

Education at the centre? Australia's national union education program

Tony Brown and Keiko Yasukawa
University of Technology Sydney

Australian trade unions are at a pivotal moment. In 2007–2008, a review of the training and education programs of the Education and Campaign Centre (ECC), the education arm of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), was conducted through a series of interviews with leaders of twenty-five unions. The review found that Australian unions do not generally view education as a core strategic activity, and many see the ECC simply as a training provider that they could access if they did not have their own trainers. We argue that there are greater possibilities for a national education centre than are currently being contemplated by the union leaders. A key to realising these possibilities lies in unions articulating a shared purpose for union education, and its role in supporting leaders, officials, delegates and activists in the continuing challenges they face in their work.

Introduction

Over the last twenty years, Australia's rate of union density fell from 46% in 1986 to 19% in 2007 (ABS 2008). The election of a Labor government at the end of 2007 has given the union movement new opportunities for renewal and growth. While legislative changes and new political alliances are significant factors in turning around the industrial relations environment and strengthening the voice of the unions, it is also important to contemplate what role education and training has in this rebuilding process, and in particular, what role a national union education centre can have in such a project.

The Education and Campaign Centre (ECC) is the education and training arm of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), Australia's national peak council of trade unions. During 2007–2008 we researched the views of Australian state and national union leaders about their approaches to union education and training, and their views of the programs being offered by the ECC¹.

The research provides a picture of the state of union education and training in Australia as viewed by its leadership. This picture is one that does not foreground education and training as an important element of union building, renewal and sustainability. This situation has not been the result of any deliberate downgrading nor does it reflect a shared vision or approach to education and training within the movement. While the picture represents the views of a significant group of union leaders, which may not necessarily match the views of groups of delegates, officials, rank and file members, and workers/members more generally, we argue in this paper that the union movement as a whole must engage in a debate about the role of education and training as part of its immediate and longer term strategies for renewal and sustainability. In particular, we argue that the Australian union movement has an imperative to engage in such a debate and to explore critically the possibilities afforded by a national education and training centre.

Australian trade union leaders, educators and academics are not alone in evaluating and re-thinking the role and purpose of union education in recent years. Unions in the United Kingdom, South Africa and the United States of America have also reviewed the purpose, organisation and delivery of their education programs, and are addressing the similar question of what is appropriate and effective in meeting the changed conditions of work and community in the early twenty-first century.

In the United Kingdom, a review of the first ten years of the TUC's (Trade Unions Congress) Organising Academy has recently concluded (Holgate & Simms 2008). A number of other programs introduced by the Labour Government, such as the Union Learning Fund and Union Learning Representatives, have opened opportunities for unions to source additional funds and positions within the workplace. The value of these programs has also been the subject of considerable debate within labour and academic circles (Forrester 2005, Shelley & Calveley 2007).

In South Africa, Ditsela's (the Development Institute for Training, Support and Education for Labour, the training arm of the three South African union federations) fifth labour educators conference in 2006 debated the meaning and practice of workers' education: its impact on workplace restructuring and globalisation, reviewed its first ten years of practice, and considered how to build on collaborations developed with progressive educators at Universities in the Western Cape and Kwa-Zulu Natal (Ditsela 2007).

In the United States of America, there has also been considerable change in the organisation of labor education. In 2002 the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organisations) abolished its Education Department, and since then a review of Labor Education focused on the breadth and scope of membership education (Byrd & Nissen 2003).

In this paper, we first provide a brief history of recent Australian union education in order to present some context for the review of the ECC, the methodology used, a summary of key findings, and a discussion of the implications of these findings in relation to the future of the movement. In the final two sections, we present our views on the possible roles that a national union education centre can play, and the dilemmas that we see the union movement has to address in order to realise and benefit from these possibilities.

Brief history of recent union education in Australia

Union education and training in Australia has experienced significant changes in its structural base and its focus since the Whitlam Labor Government established the first Trade Union Training Authority (TUTA) in 1975. When the Howard government's 1996 *Workplace Relations Bill* abolished TUTA and wound up its operations, it had the equivalent of 46 full-time staff and a budget of \$8.7 million. It owned the Clyde Cameron College in Wodonga, which contained training rooms and residential accommodation for around 70 participants with library and research facilities.

Under its Act, TUTA's functions were to plan, develop and undertake programs of trade union training; co-ordinate training; publish training materials; promote its provision; consult with unions on their internal training programs; and regularly review and re-assess that training. Amendments to the legislation were made in the 1970s and 1980s, and in 1994, TUTA underwent a major restructuring that decentralised training and resulted in the Union Training Scheme. This returned the responsibility for training union delegates to individual unions, resulting in a significant reduction in TUTA costs and staffing and rationalisation of its operations (Parliament of Australia 1996).

The changes since TUTA's abolition have been made in an environment of increasing hostility towards the union movement.

For a period following TUTA's abolition, union education was disoriented as new structures were established to replace it. A successor body, still referred to as TUTA, and the national Organising Works program for recruiting new, young organisers established in 1994, were mainstreamed within the ACTU and formally amalgamated on 1 January 2001. The ACTU established a national Organising Centre (renamed in 2005 the Education and Campaign Centre), which took over responsibility for Organising Works. Later, in 2003, with the funding support of the NSW and Victorian ALP governments, The Union Education Foundation (TUEF) was established to provide formal short courses aimed at delegate development. The Foundation would offer modules that were part of a nationally accredited set of union competencies at Certificate and Diploma level that came under the auspices of the Business Services Industry Training Board.

The current context of union education through the Education and Campaign Centre

Promoting and resourcing education as a key means of equipping delegates has been a recurring feature of ACTU reports since the mid-late 1990s. The election of the Howard government, the ending of Accord style politics and the introduction of more direct market mechanisms into employment, welfare, education and industrial relations brought into sharp relief the weakened position of unions in the Australian economy and civil society. Australian unions had for much of the twentieth century built their structures and adapted political frameworks from British unions; during the later post-war boom period, ideas from Scandinavian and German unions influenced Australian union development and were reflected in many policies of the Accord. However, the end of the Accord, the de-regulation of much industrial relations and a more aggressive anti-union agenda lead Australian unions to begin to look at how some American unions, especially those demonstrating successful growth strategies such as the Service Employees Industrial Union (SEIU), organised in a

similar environment. A number of study tours to the USA influenced the reports of the late 1990s and resulted in programs such as Organising Works, the establishment of the Organising Centre and the adoption of what became known as the 'Organising Model'. (Brown 2006, Crosby 2005).

This approach to growth and renewal aimed to rebuild internal capacity, establish new relationships with activist members and organisations outside the formal labour movement, and employ new education or development opportunities for union staff and members. An extensive literature emerged, particularly in the United States, which articulates the rationale and context for what are seen as new democratic ways of organising, alongside details and analyses of organising campaigns (Bronfenbrenner *et al.* 1998, Carter & Cooper 2002, Clawson 2003, Lopez 2004, Milkman & Voss 2004, Moody 2007, Fletcher & Gapasin 2008).

What has been missing in this literature, however, has been a close focus on how education and learning is, or can be, used as part of labour's response to the new world of work, to the rise of anti-unionism on the political front, and to how union renewal can be built on foundations that imagine a different future than that currently laid out.

The gap between knowing what needs doing and implementing it remains a difficult one to bridge. In the findings of a 1999 ACTU survey, 63% of unions reported that less than half of their delegates had received training in the previous three years; 88% reported that less than half of their delegates had received advanced training in that period; and 71% reported that less than half of their delegate education was related to recruitment and organising. The report concluded that there was 'a huge need for training, especially for job delegates, which unions find difficult to meet' (ACTU 2001). Following *unions@work* (ACTU 1999), the *Future strategies* report

noted that 'overseas experience shows unions will not grow without investing in education' (ACTU 2003).

Today the ECC employs around 20 educators in five capital cities. However, the low number of unions participating regularly in ECC activities, the low enrolments in courses and the high number of cancelled courses point to some of the challenges confronting the Centre. The ECC has four categories of enrolment. They are courses for Activists, Delegates and Representatives; for Organisers, Research & Industrial Officers, Lead Organisers and Assistant Secretaries; for Call Centre, Member Services and Administrative staff; and finally Conferences and Consultancy. Enrolments for both the first two groups of Delegates and Organisers were lower in the January-June 2007 period than the preceding six months, and as a combined figure lower than the corresponding 2006 period. Conferences and Consultancy figures were much higher during January-June 2007 than the preceding six months but lower than the 2006 period. The only consistently growing area of enrolments was among Call Centre, Member Services and Administrative staff where enrolments had risen over each of the three six-month periods.

The numbers of activists, delegates and representatives enrolled in the January-June 2007 period totalled 524, which as a proportion of overall union delegates is very low, especially when some of the large national unions have more than 5,000 delegates. The number of enrolled organisers and other union staff totalled 1,273 over the same period.

The cancellation in 2007 of around one-third of scheduled courses due to low enrolments was an important factor prompting the review. This represents not only a financial cost associated with wasting staff and physical resources, but a lost opportunity to educate and develop members and officers.

Research aims and methods

After two years of operation, the TUEF Board in 2007 decided to undertake an evaluation of the ACTU's education program. The evaluation had four components – an analysis of existing course participation data; structured interviews with key stakeholders, including high, medium and low-level users of the ECC; a telephone survey of selected course participants; and a formative evaluation of the ECC's current on-line course delivery. The review sought to capture the experiences and views of both those who participated in the education programs and those union leaders with responsibilities for the education and training of their staff and delegates.

Our research focused on the second of these four components. Structured interviews were conducted with 25 national and state leaders from 21 unions with the aims of exploring how decisions about education and training were made within unions; discovering attitudes about the relevance and value of ECC courses and its overall program; identifying how low level users or non-users might be encouraged to use the ECC more; exploring attitudes to competency-based training for union education; and discovering perceptions about whether course participants are able to apply knowledge and skills after attending ECC courses.

Those interviewed included leaders from the five largest national unions ranging through to small state divisions. Unions covering manufacturing, construction, transport and distribution, public services, education, health and nursing, media and communication, hospitality, and retail were included. Some were regular users of the ECC, some only occasional users and some were virtually non-users of the ECC. Of those interviewed, 11 were from National Offices (10 were either National President or Secretary), and 14 were from State branches, (with 10 being either the State Secretary or Assistant Secretary). Fifteen interviewees were men and 10 were women. Interviews were conducted in roughly two phases with the

first group held in the days surrounding the 2007 Federal Election, and the second in the two months following the election. At the time of the first interviews, media expectations were that the Howard government would likely be defeated but among those interviewed there was a high degree of nervousness about the outcome and some interviewees feared for the future of their union if the government was returned.²

The state of union education and training in Australia

The findings from the research paint a picture of Australian union education and training, and the unions' expectations of the ECC, as being reactive, fragmented and lacking in consensus. While there were unions that had their own well-developed programs and could provide evidence of how they had positioned education and training in their overall industrial and political strategies, overall, unions appeared to be desperately trying to survive in an increasingly hostile environment and did not appear to be factoring education and training into their overall planning. However, no union dismissed the importance of education and training.

Reactive

While union leaders were keen to talk about education and training in their unions, only a very few had what could be called a comprehensive education and training plan for their staff and delegates. Some had practices such as sending all of their new organisers to an ECC course, while others had a system of ensuring that delegates were systematically trained. However, no union could confidently say that they had a practice of follow-up after staff or delegates had been to training. Investing time and resources into co-designing, with the ECC, programs that did reflect the culture, political priorities and needs of the union appeared to be a luxury for most unions.

There was a stronger appreciation of and engagement with the ECC among those unions that have had closer contact with the ECC through concentrated work such as consultancies, curriculum reviews, campaign planning assistance and so on. One national president (NP17) commented that their union's close work with the ECC led to a successful program,

but I don't think it would have been a good program if we had just said, okay, you handle it ... [because] if you're trying to do training for officials, then the culture of the particular union and its political priorities and its industrial priorities do vary quite a bit.

Reflecting a lack of awareness of what the ECC could provide, a number of unions worked on the assumption that ECC course structures, content and approaches were non-negotiable: '[the courses are] formulaic and ... you can't question it ... other approaches to organising are not encouraged ... there isn't enough recognition of differences between unions' (SS10). Therefore relationships involving collaboration, which generate mutual understanding and trust, appear to be a key for the ECC in successfully engaging different unions.

Cost-effectiveness was an important factor for many unions, especially smaller and state unions, in deciding how to source education and training. Some that previously had their own in-house training units and staff had to shed these in response to recent financial constraints: 'we had a full-time education and training officer [but] four years ago, we were no longer in a position to have that as a full-time position' (SS16), and felt they had little choice but to use the ECC. For some others, the fact that training was organised by the peak body was enough good reason: 'it's run by the ACTU ... that's where our money would go' (SS1).

Fragmented

The approaches to training varied from union to union. Some unions saw education and training as a pivotal part of their operation, and had a culture in the organisation that facilitated the integration of education and training with the conduct of campaigns. There were other unions that conducted training and/or accessed training programs but whose programs were reactive and divorced from overall operations.

Many unions approached training using a mix of in-house and out-sourced training, with some relying on the ECC for most of their training, supplemented by using legal firms or other private providers. Although the size of the union and their capacity to conduct in-house training influenced many unions' decisions, there were other factors such as the perceived uniqueness of the industry or their union, or their organising approach, that influenced unions' interest in participating in multi-union programs offered by the ECC. One national secretary, whose union has been doing its own training for many years, explained:

... we would probably take the view – not at any sort of antagonistic or hostile way – that the ECC people wouldn't really understand the nature of [our] industry and the nature of employment, the sort of situation our delegates find ourselves in to be able to do a course as we can do it (NS3).

This contrasted with views of others who saw benefits of organisers training in a multi-union environment, for example: 'I mean we're part of a broader movement, so if there's the opportunity for staff to go and mingle with other union staff, all good and well' (SS20).

What became apparent was that the lack of close connection between the Centre and individual leaders allowed for uninformed and often contradictory views about the ECC approach and practices to co-exist among unions. This was evident in views about approaches to organising, and relevance of courses. Some interviewees believed

the Centre was still stuck using ideas on organising borrowed from the United States in the 1990s, with one national secretary (NS13) of a union that is virtually a non-user of the ECC commenting that 'the impulses are good, but ... it's a very one-dimensional model that can be presented. I think it draws too heavily on some limited US experience'. Some felt the Organising Centre and/or the ECC had pushed or 'rammed down' a particular approach to organising and industrial work, while others believed that the Centre had abandoned such ideas some years ago.

All of the unions, whether users or non-users of the ECC, hold strong views about the relevance of ECC courses. One official from a 'blue collar' union expressed a view that:

... there's a problem [in that] a lot of the courses are very theoretically based, a lot of the case studies are very white-collar based, they haven't actually got experience within their unit to be able to articulate it in a blue-collar environment, which sometimes has completely different cultural aspects to it (NO2).

On the other hand, a leader from a public sector white-collar union felt:

There's no dialogue about trying to get some sort of examples [that are relevant] because it's very blue-collar, private sector dominated rather than looking at some of the variations (SS1).

Lacking in consensus

Some courses, such as Lead Organiser Development and Union Management, were rated highly by many unions who participated in them. Others, particularly the suite of courses for Organisers, received mixed responses including strong recommendations for a complete overhaul. A third area, regarding the levels of courses, particularly the absence of advanced courses that extended the skills and knowledge of organisers, was a subject of concern.

Those interviewed expected the ECC trainers to have experience as organisers and/or union leaders, and to be able to draw examples from the industries that course participants could relate to; this was a point of tension in relation to multi-union training as expressed above.

There were diverse views about pedagogies – some liked interactive and experiential styles, while others felt a resistance towards those approaches. Respondents, however, rarely mentioned the skills, knowledge and experience of ECC staff as adult educators.

One state leader was critical that the ECC trainers were just ‘delivering the doctrine’ (SS20). Another state secretary’s criticism was that the ECC taught organisers to always ‘be in dispute, you always have to agitate’, suggesting that ECC Organiser courses did not show ‘a way to close the circle of a dispute’ (SS1). What made a good organiser, and therefore a course for organiser development, attracted different views not only between a union and the ECC, but also more generally:

... it’s not very open, but there is a difference of opinion about organising emerging in Australia, and ... in other parts of the world. It’s an evolution of the organising debate – we all still use the term “organising” but I think we now mean different things. One approach is much more paid employee focused where the union leadership or organiser controls everything, it’s very top-down managerial and the organiser learns how to fulfil tasks. The other is more focused on building unions in workplaces and industries – establishing democratic decision making and working with members to achieve this. This is a different skill set for organisers, ... it has a different ideological foundation (SS14).

However, there seemed to be little evidence of unions seeking to discuss these differences as a broader issue for the movement and the direction of union education in Australia.

When leaders were asked about the future of the ECC, their views indicated a general support for its continued existence; however, strategic ideas about its role in the overall union movement were not forthcoming. Moreover, there was not a high level of expectations placed on the ECC. Several mentioned that the ECC was a useful clearinghouse of new ideas and a meeting point for unions to discuss future directions about education and training. A number of others felt that an organisation such as the ECC necessarily had a limited role. Their ability to attract and retain good staff was identified as a critical issue. Another group felt that there was a need to modernise the education and training programs. A few commented on the need for the ECC to take its campaign role more seriously. One National Secretary expressed the view that campaign activities were sites of learning but that this was not being exploited in the ECC's approach, and raised the possibility that the Centre should provide twin arms for education delivery alongside campaigning and research.

Finally, although most unions had heard of TUEF, the foundation set up specifically for delegate training, they were not aware of its exact role, the amount of funds it had, nor how that money could be accessed, by whom and for what. The leaders had some suggestions, however, on what TUEF should do, including: making funds more accessible in a more transparent manner; applying those funds for broader education and training needs in consultation between TUEF, the ECC and individual unions; supporting innovative and collaborative approaches to education and training to meet delegates different developmental needs; and increasing consultation with individual unions.

The views may or may not be informed by accurate or current information and experience. They are perceptions, and these perceptions of the ECC do have varying levels of influence on each of the union's inclination to engage with the ECC.

Implications of the current state of Australia's national union education

This research focused on the views of union leaders only, and although they spoke for their own union, they were not asked to present the views or experiences of officials, delegates, activists and rank and file members. This means that the findings around dimensions such as the quality of the delivery and the trainers, the suitability of the range of courses, and the value of undertaking training in-house or in multi-union settings may not reflect the views of their staff and delegates who participated in the training. We also do not know from this research if other officials and delegates share these leaders' views about the role of education and training in their union. United States research into the experiences of new organisers highlights the conflicting understanding union leaders and organisers have about the role of organisers and their training needs. They point to the need for creating an environment that sustains an organising culture in unions, and which includes paying attention to recruitment, retention, learning and mentoring support for organisers (Feekin & Widenor 2002, Widenor & Feekin 2002, Ganz *et al.* 2004, Rooks 2004). Nevertheless, the significance of the leaders' views cannot be ignored.

A noticeable change since the training reform period of the late 1980s, and again since the renewal reports of the 1990s, has been how education and training has lost importance as a central strategic concern. Together the ACTU and TUEF allocate considerable financial and human resources to education and training, yet there was little sense of ownership of or regard for the ECC and TUEF as important resources for the growth and renewal of their own union and for the movement generally. One explanation is that unions have been so much under siege that all they could do in the increasingly hostile recent two decades was to react to the next crisis in membership levels or industrial assault on their sector with some form of damage

control. This harsh environment in which unions have worked also forced them to reduce expenditures, and education and training was one area that was cut in a number of unions. However, in the new environment where unions do have an opportunity for renewal and growth, the question arises as to what roles a national union education centre can play?

The research also found that most unions talked about the ECC as a training rather than education provider. While having skilled officials and delegates is undeniably crucial for any union, one could question whether the real value of a national union education centre is in its delivery of skills-based training. Is it enough for the education and training focus of the movement to be limited to meeting the particular instrumental needs of individual unions, or should the focus be broadened to an education that facilitates critical reflection of what the movement as a whole has just been through, including the highly successful *yourrights@work* campaign, and how it can renew itself into a more robust and sustainable movement?

Possibilities and dilemmas for a national union education centre

In contemplating the possibilities of a national education centre playing a strategic role in the movement, there are some silences and gaps in the discussions about the ECC and union education that need to be examined. Many unions have suffered significant membership losses over the last two decades and are struggling to reverse the trend. During this time, there have been new generations of workers entering the workforce who have grown up surrounded by a strong neo-liberal discourse and have not experienced the presence of unions in their workplaces. This poses a challenge for the movement to help the workforce ‘unlearn’ what they have learned about their identity as workers and the nature of work. Union training and education focused only on the ‘converted’ may have limited impact on those who have come through ideologically-based labour market programs,

many of which were designed around employability competencies that were about individuals competing for recognition and reward rather than a collective consciousness about the workplace and other values that unions traditionally hold.

The ECC and many unions have also adopted a competency-based curriculum for some of their education and training programs. Although competency-based training (CBT) has a history in vocational and education training, including unions' strong advocacy of it in the 1980s, many union leaders are now questioning the value of CBT for union education. Many of those interviewed did not support the accreditation and certification aspects of union training. CBT is underpinned by a particular educational philosophy that is not shared by other pedagogies such as humanist or critical pedagogy, which seeks to uncover and address questions of power and justice through engagement of participants in critical reflective practices. The choice of pedagogy in union education will limit or enable different types of learning to occur. The CBT approach, where the focus is on pre-defining clear and measurable outcomes, may be effective in achieving a range of instrumental outcomes, but is less conducive to educating critically thinking union members who can engage reflectively and strategically to lead and grow the movement in changing and challenging times.

The question of who decides the pedagogical approaches a national education centre should adopt relates to a broader question about the 'ownership' of the ECC. What does it mean to be the education and training arm of the peak national body of the Australian union movement? Reviewing the role of the original TUTA, Voll (1997) problematises the relationship between the ACTU and the national education and training centre, arguing that, as a centre structurally separate from the ACTU, TUTA had greater autonomy in the design, delivery and pedagogy of its programs, and was more strongly informed by a range of adult learning theories.

There was little discussion about how ‘problems’ of pedagogy or content also have the potential to stimulate critical learning about some of the fundamental questions that the movement needs to address: how as a movement, leaders, officials, delegates and activists engage in naming and reflecting on what being part of a social movement means; what ideologies and beliefs are shaping the movement now; and how as a movement differences in views can be negotiated and overcome for what the movement needs to become. At a time when there is increasing discussion about ‘community organising’ and working in solidarity with different types of community groups, the ability to discuss, debate and learn together inside the movement can model how open discussion can be pursued with potential allies.

Conclusion

The review of Australia’s national union education program reveals that there is a wide range of educational activities being organised or provided by individual unions, but in the main, the degree of thinking and planning for education within unions has declined in recent years.

There is a somewhat fractured delivery system with a small number of unions providing their own educational programs, another small number of mostly smaller sized unions relying on the ECC’s program, and another group who make use of the ECC only occasionally. There is little agreement about the core purpose of union education, and on what sort of coordinated union education should exist. A number of unions believe their situation is so different from others they think that there is little need for a common education provider. As a result, there is a lack of consensus about the idea of a national education ‘centre’.

There is also a lack of knowledge about the current activities of the ECC. There are strong perceptions of the way the Centre ‘trains’,

some of which are drawn from personal experience of the Organising Works program, some from the activities of the Organising Centre and others from exposure to the ECC and its staff. Some of these perceptions are inaccurate or outdated yet they are firmly held and shape decision-making within unions. At the most practical level, many union leaders said they were not up-to-date with what was going on in the Centre, they had lost touch with Centre staff, and information about Centre activities got lost amidst the inflow of other notices and correspondence. This view was particularly strong when it came to discussions about TUEF, of which many union leaders had little recognition or familiarity.

These perceptions persist in part because many believe there has been less consultation between the Centre and unions than in the past. A number commented that previously TUTA and the Organising Centre had more contacts between education staff and individual unions to discuss their needs, which would be realised in the education program.

The intention of the ACTU reports of the late 1990s and early 2000s was to position education more centrally in the life of union renewal and growth (ACTU 1999, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004). Of those interviewed, only one Secretary made any reference to the reports that shaped the planning for organising and education. One conclusion that could be drawn is that that thinking has become so ingrained that there is no longer a need to refer to it. Alternatively, it may be that, with the passing of time, the impact of those reports has diminished, or that the lack of reference reflects a gap between what is espoused in policy documents and what is implemented on the ground. Some leaders sense that the momentum for linking organising, education and campaigning has stalled.

Some respondents from unions that were devoting additional resources to growth organising, and who were more advanced in restructuring their organising capacity, new campaigning methods

and establishing broader coalitions, did articulate a view of education and development that embraced informal learning approaches. Suggestions included whether the Centre can play a role of providing non-class-based educational support through initiatives such as mentoring, informal workplace learning, targeted seminars, forums and other ideas for the wider movement. In addition, there were views that organisationally the Centre should begin to give priority to developing a stronger 'campaign' arm that would include resourcing areas such as corporate research, coalition building, community organising, working with and learning from social movements and community organisations.

A critical step in overcoming the sense of hiatus is to clarify just what the purpose of union education is in Australia today, and more specifically what the role of the Education and Campaign Centre is. This raises a number of questions about what role unions collectively see a national education centre playing in the wider movement. In educational terms, should a body such as the ECC uncritically fit in with a particular union's approach? Does the ECC have a role in educating unions about new possibilities, as opposed to, or in addition to, individual staff and/or delegates? If so, how should it go about doing this? Is the ECC a service provider for individual unions, or a leader/stimulus of new thinking and working? Can union education be re-conceived as an ecology of provision to include short courses, consultancy, forums, leadership and organisational development, developing technology capacity, corporate research, community organising and campaigning so that this knowledge and experience becomes shared? It is around this mix of threshold and practical questions that more fundamental discussion is needed. If the ECC is to give effect to this broader vision, then further thinking is needed about the mix of skills and experience that Centre staff need as well as the ongoing development of those staff.

Expecting delegates and union officers to work effectively in the challenging industrial, social and political environment of the early twenty-first century without a contemporary education program to educate, support and develop them is short-sighted. Unions already commit significant resources to the education of their members, delegates and staff, but whether this commitment is achieving the intended objectives or reaping the anticipated benefits is less clear.

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About the authors

Dr Tony Brown is a senior lecturer in organisational learning at the University of Technology, Sydney. He is also the postgraduate education program director and teaches subjects on adult education history, work and learning, and using film for critical pedagogy. His research interest focuses on the learning in and by social movements.

Keiko Yasukawa is a lecturer in adult education at the University of Technology Sydney. She coordinates and teaches in the initial teacher education program for adult educators and trainers. Her research focuses on education for social justice and sustainability, and she has a particular interest in the politics of numbers and critical mathematics education.

Contact details

Education, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney, PO Box 123, Broadway, NSW 2007

Tel: (02) 9514 3866

Fax: (02) 9514 3930

Emails: tony.brown@uts.edu.au and keiko.yasukawa@uts.edu.au

Endnotes

- 1 The full report, 'Education for organising and campaigning in Australian unions: a review of the Education and Campaign Centre', was written by Tony Brown, Geof Hawke and Keiko Yasukawa from the University of Technology, Sydney and presented to the ACTU Executive in June 2008. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand (AIRAANZ), *Labour, capital and change*, Newcastle, 4–6 February 2009.
- 2 When reporting interviewees' comments, we have used a code. NP, NS and NO refer to National President, Secretary or Officer, and the number refers to their interview number. Similarly SP, SS, SAS and SO refer to State President, Secretary, Assistant Secretary or Officer and their interview number.