribute to wider policy making aimed at enabling the whole population to become continuously engaged in learning. It is not simply a matter of developing the skills and competence for task-specific, job-related purposes of a short or medium term nature, but also of learning that provides real choices in employment and lifestyles.

(Sutherland.2002.114)

‘Providing real choices’ for members through union learning, it has been argued, requires recognising the contested nature of learning within the workplace. ‘Democratic citizenship’ in contrast to ‘employability’ encourages trade unions to situate membership learning within a wider societal framework that obviously incorporates the workplace but also raises the possibility of new learning partnerships in the community and neighbourhood and fresh approaches to themes such as social inclusion and social justice.
As Rogers & Streeck (1994.142) remind us, ‘capitalism’s social as well as economic viability depends on the limits society manages to impose on it’. For the trade unions, membership education could be an important part of contesting such limits and constraints. In doing so, union learning could substantially address the perception of crisis that has been persuasive across the union movement in recent years by visibly demonstrating a sense of having and shaping a future.


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