

# Engaging Non-participants in Formal Education: considering a contribution from trade union education

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper contributes to the debate about participation and non-participation in formal education by supporting the importance of context as a key factor mediating the engagement of non-participants. Adult women and men who are not engaged in formal education may have no ambition and see no relevance for learning in their lives. They may pass their local college, adult education centre or university with little or no recognition/awareness that it is there and no awareness of the benefit that they could get from its activity. This paper draws on evidence from a study of one group of participants in trade union education that suggests the importance of voluntary engagement in trade union practice was the driver for their enrolment in formal education.*

## **Introduction: why trade union studies?**

The study and consideration of trade union education is usually included as a minor theme in trade union histories, sources on industrial relations or political studies. Within these texts there is no tradition of attempting to engage with the important and influential discourses of adult learning. There is no effort made to consider participation in trade union education within the context of participation or non-participation in wider adult learning. It is also the case that the most important studies in adult learning have not included the experience of trade union education. For example, an otherwise excellent “guide to contemporary literature” contains no references to trade union education (Bridge & Salt, 1996). There are studies that focus on the experiences and problems of adult learners but these do not include any reference to a trade union context (Calder, 1993; Edwards, 1997; McGivney, 1990). Consequently, there is a growing literature with a focus on adult learning that fails to embrace the experience of trade union learners. On the other hand there is a body of literature with a trade union focus that fails to consider the practice and perspectives of adult learning. Furthermore, there is no mention of trade union education or of trade union learners in the events organised by bodies promoting adult learning, for example, the event organised by NIACE to celebrate “adult tutors awards” (NIACE, September 5, 2001). An important issue, therefore, is whether to conduct a discussion of the lessons to be learned from trade union education within

a framework of trade union “activity” and literature, the approach adopted by Holford (1994), or within a framework created by the literature of adult learning (Edwards *et al.*, 1996, pp. 1–7). This paper will argue that trade union education should be considered as another setting for adult learning because it is essentially the same practice (Edwards *et al.*, 1996, p. 4). The discussion will be conducted by considering the data from a particular study of the participants in trade union education in the context of the current debate about ways of encouraging wider participation in adult learning.

This discussion is primarily about adults “learning” and the setting for their “learning”. It is, therefore, important to be clear about the definition of “learning”. One important tradition for the discussion about adult learning focuses on the formal organisation of its presentation and delivery of “learning”. Examples of this approach include studies by Mitchell (2000) and Woodley *et al.* (1987). With this approach what “... is learned is defined by the specification of education and training programmes: and how it is learned is determined by the normal activities of the institution which provide those programmes” (Eraut, 1998, p. 1). Consequently, learning is defined as a formal and intentional activity contingent on institutional practice. It follows that a learner would be a participant of the organised and intentional activities of an institution of learning. This is a limited and limiting approach, especially in the context of much contemporary practice. A more embracing and flexible approach has proposed that learning should be considered “... as the mechanism through which individuals and groups both adapt to their environment and change it” (Thorpe *et al.*, 1993, p. 1). This definition focuses on the relationship between people (individually or collectively) and their environment, and embraces the possibility of change. The activity is learning and it occurs in different contexts, circumstances and settings. It follows that learning may occur in a formal educational or training setting as the intentional outcome of practice. It will also occur in non-formal settings as the intentional outcome of experience, and as the unintentional outcome of experience encountered in a non-formal setting. In a recent contribution, Billett has sought to conceptualise workplace-based learning (Billett, 2001a). His proposition is that much of the learning that takes place in the workplace setting is generated by

... historical-cultural practices and situational factors that constitute the work practice and its enactment. They also shape individuals’ engagement in that practice and how individuals construe and learn from what is afforded by the workplace. Learning is conceptualised as a product of participation in social practices such as work places, and not reserved for exclusive or particular experiences, such as those provided by educational institutions. (Billett, 2001b, p. 1)

This approach, which has much in common with the earlier work of Lave and Wenger (1991), is a much broader definition than institutional education, and creates problems with regard to the measurement or comparison of “learning outcomes” and is at the heart of discussions about achievement and qualifications (Robertson, 1993). This broader definition also carries the important advantage of

freeing discussion from the difficulty of describing those who do not participate in formal institutional programmes as “non-learners” (Eraut, 1998, p. 1). This is particularly important for addressing and understanding the complex patterns of participation and progression in adult learning and is integral to the argument of this paper.

The Billett/Lave and Wenger line of argument proposes that learning is “... a way of being in the social world, not a way of coming to know about it” (Hanks, 1991, p. 24). This perspective places emphasis on the “orientation” of the learner and the social framework of their participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Many other social theorists, including Mills (1963) and Mezirow (1991), have focused attention on the relationship connecting the social framework of individuals and their perspectives. For example, Mills has employed the “vocabulary of motives” both to place individuals within a social framework and to describe their transformation (Mills, 1963). Berger has also argued that most “... of us acquire our meanings from other men ...” or women and we require their constant support for those meanings to be believable (Berger, 1963, p. 78). Thus we can appreciate the importance that both social framework and individual perspectives play in regulating engagement in learning. Furthermore, with the help of Tight (1993) we can recognise that the transformation from non-participant to learner—a non-learner would be unlikely to experience this transformation—is a process aided by the active (orientation) engagement of the participant. For some, a successful engagement may lead to the transformation of their identity (Weill, 1986).

The value of this theoretical background for the current discussion is the focus, during the process of learning, given to the social framework of participation, the common social activity. The social framework focused on by Billett is the workplace and is separate but coexists with other social frameworks. This paper focuses on the importance of the framework established through a shared engagement in trade union practice. For the trade union learner, their engagement and orientation have taken place in a collective context. Yet these same individuals continue to live in a social world, their families and neighbours and relationships beyond their trade union contacts including other work-based relationships, in which their identity is bound up with non-participation in formal programs of education and in which they may hold negative opinions about formal education that help to reinforce that non-participation. The subjects of this study experienced a life that included their development as non-participants that they shared with family, friends and work-mates. They also experienced an access into formal education, as adults, through their voluntary engagement in trade union activity. In the following discussion “education” will be used to refer to formal courses provided in an institutional setting. References to “learning” will include references to the activity of the participant in both a formal and non-formal setting.

The following discussion will first outline the key findings from a local study of trade union education, conducted within the north of England, between 1995 and 2000 (Ball, 2000). This will be followed by a closer examination of three important issues identified from the literature about adult learning: the role of social context mediating disaffection or access, the dominant model of progression as an aide or

obstruction to non-participants engagement, and the appropriateness of “barriers” as a theoretical explanation for non-participation.

The trade union education considered for this study was developed to support trade union workplace representatives to become more effective in their voluntary workplace roles. The curriculum aim is to improve the union representatives’ effectiveness and seeks to achieve this aim by building on their experience. The formal course activity takes place in a classroom context but employs workplace assignments. The program was not developed for the education of the general trade union membership or to serve as an access into other forms of formal education. The program is therefore directed at a minority of trade union members. Even so, there are no other qualifications to regulate enrolment. The course fees were paid by the sponsoring organisation and so they appeared to be “free” to the “student”. Most of the courses were held on a day-release basis, for example over 12 weeks on successive Tuesdays.

The fieldwork for the study was conducted in three phases. The first phase was a postal survey of entrants to the scheme. There were 39.5% returns from 152 new entrants. The second phase was a mixture of two smaller postal surveys complemented with selective interviews. These second-phase surveys, conducted almost 2 years after the first phase, were to sample the students’ perspectives of their experiences attending “follow-on” and exit courses. The courses that represent the “exit” from this scheme of courses were held on one evening a week over a full year and offered the opportunity to achieve an “Access to HE Award”. The final phase of the fieldwork was the construction of three life histories. This was conducted 9 months after the completion of the second phase. The methodology was primarily qualitative. It took the subjects’ perspectives in their social context. The collection of data, the reading of literature and researcher reflection interacted with each other. The unfolding method enabled the provisional identification of issues in the pilot phase and these were either confirmed or eliminated in the subsequent phases. The combined method involved using different techniques, to complement each other, applied in circumstances that made their use appropriate. Finally, but importantly, during the life of the project it was important at selected opportunities to confirm and validate the data and researcher interpretations with the subjects. The Life History subjects, for example, were fully involved in the development of their “constructed” narratives and authorised the final version for research purposes (Ball, 2000, pp. 15–37). Those quotations, used later in the discussion, from the Life History subjects, are used as illustrations of more general points that emerge from the fieldwork as a whole.

In summary, the study considered the responses from 68 learners. The majority, 66 of these, had ended their full-time formal education at the minimum age and nearly 33% had achieved no award or qualification from their formal pre-16 education. The data collected support the interpretation that a significant proportion of the entrants to this scheme of trade union education fit the description, offered by the literature, of traditional non-participants. Furthermore, the levels of non-participation reported from this study are similar to the levels reported in other surveys (McGivney, 1999). More than 80% of the respondents reported that their

period of compulsory education was ended at the minimum age—15 for some and 16 for others. This was linked, by the respondents, with strong expressions of disaffection towards their experience. A large minority of the respondents (25%) reported no experience of formal post-compulsory education. For these their enrolment in trade union education was their “first” post-compulsory experience. The remainder reported some engagement through employer-based and vocationally oriented courses. These courses varied in duration from a half-day or more. A large minority reported that their experience had immediately followed their compulsory education and had been linked to a craft apprenticeship. There were none from within the study who reported any engagement in formal post-compulsory education in the period up to 6 years before their first trade union course. This is consistent with other studies reporting that the majority of manual workers have been excluded from workplace learning opportunities (Ashton, 2001; Tuckett & Sargent, 1996).

It was despite their educational experiences and their “disaffection” that most of the respondents enrolled in their first trade union courses. Their attitudes towards formal education appeared to be rooted in their experience of compulsory education. One of the survey respondents reported that they “... hated school ...” and another reported that they “... could not wait to get away ...” from school. They reported that their choice of course was a trade union decision because they were looking for help with their trade union role. They were willing to enrol on a trade union course because it held the promise of usefulness and was recommended, from within their trade union network, by word of mouth. They reported at the end of that first trade union course that the experience was “pleasurable”. Evidence in the form of comments included in the survey responses and the Life History narratives indicates that many of the students were surprised to find that participation in formal education could be pleasurable. This surprise that the course was pleasurable was augmented by their expectation that the course would be useful to them in their capacity as workplace trade union representatives (Ball, 2000, p. 91). A large minority of respondents, in the first-phase survey, associated their positive experience of their first course with their stated intention to enrol on further courses. The respondents, from each phase of the fieldwork, explained that they had enrolled on their first course, and would enrol on other courses, because the course content was related to their voluntary role and to their trade union activity. They wished to develop or improve their trade union practice. The respondents saw their participation in trade union courses as an extension of their trade union practice (Ball, 2000, p. 93).

### **Disaffection: the cultural context for individual action**

A review of the literature reveals that there are three principal characteristics associated with those who engage in adult learning. First, they probably completed their compulsory schooling with some form of award or qualification (Woodley, 1993, p. 113). Second, and arising from this, they probably enjoyed the experience. At the very least the experience did not engender “disaffection” (Calder, 1993, p. vii). Third, the adult learner is more likely to be employed in higher-level occupa-

tions or at higher income levels (McGivney, 1990, p. 13). This leads us to conclude that the non-participant, in contrast, may be expected to have had an unsuccessful experience of compulsory schooling (Woodley, 1993, p. 113), and this was completed with them achieving no or minimal qualifications. They probably left at the earliest opportunity (at the age of 15 or 16) and to have become "... disaffected ..." from learning (Calder, 1993, p. vii). Those who are "disaffected" will probably have a negative opinion of formal education, see no value in it for their lives, and may have a negative opinion of their own "learning" qualities. They are more likely to have similar social and cultural backgrounds and occupy the lower income and occupational levels (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Luttrell, 1997; McGivney, 1993, p. 13).

Engagement in or estrangement from formal education in their earlier life may be expected to reinforce the different cultures of participation and non-participation in formal adult education. Participation in formal courses of adult education is generally a minority activity. Patterns of participation or non-participation are strongly influenced by the quality of the early and formative experiences. Those who were successful and enjoyed their early school experiences are more likely to enrol in further courses and to have a positive attitude to engagement in education. Those with the least successful experiences, possibly with no achievements, are most likely to carry disaffection towards formal education. Furthermore, those who do engage in further formal education may be expected to gradually accumulate skills and knowledge, strengthen their confidence and acquire a positive orientation or disposition. It is through continued participation that acculturation takes place. It is a function of engagement that those with the longest experience of the formal education system achieve the most successful "acculturation" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 73). Those who do not enrol will not accumulate this social and educational capital (Rinne & Kivinin, 1996). Consequently, participation and non-participation act to promote or to discourage further participation.

The focus for the fieldwork was on the influence of trade union education on the perspectives and further educational activities of participants in the fieldwork. Related and equally important dimensions of these issues were excluded to make the project manageable. The research design, for example, did not include the observation of the influence of learning, formal or non-formal, on their workplace practice. However, the distinction drawn between "non-formal learning" and "formal education" was implicit in the survey design and schedules of questions (Coffield, 2000; Eraut, 1998). The issues of attitudes to formal education or subjective perceptions to their workplace practice were carefully explored in each phase of the fieldwork. It was with the longer and more detailed discussions, with the Life History subjects, that the distinction between "formal" and "non-formal" was most closely observed. For example, Ann described the difference she saw: "... the teaching methods were a means of control at school, all learning the same unrelated subjects, which meant nothing in connection with real life". Real life, for Ann, involved her union representatives' job. "I just got more efficient by doing the job. The first thing I did was put in a joint grievance about working hours and training." Ann's perspective was to see formal education as separate from and possibly irrelevant to real life. It

was probable that Ann saw learning as a response to both “formal” and “non-formal” situations: “I think I have always been capable of ‘learning’ be it working practice, skill or any other situations. Learning for me means using what is learned, and utilising the information in everyday situations” (Ann). A second Life History subject, David, used different words to make the same point: “It is important that formal education and the real world are combined ...”; “I see myself as a learner. I believe that life is one long constant learning programme. We are not a jug to be filled. Life is a process of coming together” (David).

It is possible to see enrolment or non-enrolment in formal educational courses as social behaviour linked with daily activity which both reflects and influences the culture and lifestyle of the individual (Duignan, 1989, p. 81). These individual decisions by individuals are linked to their perception of themselves in relation to others. People conduct themselves in tune with the membership or perceived membership of groups (Courtney, 1992, p. 97), in which case participation and non-participation become subject to the test of what is perceived to be “normal” to members of the group in those circumstances. This suggests that although there may be opportunities for adult women and men to enrol on courses at their local further education college they will not do so because it does not appear to be “normal” to them in their context. Yet, in apparent contradiction, they may enrol on a similar course at the same college when it is organised as a trade union course. In the words of Ann: “Changes in working practices led to my election as a shop steward, and as such, I enrolled upon my first trade union course. This was my first formal course since I had left school and I thoroughly enjoyed it” (Ann). For Ann and other applicants the course appears to be “normal” because it is organised as trade union activity to help participants with their voluntary trade union role. In this context their engagement is a positive response to an opportunity within their sphere of common action and appears to them to be reasonable (Courtney, 1992, p. 97). The courses are perceived by trade union representatives to be attractive and normal because they see the courses through their trade union perspectives: “I wanted to become more efficient at what I was doing because I was representing people at work ... the courses helped with new skills and then I became more confident” (Ann).

At the time of their first trade union course, which was held in a local college, none of the sample had previously attended any course at the same venue and none of the respondents claimed they were looking for “adult education” (Ball, 2000, pp. 75–80). All the members surveyed were consciously looking for a trade union course. Furthermore, their criteria for the course were related to their workplace role. They wanted to become more effective as voluntary trade union workplace representatives. Those who “progressed” into further courses, the second phase, claimed that they did so for the same reasons but augmented their comments with a reference to having “enjoyed” their previous trade union course. Added to this it should be noted that the overwhelming majority of those enrolling for further courses did so with the provider of their first course. This suggests that some confidence and trust develops between the course member and the provider. In their survey responses and in interviews, course members claimed that the course

provider had played an important role in making the course relevant and useful and enjoyable. Consequently, they were justifying their enrolment in further courses with the same provider. Their continued enrolment, they explained, was a function of their trade union orientation and the practical implications for their trade union practice. They were not, at this stage, interested in any of the other course options offered by the same provider (Ball, 2000, pp. 92–95).

## **Barriers**

A common theme in contemporary adult learning literature encourages us to consider that “barriers” act as an obstacle to access. An important origin for this approach was the work of Cross (1981), with the claim that non-participation was a function of barriers grouped into three categories: “situational” (the current circumstances); “institutional” (factors associated with the organisation of the learning); and “dispositional” (individual attitudes and motivation). These barriers, individually or in combination, may deter enrolment. Consequently, there are many reports and other publications exhorting colleges and other providers to address their practice and remove or reduce their barriers. Two important examples of this have been the “responsive college” project (Theodossin, 1986), and the report on “inclusivity” in further education (FEFC, 1996). In response, critics have suggested that this implies that the “barrier” is holding back non-participants and implicitly proposes that adult women and men hold positive views about their adult learning needs but don’t act on those views because of “barriers”. It has been readily accepted that the simple absence of knowledge about opportunities cannot, by itself, explain non-participation (McGivney, 1993, p. 17). Non-participation “... results from the combination and interaction of diverse factors” (McGivney, 1993, p. 22). Others, such as Courtney, have responded to the barriers typology by arguing that overcoming barriers does not arise. According to this view the potential learner sees non-participation as a response to an opportunity that appears to them, in their circumstances, to be an unreasonable option (Courtney, 1992, p. 94). The barrier is effective within the respondent’s current perspectives and rationale. It is not necessarily a permanent and concrete reality. In their circumstances the non-participant does not consider that becoming a participant is reasonable. These circumstances include their social context and their cultural practice. This is a context in which formal post-compulsory education has played no part. Their experience (past) is linked with their expectations (future) and mediated by their behaviour (Duignan, 1989, p. 82; Greenfield, 1989, p. 86). Non-participation, for the individual, is given effect in the practice of their daily activity in which they have no place for formal education.

When the respondents for this study enrolled on their first trade union course they exhibited characteristics identified in the literature as features associated with non-participation. Those respondents who continued into further trade union courses, the phase two subjects and the Life History subjects, reported any number of potential problems that may have prompted them to end their participation. These included difficulties with “time-off”, course costs, travelling to the course and



also difficulties with some aspect of the course content. In the cases studied the respondents found a solution to the problems and they did not act as barriers for these respondents. To give one example: one of the Life History subjects, in her narrative, reported leaving school at the minimum age (15) and was driven by economic necessity and family circumstance, including a disabled partner and one child, into a succession of unskilled and low-paid jobs. Over a period of 20 years the daily pattern of her life reproduced itself and excluded her participation from formal education. Yet over the relatively short period of 3 years from the time of enrolling on her first trade union course she broke out of the pattern of non-participation and progressed to university entrance: "At one point I was attending a one-day release course, a three hour early evening course, and an individual union course following a week end women's education induction" (Ann). Those factors which may have been seen by Ann to be barriers for over 20 years had ceased to exercise their negative power.

This study has located non-participation and participation as a feature of the context and daily lives of the people concerned. At the centre of these lives was the time and energy they gave to their employment and voluntary trade union activity. While not seeking to ignore the influence of social life or of family roles (Luttrell, 1997), through their voluntary engagement in trade union practice the respondents were also adopting an orientation that became influential on their attitudes to participation in formal education. This places emphasis on their voluntary trade union role at their place of work and places them in a web of interlocking social relationships. In this context learning may be seen to signal socially inscribed values: "These courses are intended to be work focused and useful. That was the mainstay of going on these. I could not see the point in learning something that I could not put into practice. My experience of the courses was that they were useful and enjoyable ..." (Ann). With these words, Ann indicated the collective ethos of trade union values and practice: "Almost everything I learned on this first course was of benefit to my workmates when put into practice, for myself it changed my view of working life" (Ann). This was the rationale offered, by this former non-participant, to enrol in trade union education. This rationale was common to most of the survey or interview responses. Consequently, to participate in formal trade union education became a positive activity because the participant saw formal education as helpful for their trade union activity. For the respondents, this positive approach to trade union "education" coexisted, and contrasted, with the attitudes generated by their previous experience of compulsory education. In common with many of their work colleagues they saw formal education through a negative perspective. Participation in formal education, for many adults, is not an anticipated or a shared experience and for those who do enrol it is regarded with suspicion (Reay, 2001). Recent contributions to this debate have drawn attention to the varied responses, by adults, to a range of different education and training initiatives. Many non-participants continue to maintain their non-engagement and exhibit negative attitudes (Bowman *et al.*, 2000; Field, 2001). One example, which illuminates this clash of attitudes, from the collected data was indicated in the responses of David a (Life History) respondent who passed through trade union education en route to higher education.

It was with regret that he pointed to a developing division that grew between himself and his workmates during the later period of his trade union education: "I noticed there was a distance growing when I used to go back. Because I'd been to education ... they move away from you" (David). Similar comments were made by other respondents and in this critical context, and especially at the beginning of their first course, problems that were encountered could become "barriers" or reasons for leaving the course. At a later point in his "life", after he had started his university course, David commented critically "The universities adopt the formal system. You could watch the young students in lectures with steam coming off their pencils. Some of the lecturers enjoy that type of teaching. They seem to be saying 'you sit there and we will fill your heads'" (David). This comment was significant, for David, because of the comparison he made with his experience of trade union education:

Student centred learning or shall we say learning by being involved in your own learning is far more acceptable than being lectured to in a classroom. It gives you the opportunity to learn from others, combine skills and teaches you to respect other people's views, although you may disagree with them. (David)

The findings from the combined fieldwork point to the respondents holding what appeared to be contradictory perspectives. On the one hand they demonstrate disaffection to formal education and on the other hand they enrol in "formal" trade union education and discover participation in trade union courses to be useful and enjoyable. The barriers theory was not useful, with this study, for dealing with the apparent contradiction that "disaffected learners" reported that their engagement in trade union courses was useful and enjoyable.

### **Progression: the evolution of trade union learners**

The common practice is to refer to "progression" to imply development or improvement. It is also used to associate personal development with moving "between different levels of learning, and between academic and vocational learning" (Robertson, 1993, p. 2). There are other examples of this practice (Mager, 1993; McGivney, 1992). A theme of recent DfEE publications has been to "... promote progression to higher education ..." (DfEE, 1998, para. 4.33). The emphasis, in this usage, implies linear movement from entry learning, whether primary or adult basic skills, to higher education and possibly beyond. This has been captured in the phrase "a ladder of progression". This invisible ladder underpins the organisation of a large proportion of contemporary education and achievement. A different philosophy sees "progression" to be plural and diversified, and while it may include climbing imaginary steps through further and higher education, it also includes embracing priorities of deepening knowledge and understanding for the life that is being lived (van der Zee, 1996, pp. 170–171). This approach sees learning as integral to and a support for life. It may support the accumulation of learning awards for employment or career reasons but is equally open to their achievement for personal reasons. On

the one hand the awards are evidence of “competence” for an outside audience. On the other hand they are the building blocks of self-confidence and increasing awareness of the world.

The engagement in initial trade union education by the respondents for this study was driven by a trade-union-related rationale. This same rationale also dominated the responses of those entering further trade union courses. For all of these participants their participation was driven by the relevance of the course content and activity to their workplace trade union practice. A consequence of participation in trade union education was that they were meeting new people from similar backgrounds and with similar experiences, and they were developing new skills, acquiring new knowledge and confidence: “There are also the other people you’ve met on the courses. You know if you’ve got a good network of these friends you can ring them up, and they’ll do the same to you. You can help each other out. That is something these courses provide” (Carol, Life History subject). The development of new social networks and educational skills and attitudes was followed by other changes including the emergence of personal targets that included entry into higher education. Course participants may have expected to become more effective in their trade union roles—this was the rationale they gave for enrolment—but they had not expected to develop the ability to research, build argument and write essays.

These changes were followed in some detail through the construction of Life History narratives. Within each of the constructed narratives there was evidence of an evolution in the attitudes and practice of the subject. The literature suggests that this is frequently associated with exposure to different and probably successful experiences and the development of reflective and evaluation skills by the subject (Boud *et al.*, 1996; Kolb, 1984; Schon, 1983). Three aspects of new experience may be identified. First, there was the development of the workplace role stimulated by the relationship between course work and workplace activity. Second, there was the sequential and cumulative progression through a number of different courses. Arising from this there was the accumulation of evidence of achievement but there was also exposure to more complex problems requiring a more complex application of skills and understanding. Third, there was the evidence of consciously building the competence for the workplace role (skills, knowledge and understanding) profile. Furthermore, with the Life History subjects there was increased evidence of an awareness of preparing or planning for the future. For example, Carol describes the influence of her experience on her decision to apply for higher education: “Looking back over more than ten years’ experience with trade unions I can see that the experience gave me the guts to decide ... I wouldn’t have done it without that experience” (Carol, Life History subject). None of the responses from the group (first phase of fieldwork) entering their first trade union course demonstrated any evidence to suggest that they linked participation in that course with future provision. Yet those completing their final trade union course had a clear vision both of future opportunities and of the value of trade union course work to any future learning. For example, Ann (Life History subject) who had entered the trade union programme with no formal achievements and carrying strong disaffection reported, as she prepared for higher education: “I would now describe myself as a learner and

by this I mean that we step outside of our own little bubble, experience, understand and question ... My experience of learning has changed me quite a lot" (Ann).

## **Conclusion**

This discussion has considered data from a local study in trade union education within the framework of literature and issues associated with adult learning. This combined literature offers a perspective for understanding that the cultural context of non-participants reinforces their non-participation. This may also provide, as in the case of trade union education for this study, the rationale for the emergence of successful learners from previously disaffected non-participants. The literature indicates that the attitudes of non-participants and their non-participation in adult education are usually associated with any negative opinions they hold about their experience of school education. This implies that to bring about participation in adult education it is important for adults to recognise that education can be enjoyable and relevant to their lives. Evidence from the respondents of this study supports the claim that the combined engagement, over time, in trade union practice and trade union education enabled the Life History subjects to access higher education. Other subjects, who responded during the second phase of the fieldwork, indicated their intention to follow a similar route. The dominant orientation for action, of respondents, was premised on their trade union practice. This does not disregard the complex process, associated with social origins and family background, through which they developed their identity (Luttrell, 1997, p. 117). It does propose that the respondents explained that their trade union engagement provided the rationale to enrol in formal education. The negative attitudes towards education and learning, held by the participants and accumulated through earlier experience, became augmented with definitions that they saw to be appropriate in their circumstances. These definitions were developed through their trade union orientation and the experience of their trade union practice and trade union education. Consequently, they were able to accumulate new information, new knowledge and new intellectual skills. These gradually formed part of a new perspective that held implications for their daily priorities.

The data generated by the fieldwork for this study include many references in which the respondents consider the value of their experience related to the practical value of formal education and the satisfaction they experienced from their course activity. The evidence suggests that the respondents were learning from their trade union practice and recognised the value of that experience. It also suggests that they saw formal trade union education to be influential on their trade union practice. They justify their engagement in trade union courses by relating the value of the course activity to their workplace trade union activity. This suggests: first, that the respondents linked workplace activity and course activity; second, that usefulness and enjoyment may be applied as a test of the changes taking place in the perspectives and meanings of the respondents; and, third, that they recognised that learning took place in both practice and in the course-room and were mutually beneficial. They were initially looking for support to help with their voluntary

workplace trade union role. Each of the respondents had consciously, and voluntarily, opted for a trade union course and ignored the menu of other courses made available by the same provider. This also serves as a useful metaphor that signals the weight of their disaffection and the value of their trade union commitment.

Those who continued their engagement in trade union education, beyond their first course, were also driven by their trade union role. They continued to exhibit their trade union orientation that carried them into their first course. The continued role activity supported by continued participation in courses was demonstrated to be “useful” in dealing with role-contingent issues and was “enjoyable”. They confirmed in their responses that this was essential to their continued enrolment. Furthermore, and essential to their transformation, it enabled the development of a critical awareness of their own personal needs. Those who completed the exit courses demonstrated a significant difference from the first-phase subjects as they chose further formal study in either further or higher education.

Although the setting for trade union education may be different from the other settings of adult education it is useful to consider it within the same theoretical context. This claim is justified because of the connections, recognised by participants, between workplace practice, voluntary activity and course-room activity. Consequently, for the participants, learning in a non-formal context and learning in the educational context are both understood to be learning, and are judged by their relevance and usefulness. It is useful, therefore, to consider this combined practice within the framework established by the literature devoted to adult learning. This literature helps with the task of interpreting and understanding trade union educational practice and this practice may be helpful for understanding the problems that mediate non-participant adults and their access to lifelong learning.

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