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Tracing trade union innovation: a framework for evaluating trade union learning projects in a time of complexity

Steve Walker*, Miguel Martínez Lucio** and Philippa Trevorrow*

E

Summary

In this article we present an evaluation framework developed during the evaluation activities of TRACE – a major European trade union project centrally concerned with the anticipation of, and response to, change. The framework links the ‘micro’ project activities of training workshops, materials and networks to broader organisational and social outcomes. We demonstrate the use of the framework, presenting findings and discussing two related themes – inter-organisational networking and organisational learning – which have emerged as central in the evaluation.



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Sommaire

Dans cet article, nous présentons un cadre d'évaluation développé durant les activités d'évaluation de TRACE, projet européen important mené au niveau des syndicats européens et qui se focalise sur l'anticipation du changement et les réponses qui sont données. Le cadre lie les « micro » activités des projets des ateliers, du matériel et des réseaux de formation à des résultats plus importants sur le plan organisationnel et social. Nous soulignons l'utilisation du cadre développé tout en présentant des résultats de recherche et en traitant deux thèmes qui y sont étroitement liés et qui sont apparus comme des points importants dans l'évaluation : la mise en réseau interorganisationnelle et l'apprentissage organisationnel.



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Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Beitrag präsentiert einen Evaluierungsrahmen, der aus den Evaluierungsarbeiten des Projekts TRACE hervorgegangen ist. Dieses bedeutende europäische Gewerkschaftsprojekt befasste sich mit der Antizipation von Wandel und den Reaktionen darauf. Der Evaluierungsrahmen verknüpft die „Mikro-

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Ebene“ der Projektaktivitäten – Ausbildungsseminare, -materialien und -netzwerke – mit umfassenderen organisationsbezogenen und sozialen Ergebnissen. Die Autoren beschreiben die Anwendungsmöglichkeiten des Evaluierungsrahmens und seine Ergebnisse und erörtern zwei damit verbundene Aspekte, die sich bei der Evaluierung als zentrale Elemente herausgestellt haben, nämlich die Vernetzung zwischen Organisationen sowie organisationsinternes Lernen.



Keywords: evaluation, restructuring, organisation, networks

Introduction

In common with work in many organisations, trade union work is increasingly organised as projects, requiring intense collaboration for limited periods. Such project work is often financed or co-financed by external bodies, the most significant of which at European level is the European Commission, which has supported trade union work through a range of structural, education, training, research and other budgets. As well as being good practice in project management, evaluation is often a requirement of such external funding. To date, little has been written about approaches to the evaluation of these types of projects in a specifically trade union context. In this paper, we present an evaluation framework and a discussion developed during the evaluation activities of a major European trade union project. This framework is not intended as an alternative to the self-evaluations widely carried out in trade union projects. Rather, the framework offers an additional perspective on evaluation, which we argue can allow for learning across a wider range of projects through evaluations that can build on previous learning. The paper also raises issues of a broader nature regarding the way evaluation is challenging when looking at sensitive and complex initiatives such as trade unions and their responses to the changing labour market environment.

The paper is organised as follows. First we give a background to the wider context of industrial transformation which forms the background to contemporary trade union work. Secondly, we give a brief description of salient elements of the Trade Unions Anticipating Change in Europe (TRACE) project. Thirdly, we outline an approach to evaluation, drawing in particular on the ‘realist evaluation’ developed by Pawson and Tilley (1997). Fourthly, we outline the framework we developed for the evaluation of innovative trade union responses to industrial change and its application to the TRACE project. We conclude with a brief discussion of two main issues arising. We argue that sensitivity to the context of trade unionism, and the need to appreciate political and strategic issues, is vital if we are to avoid mimicking a managerialist understanding of evaluation techniques and processes, which for some is a very tempting and ‘off the shelf’ solution.

Trade union renewal and innovation in Europe – finding responses to moving targets

The changing nature of industrial relations is well studied (Healy *et al.* 2004). There have been a range of concerns about the extent of change and how it affects trade unions and their members. The 1970s and 1980s were littered with texts proclaiming the end of organised labour and the working class as we know it (see Martínez Lucio 2006 for a discussion). The causes of these changes vary considerably due to the combination of economic, social and political factors. Tracing the origins of these changes is a major task in its own right: some privilege economic changes in the form of globalisation and the transformation of product markets, which have an effect on labour markets. Others point to the nature of labour markets and the way they have been constructed in gendered or racist terms thus finding a challenge when social inclusion emerges as a strategy and reality. Then there are those that see an emergence of neo-liberal ideals and values, which have their own political contingencies and values. Identifying the source of change is complex but what we do know is that change is now a vital part of the vocabulary of industrial relations.

What we have seen is a transformation in the way we understand this question of ‘change’ and a multitude of challenges facing the labour movement. In the first instance, there was the oil crisis of the 1970s. This mutated into a lengthy period of industrial closures and restructuring during the 1980s, with its language of decline, depression and a recollection of the 1930s. The rise of a period of deregulation and privatisation brought new forces and pressures: new actors were brought into the world of corporate politics and regulation (e.g. the transnational utility companies; see MacKenzie and Martínez Lucio 2005). Paralleling this was a language heralding the end of industrial relations. Micro level and workplace changes emerged in the form of new modes of management communication, engagement, and value systems (Martínez Lucio and Weston 1992). The question of engaging the workforce and placing them within the realm of corporate needs and culture was symbolised by such developments as Human Resource Management (Legge 2004). This paralleled a new – supposed – individualisation and decentralisation of employment relations and its management. So the language of change moved from a quantitative one to a qualitative one (Hammerström *et al.* 2006). Secondly, this means that change has a variety of dimensions and features and thus the challenge to organised labour varies as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Dimensions of change

Dimension of unions	Challenge of change
Workplace	Decentralisation in the firm and the workplace
Social context of work	Fragmented boundaries in social terms and the decline of conflict
Management and labour utilisation	New forms of labour utilisation through the quality and consumer paradigm

State and regulation	Changing state roles and its decentralisation
The global dimension	Globalisation – the new international dynamic and the gaps in labour
The communication sphere	New forms of communication and the decline on public space and collectivism

Source: Martínez Lucio (2006).

We see that the nature of the challenge for organised labour is diverse and requires consideration of a variety of strategies for union renewal, a debate that has spawned a range of schools and interventions (Healy *et al.* 2004). Given this panorama, the challenge of responding to change is a tall order: as is evaluating what constitutes a successful or effective response.

The TRACE project

The TRACE project is an example of the breadth of trade union responses to change. This large-scale, two-year project (2004–2006) was led by the then European Trade Union College¹ (ETUCO) in partnership with six European Industry Federations, and the training departments or institutes of ten national confederations. It was supported by the European Commission under Article 6 of the European Social Fund Regulation: ‘Innovative Approaches to the Management of Change’, Call for proposals VP/2003/021 (European Commission 2005). The project aimed to ‘*build improved capacity within European trade unions to respond to situations of economic and industrial change*’ (ETUCO 2004: 1). Under a broad framework of ‘organisational learning’, the project was organised as a series of sub-projects, referred to as Key Actions (KAs). The substantive activities of the project were organised through 16 KAs, each led by one of the trade union partner organisations with the responsibility for conceiving, designing and delivering their KA within the broader project. These sub-projects covered a range of issues related to the dimensions outlined above: workplace developments in terms of subcontracting and decentralisation, the changing nature of management strategies, the changing nature of the state and the rise of deregulation, the challenge of global product markets, and the impact of new information and communications technologies (ICTs). To give some sense of the diversity, these KAs included, for example, research into aspects of the changing situation of staff in schools and higher education, the establishment of a network and database in the rotogravure sector of the print industries, the development of training materials to support union recruitment in (primarily) Austrian small and medium-sized enterprises, and the development of a tool to predict company level crises. For a very brief summary of these Key Actions see Tables 4 and 5, (also the TRACE project Report (ETUI-REHS 2006a)).

1 During the project, reorganisation resulted in ETUCO’s activities being incorporated, alongside research and health and safety, into a broader European Trade Union Institute for Research, Education and Health and Safety (ETUI-REHS). The Education Department of the new institute is frequently referred to as ETUI Education.

ETUCO (now ETUI Education) and other partners were responsible for a number of activities intended to support the individual KAs during the life of the project which included a series of training workshops, a website and conferencing platform, a final conference and the evaluation activities. The project was organised in three main stages: preparation, implementation and review. The preparation phase involved training and supporting the lead trainers and/or network animators for each KA via centrally led workshops. The implementation phase provided the KAs with the opportunity to pilot their project. The review phase provided the opportunity to draw conclusions and outcomes together, resulting in the production of a project handbook (ETUI-REHS 2006b).

Approaching evaluation

The evaluation literature is increasingly rich with competing and complementary approaches and methods. Scriven's well-known (1967) distinction between formative evaluation, conducted during a process to improve the outcome, and summative evaluation conducted on completion of a process to make a judgement of its value has been extended (Patton 1982) and challenged (Chen 1996). More recently, Hansen (2005) offers a typology of six evaluation models, characterised by the types of questions they seek to answer: result, explanatory process, system, economic, actor or programme theory. It is our intention here only to indicate the variety of approaches rather than to give a detailed account: for that, Pawson and Tilley (1997) and Hansen (2005) give historical and overview accounts respectively.

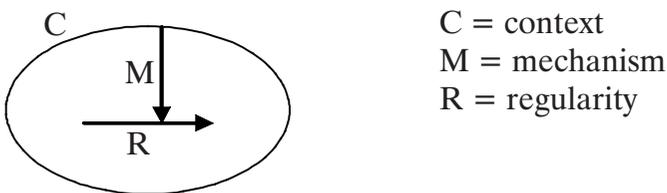
Evaluation is widespread in trade union education practice, where it has become an integral part of the learning process. Learning events and projects frequently end with participant evaluations, reflecting on the successes and failures of the course. Such evaluations are a recognition of the learner's centrality to the process and serve pragmatically to assist educators in improving their practice for the future. Trade union project work in general makes extensive use of self-evaluation to improve future practice. There is, though, very little explicit, systematic discussion of evaluation practices in trade unions, and the particular challenges and opportunities it presents in which to locate our work here. Our purpose in evaluating TRACE was to identify effective trade union practices and to contribute to trade union learning about responses to industrial restructuring, and to change more widely. It was not intended as a replacement for the kind of evaluation which trade union educators routinely conduct, but as complement, looking for patterns across a wider range of projects.

The complexity of the transformations outlined in the preceding section give rise to several significant problems in evaluation design. First, change, almost by definition, is complex and turbulent with multiple contributory factors, perhaps operating at different levels of analysis. This makes the simple attribution of cause and effect in assessing the outcomes of project interventions difficult. Secondly, 'change' and 'restructuring' are experienced differently by, and mean different things to, different trade unionists. Thirdly, the TRACE project involved trade unionists working in very diverse organisational, (trans-)

national and sectoral contexts. Practices which are effective in one setting may, or may not, be readily transferable to other situations. Context, then, is vital with major implications for the design of the project evaluation. Fourthly, the nature of ‘success’ in responding to change is frequently situated within national systems and traditions, and is likely to be contested by trade unionists with different backgrounds and working in different contexts. Taken together these limitations make it impossible to identify a set of simple indicators which might allow a comparative assessment of success. Indeed, discussion of what might constitute appropriate goals in trade union responses to restructuring itself featured as an issue of concern in some project workshops.

In designing the project evaluation, we have drawn heavily on Pawson and Tilley’s (1997) critical realist (Collier 1994; Mingers 2004) approach to evaluation research and practice. Central to their approach is the proposition that the outcomes of a project are a result of underlying mechanisms operating in a particular context. Context is critical here: mechanisms which generate particular outcomes in one context may lead to quite different outcomes in others. Context here may be economic, social, ideological and others (Lovering 1990). Also, a single intervention may invoke a range of different mechanisms which are more or less pronounced in different contexts. Pawson and Tilley (1997: 78-82) illustrate this with an apparently straightforward example of installing CCTV in car parks to reduce car thefts. They identify eight potential mechanisms invoked by installing cameras, such as increasing burglar fear of being caught red-handed, a tendency for apparently safer car parking to attract a greater proportion of risk averse drivers who also tend to have more security devices on their cars, and potential improvement in the effective deployment of security staff. These mechanisms have different consequences in differing contexts, for example depending on physical layout, location and temporal patterns of car parking.

Figure 1: Basic ingredients of realist social explanation

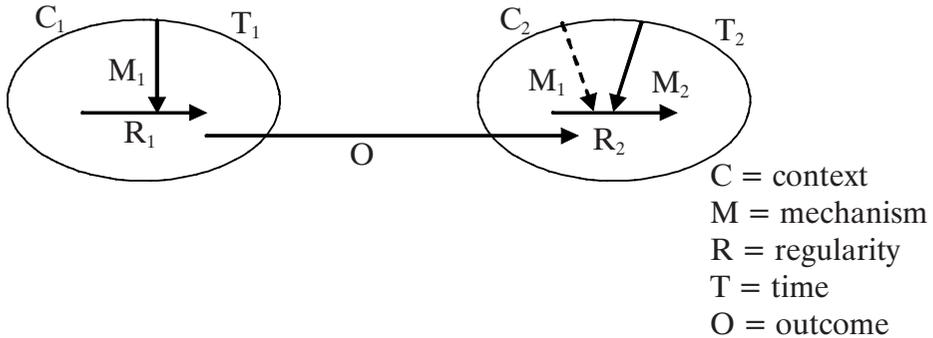


Source: Pawson and Tilley 1997, p. 72.

Rather than seeking out context-independent ‘best practices’ a realist approach to evaluation aims to identify and explain regularities in patterns of project interventions and outcomes, through an analysis of mechanisms and the contexts in which they operate (Figure 1). Project activities attempt to embody or to mobilise underlying mechanisms in order to achieve particular outcomes. The aim of a project intervention then is either to modify an existing mechanism or invoke a new mechanism (M) to lead subsequently to

modified regularities. The aim (Figure 2) of the intervention is to generate a new pattern of regularities (R_2) at a later time (T_2) generated by the new mechanism (M_2). The difference in regularities R_1 and R_2 constitutes the outcome of the intervention. Depending on the outcome, this may be measured qualitatively or quantitatively.

Figure 2: Realist social explanation of successful change



Source: Pawson and Tilley 1997, p. 74.

Undertaking projects can be thought of as putting into practice implementation theories (Birkmayer and Weiss 2000) of how particular mechanisms and contexts generate (or not) particular outcomes. Theory here is understood as a set of working assumptions and understandings rather than wider social theory (though Pawson and Tilley (1997) do suggest that evaluators need to draw on wider social theories). For example, the formulation of a trade union training course implies both that the identified problem is either contributed to by a lack of skills and/or knowledge (or, at least, can be addressed by raising them) and that the course is an effective way of addressing the shortage. The design of the course as content, methods and audience then comprises an implementation theory about how the problem might be addressed. Inevitably, where innovative interventions are implemented in complex situations, there will frequently be shortcomings both of conception and execution, which a theory-based approach allows us to identify. In addition, the framing of the problem – such as restructuring – can be understood through the analysis of such processes.

The evaluation described below aims first to identify regularities across the interventions carried out in the TRACE Key Actions and to propose candidate explanations in terms of the underlying mechanisms they aim to mobilise. This comparison of what works or does not work in different contexts helps us to build a ‘mid-range’ theory (Pawson 2002) of how educational interventions can support transnational trade union activity. The explanations can, we hope, contribute to the design of future transnational trade union education projects, particularly those addressing aspects of industrial change.

Evaluating TRACE – towards a framework for analysing renewal and trade union response to change

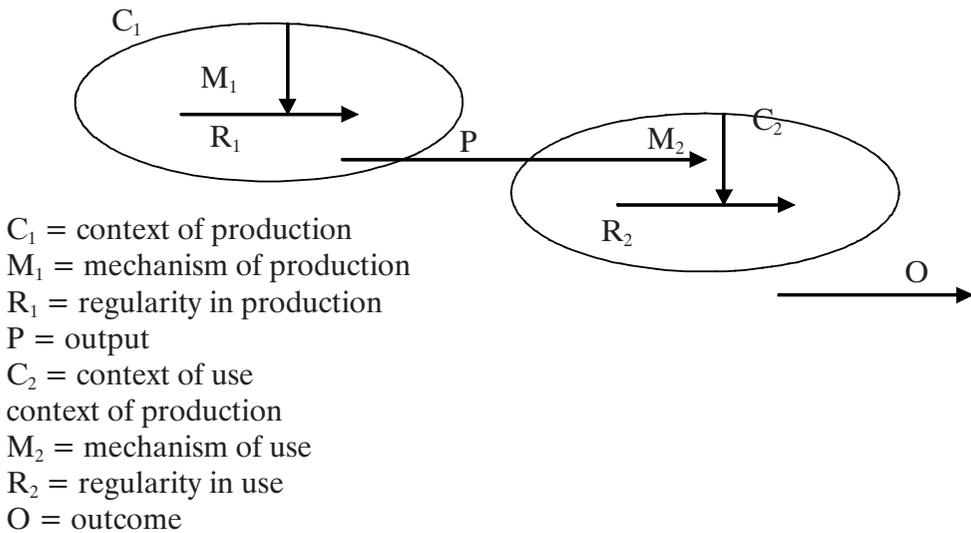
Overview

The TRACE project provides an opportunity, and the resources, to start to draw systematic lessons about how trade unions can coordinate responses to industrial restructuring in a wide range of settings. The primary purpose of our evaluation is to assist in this learning. The nature of the project does, though, pose a number of significant challenges to an evaluation. The different Key Actions (KAs) did not just have different objectives and outputs – let alone drivers – but they also faced a myriad of challenges of timing, and how they synchronised with previous projects and networks. There were also a variety of language skills and linguistic hurdles. These were a problem in particular regions of the European trade union movement. The evaluation had to be sensitive to these structural constraints and the nature of the specific networks and alliances that emerged within and between particular KAs. Evaluating inputs was not just about time, resources and measurable milestones: it was about mapping the particular hurdles KAs faced and being sensitive to them.

At a general level we conceived of TRACE as a series of educational interventions aimed at mobilising underlying organisational learning mechanisms in understanding, anticipating and ultimately influencing change. These mechanisms operate in diverse national, organisational and sectoral contexts and are intended to achieve industrial relations or political outcomes. Each KA was also the product of particular alliances or synergies between trade unions, shared repertoires of meaning and even political interests. The focus in this paper is on the partner KAs. Each KA is treated as a case study in the development of trade union practices. For each KA, we modelled the activities and their intended consequences, capturing each KA's implementation theory. We verified our understanding with the organisers of each KA. During this process we distinguished between the immediate *outputs* of each KA and the wider *outcomes*. The outputs were, in general, specified in the original project proposal as artefacts or processes which were subsequently developed over the life of the project. For example, several KAs aimed to produce handbooks for use in subsequent dissemination or training activities, to achieve the wider outcomes. These outputs, then, become part of the intended mechanism for a second phase of change (see Figure 3). The outputs are produced in one context – the 'context of production' – and then used in a rather different context – the 'context of use'. The *outcomes* are the wider industrial relations or political consequences stemming from the use of outputs in this second context. In general, these were expected to happen beyond the lifetime of the project and so we could not include them directly within the project evaluation. We did, though, look for evidence which might suggest whether or not steps towards such outcomes had been taken.

To capture both the immediate implementation logic leading to a KA's outputs, and the logic leading to the wider industrial relations outcomes, we produced two models for each KA. A low level model mapped the relationships between specific sub-activities (for example, the planned relationships between a workshop's target audience and its intended outcomes). A higher level model attempted to map the wider intended political, industrial or organisational outcomes.

Figure 3: Outputs and outcomes



Using the terminology of Figure 3, we sought to identify M_1 – the activities and underlying mechanisms through which, in the ‘context of production’ (C_1) partners would produce output P which would become part of an envisaged ‘mechanism of use’ (M_2). The mechanism of use would, in a distinct (generally organisational or temporal) ‘context of use’ (C_2), contribute to the achievement of wider industrial relations outcomes (O). Of course, in complex settings, it would be unreasonable to expect that this sequence would happen unproblematically: consequently, we sought to identify the problems which occurred as breakdowns in the implementation logic of a KA. Our framework, then, sought to identify (a) the activities and underlying mechanisms of production operating in (b) particular contexts of production (c) outputs which were envisaged as contributing to (d) wider outcomes. In this process, we also identified (e) breakdowns in the implementation theories of particular KAs. The KAs are discussed below in terms of these five elements.

Table 4: Summary of the KAs led by the EIFs

Key Action No and EIF	Context		Activity
	Sectoral	Spatial	Research
4. EMCEF	Widespread takeovers and mergers leading to transnational corporate restructuring	EU	
5. EMF	Transnational restructuring, changing ownership, relocating activities, plant closure, new technology	EU/global	
6. EPSU	Decentralisation of public services through shifting responsibilities between central, regional and local levels of government	EU-level aggregation of national contexts	
7. Transport SEKO/ETF	Emergence of logistics as major force in reorganising distinct sub-sectors of the transport industry	EU/global	
8a. ETUCE – Higher Education	‘Bologna process’ seeks to establish a ‘European Higher Education and Research Area’ among signatory countries	Process organised outside structures of the EU – 45 countries.	(Online) survey of affiliates
8b. ETUCE – Teachers	Introduction of private sector working methods in schools	EU-level aggregation of national contexts	(Online) survey of affiliates
9a. UNI-Europa Services	EU-level regulation across the service industries	EU	
9b. UNI-Europa Graphical	Overcapacity and increasing market concentration. Technological change blurring market boundaries	Gravure production concentrated in Germany, France Italy, NL and UK	

		Outputs	
Networking	Workshops	Network	Tool
Informal networking	Prepare and revise guidelines for EWC coordination		Guidelines
Informal networking	Consider and revise 'How to deal with transnational restructuring' handbook		Handbook and associated training materials
Informal networking	Develop shared understanding of decentralisation		Handbook 'Decentralisation and Public Services'
Informal networking	Review and analyse affiliates' experiences of logistics industry		Report on key issues and recommendations for future actions
	Prepare survey, review results	Nationally-mandated representatives using FC (ETUI Education's First Class conference server)	Report: 'New developments in the HE and Research sector: consequences for academic staff'
	Prepare survey, review results	Nationally-mandated representatives, using FC	Report: 'Impact of private sector working methods in education'
	Considering the Services Directive and the internal market	National policy officers. E-mail, phone, face to face and web forum	
	Prepare and revise guidelines for EWC coordination	Workplace reps and national officers using e-mail and web forum	Information gathering tools and database of company information

Table 5: Summary of the KAs led by the confederations

	Context	
National confederations	Sectoral	Spatial
10. CC.OO (ES & PT)	Large companies in banking, metal and chemical sectors	Iberian peninsula
11. CFDT (F & UK)	Telecommunications and transport	Companies significant to regional economies of north-west France and south-east England
12. CGIL (I & PT)	Relocation of employment in the textile industries to lower-wage economies	Portugal and Italy
13. CGTP-IN (PT & ES)	Relocation of employment in the textile industries to lower-wage economies	Portugal and Spain
14. CISL (I & DK)	Cross-economy	Italy and Denmark
15. LO-Skolen (DK & I)	Cross-economy	Denmark and Italy
16. LO-S (SE & DK)	Relocation of employment in the European metalworking industries	Sweden and Germany
17. ÖGB (AT & UK)	Cross-economy	Growing significance of SMEs in the Austrian economy
18. SAK (FI & EE)	Relocation of employment in the metal and service (retail) industries	Relocation of work and employment between Finland, Estonia and beyond
19. TUC (UK & SE)	General outsourcing	Generic

Activity	Outputs	
Workshops	Network	Tools
Workshops to consider issues, prepare and evaluate guidebook on EWC coordination		Guidebook on EWC coordination
Training workshop for network participants	2 company level cross-border networks of workplace reps, sectoral and regional officers	Collection of training tools
National and transnational workshops analysing context of textiles in two countries, and possible responses		CD-ROM of resources
Analyse the sectoral context and testing the company analysis tool		'Crisis matrix' company analysis tool
Training events examining similarities and differences in restructuring in the two countries		'Management of change: an integrated approach' – CD-ROM incl. case studies
Training events examining similarities and differences in restructuring in the two countries		'Regional influence on restructuring and workplace development' report and case studies
Planned events not held		'A New Division of Labour' report and case studies
Workshop programme for educators, officers, reps and experts to develop and pilot materials		Training materials and handbook on recruitment in SMEs
Workshops for a) union reps and b) young trade unionists		'Trade Union Movement and Restructuring' – guide for shop stewards
Workshops of educators to develop course and materials		Curriculum and materials for course on outsourcing

Context

The context of each KA varies in diverse and interrelated ways, organised into five broad categories as summarised in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Context

Organisational	Organisational structures and routines; policies
Sectoral	The dynamics of restructuring as experienced in particular industrial sectors (e.g. privatisation, marketisation, market concentration, delocalisation)
Geographic	Geographic aspects of restructuring including national industrial relations systems, and national/regional distribution of industries
Historical	Previous experiences of organisations and key individuals, for example of particular trade union working methods or the use of ICT
Individual	Knowledge, experiences and social networks of key individuals

The most immediate difference among the contexts of each KA is *organisational*. KAs were led either by a European Industry Federation (EIF) or by the education department of a national confederation. The two types of organisation had very different perspectives on their work, and within TRACE their respective activities were largely supported and coordinated separately. The secretariats of EIFs are, in general, rather small, without their own specialist education departments or staff. EIF responsibilities are sectoral and Europe-wide. National confederations, by contrast, are relatively well resourced with dedicated education departments and frequently with their own training centres or colleges. Their responsibilities are geographically limited to nation states and cross-sectoral, though within TRACE some addressed issues in a single or limited range of industrial sectors.

The diverse *sectoral* context in which KAs operated meant that the nature of restructuring that they confronted also differed. This was most clearly evident among the EIF-led KAs, each of which was addressing a distinct set of transnational restructuring dynamics. In public sector industries (as in those KAs led by EPSU and ETUCE), for example, issues of decentralisation, private sector working methods, privatisation and marketisation are central concerns; in the manufacturing industries organised by the EMF and EMCEF sector prominent issues include outsourcing, de/re-localisation and attempts by enterprises to foster inter-plant competition. In the gravure sub-sector of the print industries, technological change and growing market concentration provided the immediate context. In transport, the KA was centrally concerned with developing an understanding of the growth of logistics companies which blur historical distinctions between transport sub-sectors (e.g. rail, maritime, road, civil aviation). The UNI-Europa

activities in the services sector were dominated by political and regulatory aspects of change as exemplified in the first instance by the European Services Directive (the 'Bolkestein' Directive) liberalising the provision of services in the European internal market. In the EIF-led KAs, the *geographic* context was essentially European, though even the precise meaning of this varied. The political institutions of the EU provide a context across the project as a whole not least through the funding of the project in the context of a European social dialogue, but also directly, as with the Bolkestein Directive. Some industries, for example the gravure print industry, are particularly concentrated in a subset of Member States, so the spatial significance is not uniform and participation in KA activities reflects this. For the ETUCE, activities relating to the 'Bologna declaration' are a response to new methods of intergovernmental coordination beyond the European Union, in 45 signatory countries.

By design, the confederation-led KAs were transnational in the sense that they involved collaboration between pairs of national confederations. For these, the interplay of the sectoral and spatial context takes different forms. Half of these KAs took generic, cross-sectoral approaches to addressing particular issues such as outsourcing (TUC/LO-S), union recruitment in SMEs (ÖGB/TUC), management of change (CISL/LO-Skolen) and regional influences on restructuring (LO-Skolen/CISL). These issues had a prominence nationally (or sub-nationally), though of course the significance of such issues is different for different industrial sectors. The reasons for the particular organisational pairings varied but in some cases at least were explicitly intended to enable particular cross-border learning: for example, the Danish LO-Skolen had a particular interest in the trade union experience of the flexible production networks of SMEs found in regions of Italy; the Austrian ÖGB was particularly interested in the TUC's Organising Academy's experience of organising in SMEs. The remainder addressed sectoral issues of particular relevance nationally (CC.OO/CGTP-IN, CGTP-IN/CGIL) or sub-nationally (CFDT/TUC, CGTP-IN/CC.OO). These KAs had a shared industrial organisation focus (in two cases on textiles, and the widespread relocation of work to low-wage economies); in the case of the CFDT-led project, the KA aimed to develop links at the level of specific companies significant in the economies of adjacent regions of France and the UK.

While the geographic and sectoral contexts provide the macro, structural context for each KA, each also operates within a unique 'micro' context. This has both an *organisational* dimension, as discussed above, and an *individual* dimension. Of particular interest here is the *historical* aspect of each, in the form of prior experiences. A particular historical aspect here, both for individuals and their organisations, was previous involvement in projects led by the ETUI-REHS. Where organisations and individuals had been involved in these projects, they were familiar with a set of administrative, technical and organisational routines which the ETUI-REHS has developed for running such projects. More significantly, they had shared experiences, in the case of EIFs, of methods for using ICT to support transnational networking (ETUCE, ETF and UNI-Europa), and for the national confederations in e-learning methods in transnational education (Bridgford and Stubbs 2001; Creanor and Walker 2005; Walker and Creanor 2005).

Activities and mechanisms

In the diverse contexts outlined above, each KA initiated a set of activities within a broad framework of organisational learning.

The core form of the activities of all KAs was the residential workshop, though the purpose of these varied and might be thought of as occupying a spectrum between the 'pure' training seminar led by tutors, conforming to a largely predetermined curriculum and the 'pure' workshop organised around the completion of particular tasks with little or no designed educational component. It is in the nature of trade union education, and its commitment to collaborative learning linked directly to trade union work, that, in general, activities will occupy points between these two extremes. There is though, a difference of emphasis between three broad themes in the purpose of workshops: those organised to bring a range of perspectives together to review and develop methods and tools for subsequent use beyond the life of TRACE ('development workshops', for example in KAs EMF, CGTP-IN, and ÖGB); those aimed at training particular groups of learners in particular sets of skills ('educational workshops', for example as led by the CFDT) and those which aimed to develop research tools for use externally to the workshop and later to discuss results (as for example, those led by the ETUCE). In many cases, a particular workshop may involve elements of all of these; the examples given are those which might more clearly fit into a particular ideal type. As might be expected, the EIF-led KAs are exclusively comprised of development and research workshops, including hybrid 'research and development' workshops synthesising shared understandings to inform future work (as for example in the ETF-led KA's work on logistics, and EPSU's work in understanding decentralisation in the public sector). Perhaps more surprisingly, such development workshops were also a strong feature in the confederation-led KAs, with relatively few workshops organised predominantly as 'educational workshops'.

Outside workshops, many KAs made some use of online communications to sustain their activities (beyond the everyday use of e-mail in the organisation and coordination of the KAs itself). As noted above, previous projects led by the ETUI-REHS explored the development of e-learning methods for use in transnational trade union education (usually to support a phase of distance learning between residential workshops), and approaches to online networking methods to support ongoing transnational trade union work, used by the education departments of national confederations and EIFs respectively. It is a striking feature of TRACE that, despite the involvement both of partner organisations and individuals in the earlier projects which developed these methods, no transnational e-learning was conducted during the project. This suggests that educators have concluded that the methods developed have not adequately overcome many of the difficulties, for example of language, commitment and technology access they encountered. The networking methods (which we can still characterise as a type of informal learning experience) have however been further developed in some (predominantly EIF-led) KAs.

We have found it helpful to distinguish between the process of online 'networking', as an information sharing and coordinating activity conducted within a KA, and the existence

of a ‘network’ as a structure which is intended to have a life beyond that of TRACE. There are examples of KAs that used networking methods within the KA, without the commitment to establishing this as an ongoing pattern of work, and of one KA where ‘networking’ was not used as a method within the KA, but as an intended output after a training intervention. Where networking (verb) did not seek to build a durable network (noun), there was less commitment to establishing a shared technological infrastructure, relying instead on e-mail, and the telephone. In the case, for example, of the ETUCE Higher Education network, the networking activities were conducted through a network established in the Dialog On project, which TRACE served to reinforce, and which it is envisaged will continue into the future.

These activities all aimed to invoke one or more mechanisms to fulfil their purposes, as summarised in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Activities: purposes and mechanisms

Activity	Purpose	Mechanism(s)
Training	Increase knowledge and/or skills in a target audience	Peer learning Tutor-led learning Expert-led learning
Research	Generation of new knowledge	Identification of external information sources; Conducting or commissioning new research; Identification and analysis of existing internal knowledge
Networking	Exchange of information; Generation of new knowledge; Coordination of distributed action	Facilitated online communications; Spontaneous online communications
Development: creating tools	Elaborating policy for wider distribution; Training materials; Handbooks; Codifying methods for wider use	Information dissemination; Support for future training activities; Support for other future activities

Outputs

One measure of the significance of the outputs of TRACE is the number of participants in the various KAs: a total of over 830 participants (in addition to those running the KAs) from trade unions across the EU (and beyond) took part in TRACE activities, exceeding the intended audience by at least 12%. While this in itself represents a significant contribution to encouraging European trade unionists to consider issues of change, numbers alone tell us little about the achievements and longer-term

consequences of the project activities. To help with this, we need to understand a little more about what was produced during the project as outputs and the potential consequences for longer-term outcomes.

The KAs produced varied combinations of materials and methods as outputs. Several KAs aimed to establish new working and communication patterns through (Internet-mediated) transnational networks (see above, for a distinction between networking as mechanism and network as output). The scope of networks varied across the company, sub-sectoral, industrial and European levels of organisation. The composition similarly varied, including workplace representatives and union officials with either particular industrial or functional responsibilities. The nature of these networks is discussed in more detail below under findings, partly because of their inherent significance and partly as an example of how the evaluation model can be used better to inform future initiatives.

At the level of ‘materials’ (insofar as we can use that term to include digital artefacts) we can distinguish five types of output depending on their intended use:

- Handbooks and guidelines (and supporting background materials) for use in the dissemination of policy or project results;
- Training materials: incorporating pedagogic materials for use in subsequent training courses;
- Research reports: for use as inputs into subsequent organising or policy initiatives;
- Databases: collections of information, for example on companies in a particular sector intended to be kept up to date over time, serving both as a useful resource and a focus for ongoing work;
- Other tools: intended for use in the workplace, for example in diagnosing the likelihood of reorganisation at the enterprise level.

Taken together with the activities and mechanisms of the central KA activities, the outputs can be thought of as embodying different phases in the process of understanding change. This is discussed more fully in the following section.

Outcomes

Evaluating project outcomes represented the greatest challenge, for two reasons. First, the timeframe of evaluation is such that the outcomes may not emerge until some time after the project has ended. Secondly, outcomes might be embedded within the activities of organisations in ways that make direct attribution difficult. We created a list of possible outcomes related to restructuring (see Table 8). These were arrived at both through discussions with the KAs and observing their work and through the literature of organisational change and industrial restructuring more generally. In this respect, we had to combine the wider research on the subject with a grounded approach based on observing expectations and understandings.

Table 8: The outcomes of trade union responses to restructuring

Outcome level	Example
Internal	Development of trade union capacities to anticipate and respond to change
Workplace	Fewer jobs lost; Improved agreements in terms of scope of content (e.g. retraining); Educational and training outcomes in terms of workforce and local communities
Corporate	Partnership and joint working with employers; Corporate Social Responsibility and a commitment to a rethinking of corporate values
Economy	High road (high skill) visions of future changes which are not based on labour cost minimisation or labour exploitation
Political	Influencing public policy on specific and broader issues of restructuring
Social	Involving stakeholders such as customers and the community

We located KAs in terms of these outcomes. Given the nature of the KAs as educational interventions, they were all conceived of as having internal outcomes in improving the capacity of unions to anticipate and respond to change, for example through improved coordination in relation to EWCs (as for example in the EMCEF guidelines), reconfiguration of internal structures to deal with emergent issues (as for example in consideration of how best to reflect the emergence of logistics in the structures of the ETF), and the use of new tools and techniques (e.g. the CGTP-IN's 'crisis matrix' for anticipating company level restructuring). Exactly what this means might be thought of primarily in terms 'phases' and 'levels' of learning discussed below. Of course, these improved capacities will, it is hoped, lead to improvements in outcomes at the workplace, corporate, economic, political and social levels. As the projects progressed we identified a tendency for outcomes to move from internal to corporate level but in general, the timing did not allow for such outcomes to be mapped. In general, it is likely that the activities of the EIFs will allow outcomes to be identified more readily (or at least, sooner) than those organised through the education departments of confederations, although there are certainly exceptions to this with the CGTP-IN's crisis matrix, and the CFDT's company level networks providing examples where, in principle, the outcomes might readily be identified in the medium term.

There was, though, one significant exception, in which a significant political level outcome was attributable to TRACE activities within the life of the project. Support for UNI-Europa's establishment of a network of political officers of national affiliates contributed directly to the successful campaign to amend the European Services Directive (the 'Bolkestein' Directive) on the liberalisation of services in the European Union (UNI 2006; Kirton-Darling, in this issue).

Problems

Inevitably, KAs encountered problems in achieving their objectives. Understanding these problems is a key objective of evaluation. These difficulties ranged from the unforeseen and locally contingent to the more predictable, and systemic. The purpose of the evaluation is to try to identify regularities in difficulties and the circumstances in which they emerge, as well as activities and mechanisms to limit the consequences.

At a systemic level, language continues to represent an important barrier to online collaboration and various strategies to reduce this effect were explored. As we might expect, however, language is more problematic in some contexts than in others. Some languages, while distinct, are mutually comprehensible to most speakers, as for example with the Nordic languages of Swedish, Danish and Norwegian. In some milieux, such as the higher education unions or some levels of European trade union organisation, English is sufficiently widely understood to serve as a *lingua franca*. In other contexts, though, as for example in workplace networks in the UK and France, lack of a shared language places serious restrictions on what can be achieved outside those residential events where simultaneous interpretation can be provided, at least for formal sessions.

A range of diverse, contingent difficulties were also encountered. For example, in one binational company level network, immediately after the residential workshops which established the network, workplace elections removed the local leadership from one country which had the effect of breaking the links and commitment to shared plans established with their peers by the previous leadership. This situation was exacerbated further by systemic language difficulties making it practically impossible to attempt to rebuild links at a distance.

Discussion

In the following section, we briefly discuss two issues identified in the TRACE evaluation, partly because we believe they have wider significance to considerations of how trade unions are anticipating and responding to change, and may continue to do so, and partly because they illustrate outcomes of the search for regularities in the contexts, mechanisms and outputs in this approach to evaluation.

Online networks

Online networks have been a feature of recent transnational European trade union organisation and education projects. The potential of ICT to support new channels of communication which involve wider layers of trade unionists in sharing information and coordinating cross-border activity appears self-evident. However the experience of TRACE suggests that in reality it continues to be difficult to build durable information and coordination networks. Disentangling the multiple potential factors and their influence on the successful development of such networks is difficult, but the TRACE

experiences allow us to identify some themes. First, those networks reported by KA organisers to be more successful were comprised primarily of national trade union officers working on transnational issues with immediate domestic concerns. In all cases, the focal work of the network has addressed issues of public policy either in the primarily public sectors (in the ETUCE-led KAs examining the Bologna process in higher education, and general tendencies towards private sector working methods in schools) or by European political institutions, as in the UNI-Europa political lobbying campaign to amend the Services Directive in the European Parliament. The experience of these networks demonstrates that, at the very least, networks can provide sustainable and responsive ways of organising trade union officers around common political institutions.

Secondly, and conversely, it appears rather more difficult to build sustainable networks of workplace representatives either at enterprise or sub-sectoral levels. The reasons for this are unclear but potential reasons cited by KA organisers included: greater difficulties with working in a foreign language (in reality for most transnational networks, English), greater unevenness in access to ICT and/or ICT-related skills, reluctance to share information with members of other unions or workers at other plants or, for other companies, workplace representatives being less concerned with more 'abstract' or longer term trade union issues addressed by transnational networks; and greater network sensitivity to workplace level developments (such as changes in locally elected leaderships, as occurred in one of the networks established in the CFDT-led KA). This does not mean that such networks are not feasible, but that it may take longer to establish the working practices to sustain them. The UNI-Europa Graphical initiative, with its aim of establishing a network of workplace level and responsible national officers in the gravure and web offset print sector, is continuing, but to date has proved more difficult to 'breathe life' into than those discussed above. It may come to provide an important case study and example of how such networks might be established.

Thirdly, the more successful networks were led by capable 'animateurs' with both the personal commitment and the organisational support to be able to devote time to the work of the network. The same, however, was true of at least one of the less successful networks, suggesting that while effective animation is necessary it is on its own an insufficient condition of success. The more successful networks had both some form of shared online space (either a First Class conference or a web-based bulletin board) as well as e-mail connections. With one exception, the less successful networks relied solely on e-mail. Again, this may suggest that a shared online space is a necessary, but insufficient, condition of success.

Organisational learning

Our model of activities and outputs works well in allowing us to consider whether the micro activities of a particular KA led to the kind of output envisaged, and the sort of difficulties that might arise in their production. For example, in the EPSU-led KA, the outputs achieved were less ambitious than originally envisaged, because of a greater than

expected diversity of national contexts and understandings which comprised the context of restructuring in the public sector. Achieving a shared vocabulary in which to discuss diverse experiences of restructuring itself represented a significant accomplishment.

However, our model tended to de-emphasise the way in which, taken together, they represent different elements of the process of organisational learning (see Pawlowsky 2001 for a concise framework for characterising types of organisational learning drawing widely, primarily from the management literature). We might view the outputs and the activities produced as distinct phases of collective learning as described in the (management) organisational learning literature: the identification of relevant information (research reports, databases); the internal exchange and diffusion of knowledge (handbooks and guidelines); the integration of knowledge into existing systems (training materials and tools); and the transformation of knowledge into action (network). These phases do not necessarily need to follow sequentially, and a particular activity may involve more than one phase of collective learning. Similarly, we can analyse these activities depending on the individual, group, organisational or inter-organisational levels of learning they represent, and the nature and extent of that learning (single- and double-loop, and deuterio, learning in Argyris and Schön's (1996) well-known model).

Space does not permit a fuller discussion of these issues here, but the significance of the relationship between a more textured understanding of organisational learning and its relationship with strategic action in trade unions has been noted elsewhere in this issue (Hyman).

Learning from TRACE: evaluation and empowerment

We have presented an approach to evaluating an EU-level project that furthered discussion and activity on restructuring and change. The sub-projects succeeded in covering a range of issues of restructuring including: developing networks, sharing information, sharing good cases of union engagement with the issue, anticipating change through the analysis of specific contexts, preparing transnational cooperation around European Works Councils and fora, and lobbying strategically on deregulation. The question of anticipation of change was opened to a variety of understandings and responses. It was clear that the European labour movement would have to develop strategies at various levels if they were to cope with change. This multi-dimensional view is captured in some of the main documentation from TRACE (Holman 2006; ETUI-REHS 2006b). It also leads to a discussion on the very nature and variety of restructuring and competing visions of it (Hammerström *et al.* 2006).

TRACE also provided a possibility for adjusting the work of evaluation to the realities of trade union action and contexts. Trade unions aim to be democratic and participative organisations but they also have competing cultures and interests (Martínez Lucio and Walker 2005). Also, they exist in a volatile and unstable environment. However,

evaluation must be mindful of context and the manner in which change unsettles a politics of coordination. The ability to capture the different stages of a project and the different inputs, outputs and outcomes cannot be measured without an appreciation of the rich complexities of the labour movement. This requires expert input in terms of evaluation, as here the expert input on educational process and actors was coupled with an expert input on the industrial relations systems. There is a need for multi-disciplinary teams of evaluators that bring different skills and understandings of inputs, outputs, processes, outcomes, and problems. Off-the-shelf evaluation toolkits are not enough. Instead, trust is vital though it carries with it the risk of undermining independence. However, this is a reality of dealing with such organisations. Where organisations are experimenting and attempting to find new synergies across different points to permit a more proactive and transparent understanding of a problem then context, time, learning and adjustment is important. Within the evaluation literature there rests – hidden in the less attractive and managerialist aspects of the discipline – a radical and democratic tradition. It may be time for those in industrial relations to open this door to guarantee a more fruitful, realistic and democratic vision of how we measure and evaluate strategies. Otherwise, others will do it for us in a less democratic and more hierarchical manner.

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