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Employment Relations Education: Learning for a Change?

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Education
(Adult Education) at Massey University**

Ross Teppett

2008

Dedicated to the memory of

Ada Joyce Marsden

6 September 1915 – 23 November 2008

“My life is so much better because of the EREL training and being a union delegate. It is amazing how much confidence you get and how that can change your life and the lives of your family.”

*Polly
Research Cohort Participant*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	x
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	xi
GLOSSARY.....	xii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION - Employment Relations Education: Learning for a change?.....	1
Trade union education - Three learning drivers.....	2
Employment Relations Education Leave (EREL).....	4
The aims and objectives of this thesis	6
Structure of the thesis:	
Chapter 2 – DEVELOPMENT OF TRADE UNION EDUCATION IN NEW ZEALAND.....	6
Chapter 3 – LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
Chapter 4 – DESIGN OF THE STUDY - METHODOLOGY.....	7
Chapter 5 – GETTING STARTED: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RESEARCH.....	8
Chapter 6 – THE RESEARCH MEETINGS AND DATA GATHERING.....	8
Chapter 7 – RESULTS FROM THE STUDY.....	9
Chapter 8 – CONCLUSION.....	9
 CHAPTER 2: TRADE UNION EDUCATION – A NEW ZEALAND PERSPECTIVE	
- Introduction.....	10
- Trade union education: What is it?.....	11

- Development of trade union education in New Zealand.....	12
- Trade Union Education Authority (TUEA).....	12
- TUEA and the impacts of a neo-liberal agenda.....	14
- Unions and union education under the Employment Contracts Act (ECA)	15
- A future for union education beyond the 1990s.....	16
- A new century and the introduction of ERE.....	18
- How EREL works	19
- Conclusion	20

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

- Introduction.....	22
- Defining the ideological orientation of trade unions.....	22
- Trade union education: A democratising force?.....	23
- The aims of trade union education.....	23
- The politicising effects of the organising method.....	25
- A system built to resist change.....	26
- Taking a critical approach to learning.....	28
- The workplace as a site for learning.....	30
- Political action and class.....	31
- ERE and evaluation.....	32
- Conclusion.....	34

CHAPTER 4: DESIGN OF STUDY – METHODOLOGY

- Introduction.....	35
- Definition of methodology.....	36
- Finding an appropriate research paradigm.....	37
- Critical social research.....	38
- Participatory Action Research.....	39
- Giving voice to the participants.....	40
- The method of focused conversation.....	40
- The use of triangulation.....	41
- Interviewing SFWU officials.....	41
- The use of journals by participants.....	42
- The use of photographs.....	42
- Other methods of data collection.....	43
- Conclusion.....	43

CHAPTER 5: GETTING STARTED: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RESEARCH

- Introduction.....	45
- Making contact with the Service and Food Workers' Union (SFWU).....	46
- Establishing a research cohort of member-activists.....	48
- The pre-research meeting at SFWU Office (October 24, 2007).....	49
- A non-EREL project.....	50

- Gaining ethics approval from Massey University.....	52
- Introducing the Research Cohort.....	53
- Conclusion.....	59

CHAPTER 6: THE RESEARCH MEETINGS and ‘DATA’ GATHERING

- Introduction.....	61
- First research meeting – Petone, November 7, 2007.....	61
- Second research meeting – Petone, December 5, 2007.....	63
- Delegates’ Vision for the Future.....	68
- Issues for consideration for next research meeting	71
- Third research meeting – Petone, January 30, 2008.....	72
- Fourth research meeting – Petone, February 20, 2008.....	72
- Poster for EWL Conference.....	74
- Interview with SFWU national secretary, John Ryall and education organiser, Jody Anderson.....	76
- Distribution of cameras and notebooks.....	76
- Conclusion.....	76

CHAPTER 7: RESULTS FROM THE STUDY

- Introduction.....	78
- Section A: Emerging Themes from the Research Meetings.....	79
- Theme 1: Making Connections.....	79
- Theme 2: Building Confidence.....	83

- Theme 3: Active Citizenship.....	85
- Theme 4: Learning by Doing.....	86
- Theme 4: Skills, Knowledge and Understanding.....	88
- Section B: The Research Cohort’s Journals and Photographs.....	92
- PERSONAL REFLECTIONS – Matariki.....	93
- PHOTOGRAPHS – Matariki.....	97
- PERSONAL REFLECTIONS – ‘99’.....	98
- PHOTOGRAPHS – ‘99’.....	101
- PERSONAL REFLECTIONS – Wikitoria.....	106
- PHOTOGRAPHS – Wikitoria.....	109
- PERSONAL REFLECTIONS – Polly.....	111
- PERSONAL REFLECTIONS – Tractor.....	111
- PERSONAL REFLECTIONS – Lyn.....	112
- Section C: The SFWU Officials’ View of ERE.....	113
- Conclusion.....	119

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

- Access to ERE.....	120
- Strategic use of ERE.....	121
- How and what members learn.....	122
- Learning for a change.....	123

APPENDICES

1. Approved ERE Providers and Courses – as at September 2008.....	126
2. Background paper provided for participants at the first pre-research meeting at SFWU, Petone, October 24, 2007.....	127
3. Initial draft of letter constructed for SFWU member-activists inviting them to be involved in study.....	130
4. Copy of final letter sent to SFWU member-activists October 1, 2007 inviting them to be involved in study.....	132
5. Letter sent to SFWU research cohort outlining research question, for first research meeting November 7, 2007.....	133
6. Covering letter sent to SFWU research cohort with first transcript of November 7, 2007 meeting.....	135
7. Template used for research participant profiles.....	137
8. Covering letter to research cohort for distribution of disposable cameras – May 2008.....	139
9. All Union Education Records for SFWU Research Cohort.....	141
10. Confessions of a trade union educator, activist and very part-time academic researcher.....	145
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	151

ABSTRACT

Trade union education constitutes a significant practice within the adult and community education sector in New Zealand, but rarely is the subject of academic research. This study examines one major domain of trade union education in this country, Employment Relations Education (ERE). Working collaboratively with a small group of member-activists from a large private sector trade union, the study investigates the evidence of transformational changes that may emerge as a result of their participation in ERE courses and workshops. An appropriate definition of transformation is used for a trade union context. This refers to that change occurring at the micro and macro levels of union activity that in turn leads to the twin goals of wage and social justice through the building of union influence and power – at the workplace and community levels. The study examines the nature and role of union education within the broader trade union context, particularly the ERE provisions of Employment Relations Act 2000 (ERA), enacted in response to a decade of significant labour market deregulation and marginalisation of unions under the auspices of the Employment Contracts Act (ECA). The study is located within the critical paradigm of qualitative social research, using a range of collaborative methods such as focused conversation, personal journals and photography, and, as such becomes a critical learning journey in itself for some participants. The study concludes by affirming that ERE plays an important role in augmenting the learning and development of member-activists in their daily struggle to improve the working lives and social outcomes for members through collective agency.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Six years ago I embarked on a challenging balancing act; to study for a Masters degree while working in fulltime employment as well as leading an active family and community life. The completion of my studies, culminating in this thesis, would not have been possible without the incredible love, support and immense tolerance of my partner, Kirsty. I also acknowledge the encouragement and patience afforded me by my children Jack, Finnius and Sylvia. For this, my family, you have my promise I will definitely be spending more time with you all in the future.

My sincere thanks go to my workmates and comrades at the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union who have been fully supportive of me from the beginning of this endeavour. My union has given me the time, space, encouragement and resources to help me with my studies and complete this work. Thank you to the Service and Food Workers' Union's John Ryall and Jody Anderson for enthusiastically facilitating this research project from the beginning, and for their participation in the study. I sincerely acknowledge the contribution made to this project by the six Service and Food Workers' Union member-activists central to this study who participated so willingly and energetically – giving up their precious time, and at personal cost, to be involved in this work. This is a collaborative work. This is also your work. I also acknowledge the keen support and skilled guidance of my supervisors for this study, Dr Marg Gilling (Massey University) and Dr Mike Law (University of Waikato).

I acknowledge there will be personal gain with this Masters thesis; the recognition that can go with such credentialism; the great joy and satisfaction of having traversed a long and enlightening journey of personal learning. However, most importantly, I want this study to be useful and insightful to those who have so freely offered their time, collaboration and commitment to participate in its production, and to the many union activists throughout New Zealand who may be able to enhance their own learning and understanding by studying and critiquing this work.

GLOSSARY

DOL	Department of Labour
ECA	Employment Contracts Act
EPMU	Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union
ERA	Employment Relations Act 2000
ERE	Employment Relations Education
EREL	Employment Relations Education Leave
ILO	International Labour Organisation
MECA	Multi-Employer Collective Agreement
PEL	Paid Education Leave
NZCTU	New Zealand Council of Trade Unions
SFWU	Service & Food Workers Union – Nga Ringa Tota
TUEA	Trade Union Education Authority
TUTB	Trade Union Training Board
UREL	Union Representatives Education Leave Act

"The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, government relief for the destitute and, above all, new wage levels that meant not mere survival but a tolerable life. The captains of industry did not lead this transformation; they resisted it until they were overcome. When in the thirties the wave of union organization crested over the nation, it carried to secure shores not only itself but the whole society."

Martin Luther King Jr.

Speech to the state convention of the Illinois

AFL-CIO,

October 7, 1965