EDUCATION METHODS

TUC Education

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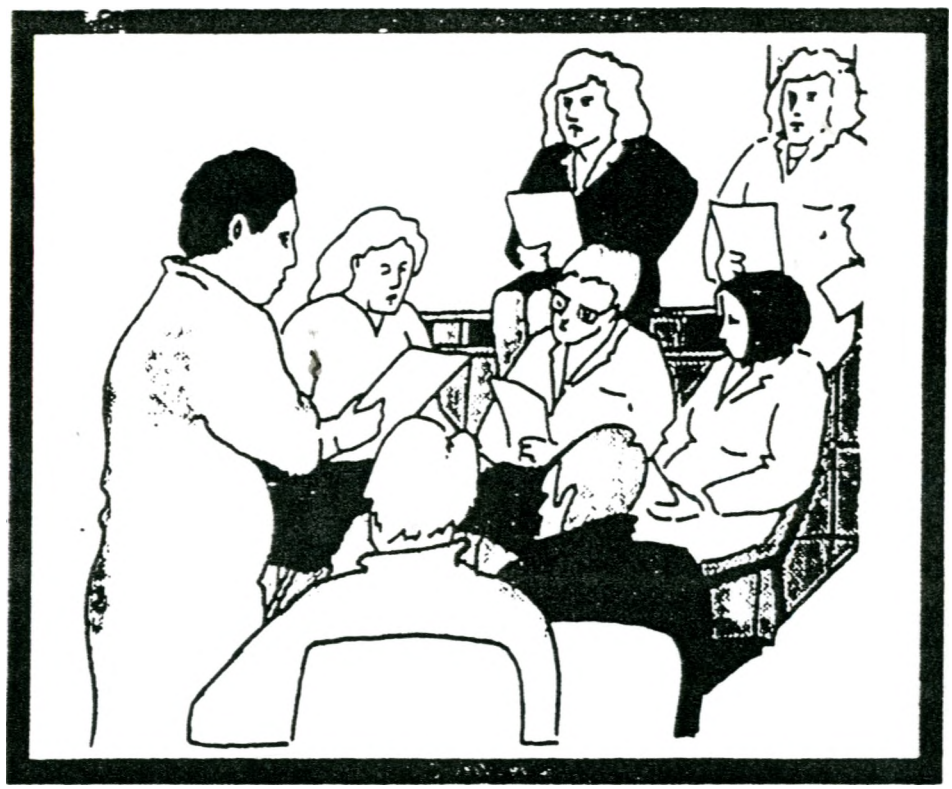

Handling Complex Information

TUC Education

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INTRODUCTION

This note looks briefly at a key problem confronting trade union educators: how to handle topics which involve complex information. There are several different parts to this problem:

1. The range of topics facing trade union educators is immense, and growing all the time. Safety, pensions, compulsory tendering, new technology.... the list seems to be endless. Trade union education must develop an approach that allows us to take all these and other issues on board in an effective and rational way.

2. Many participants on trade union courses don't have highly-developed 'information skills', such as looking up a reference book, using an index, or gutting a document for key points.

3. There is a shortage of tutors with detailed knowledge of complex topics, and of subject experts with educational experience.

The TUC Education Service has tackled these problems and produced a range of examples of courses dealing with complex and technical areas.

First we look at educational approaches to complex topics, and then go on to look at overcoming tutor shortages.

1. Educational Approaches

Here are some examples from TUC course materials, based on themes such as 'Finding Out' activities, using complex information in course work, developing Simple structures, and developing information skills.

'FINDING OUT'

Finding relevant information is the starting point for knowing how to deal with it. Tracking down information is a key still that union activists need to develop, and a habit they need to get into.

WORKPLACE REPORTS

All TUC courses ask the course members to find various types of information through the use of 'workplace reports', issued at the end of each week. They involve asking management for information about future plans; members for their views; other reps for their priorities for negotiations; pension scheme administrators for membership figures, and so on. The information collected in this way is then often fed directly back into the course.

Example:

> A safety rep is asked to bring along copies of any noise surveys done in her workplace, she brings along a consultants report. This is then set for the rest of the class as a case study, by running a union-side meeting and then a safety committee meeting to study the report.

Where courses are run in a block, it is possible to achieve some of the effect of the workplace report by sending out a 'pre-course survey', or letter asking the course members to find information for the course. For example, on Communication Skills courses at the NEC, participants are asked to issue a questionnaire to members about information they get from the union and from the media, and their views about it.

VALUE OF THE 'FINDING OUT' APPROACH

* Confidence and self reliance are developed by encouraging the participants to find things out for themselves.
* they begin to think about key issues before the course starts, and between the different days
* real examples, problems, and documents make the course practical and relevant, and increase motivation
* 'finding out' activities help to make connections between the course and other union activities
* requests to find specific information can lead to useful general spin offs.

On a pensions course everyone was asked to find out how many employees were excluded from the pension scheme under a '30 hours or more' rule. One person discovered from the figures that there were more part-time than full-time workers in the company, many not members of the union.

PROBLEMS

* workplace reports are only possible in a course where there is a gap between the course days

* there is a limit to the amount of information you can ask for in a pre-course questionnaire

* some information takes several weeks to collect

* not all participants will carry out pre-course work

USING INFORMATION IN COURSE ACTIVITIES

The key to successfully handling complex information on a trade union course is to plan activities which make effective use of the information.

We look at:

* defining the information you need
* comprehension
* mini-case studies
* comparison charts
* problem-based approach

DEFINING THE INFORMATION YOU NEED

Trade union activists spend only a tiny fraction of their time on courses. At work, they are faced with problems on many different issues. It would be misleading if trade union courses, therefore were to give the impression that relevant information always came in neatly-labelled packages. One way round this problem is for course activities to look at what information you need.

Example:

Monitoring YTS schemes

Your union committee at work has decided to keep a close check on the youth training scheme your employer is planning to introduce.

Make a list of the information you will need about the scheme and the trainees on it. Take into account:

- equal opportunities
- quality of training
- supervision
- safety problems and grievances
- any other issues you think important

One value of this approach is that it will produce a checklist of information demands that can be taken back to work for use by the union branch or stewards' committee.

Defining the information you need is now a central part of TUC Stage 1 courses.

COMPREHENSION

One way of getting people to become familiar with using a document such as a union rule book, policy statement, or agreement, is to set comprehension questions for groups to work through. This is a more active method than giving a talk on the same information.

A drawback to this method, however, is that comprehension questions often lack immediate relevance for the students. This is one reason why problem-based questions have tended to replace comprehension questions on trade union courses.

One way of getting over the problem of the relevance of comprehension questions is to set an activity in which one group of course members have to explain an issue to another group. You can use this where there are several different aspects to a topic. For example, looking at changes in pension schemes, you might ask groups to look at issues facing young workers, women, and workers with poor health. Each group would have to present an account to the others.

MINI-CASE STUDIES

Written problems or 'mini-case studies' have tended to replace comprehension questions in recent years. Here is an example from the TUC Bargaining book:

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REPRESENTING MEMBERS

Aims

To help you:

* deal with members' problems more effectively
* develop the skill of planning your approach to problems

Task

Discuss some of these problems in your small group. For each problem make a short note setting out:

* what information you need
* what your aims should be
* how you will deal with the problem.

Refer to any of your agreements if they cover the problem.

1. Your members complain that the office is dirty because the cleaning staff don't do their jobs properly.
2. A member tells you that her bonus earnings have been calculated wrongly for the fourth time in three months.
3. Your members are angry because management are cutting overtime.
4. A member complains that a fellow worker is pestering her by making sexual advances.
5. A group of members are saying that basic rates of pay are far too low.
6. A member claims that her job should be up graded.

7. Management have introduced a new brand of glue, and members say it gives them rashes.

8. A member claims that he wasn't paid enough by social security during a recent spell off work.

Advantages of this method include: showing the relevance of information by linking it to typical problems; providing examples of a range of problems which is wider than the experience of some of the course members; and developing the skills of thinking through what information you need and how to use it.

Disadvantages of this method are that the problems set may not really be typical for the group in question - or that small details (such as putting 'shop steward' instead of 'staff representative') may take the problems seem irrelevant.

Unless the course members have thought through what their problems are, they may not make the link between the pre prepared problems set on the course and their own situation.

COMPARISON CHARTS

Trade unionists often remark that what they got most out of was mixing with other trade unionists and comparing their different wages and conditions and union set ups. This is seen as an accidental spin-off, quite different from the formal course work.

But we can use the advantages of mixed backgrounds directly in the course work. One way of doing this is to use 'comparison charts', or worksheets.

Here is another pensions example. Course members use their scheme documents to fill in the worksheet, which then allows a direct comparison of the various scheme benefits.

Key advantages of this method are that it helps to develop information skills, such as looking through a complex booklet, and it results in a useful summary to take back to the union branch.

A further use of this technique is to ask course members not only to complete the charts **but to draw them up.** On a recent course, for example, the members decided they wished to compare work breaks. The tutor introduced the idea of a comparison chart to do this, and asked the groups to draw up the questions they would ask for the survey. (Length of work breaks; canteen facilities; arrangements for shift workers; and so on.)

Comparison charts can also be used to introduce published sources of information, such as legislation or codes of practice, and union policy booklets. For example, on the pensions worksheet, columns can be added to show legal standards for pensions, and union aims.

Pension schemes benefits - Worksheet

NAME OF SCHEME

CONTRACTED IN/OUT

Membership and
re-entry restrictions

Final earnings/money purchase

CONTRIBUTIONS
employer
employee

EARLY RETIREMENT
conditions and reductions

AGE OF RETIREMENT

CALCULATION
of pension benefits

LUMP SUMS

DEPENDANTS
death in service
death in retirement

EARLY LEAVERS
preservation
transfers
refunds

INFLATION
protection for pensioners
protection for early leavers

AVC arrangements

PROBLEM BASED APPROACH

Earlier in this note we looked at the importance of getting students to think clearly about what information they need. We also discussed the problem of case studies and pre prepared problems becoming unrealistic. One way of dealing with these two issues is to get course members to define their own problems, and then the information they need to deal with them. In the TUC courses this problem is known as the PIP method (Problem Information Plan).

This method works best where there is a system of workplace reports, but a pre course activity can be set.

One way of handling this PIP method is:

1. Participants are asked to make notes about a trade union problem they know about.

2. A second participant then interviews the first, making notes of the problem.

3. Both then report back to the rest of the group, after having worked out the INFORMATION they would need and the PLAN they would propose to deal with the problem.

4. Other course members may comment on the presentation, suggesting, for example that the problem was not fully thought out, or that other information sources would be useful, or that the plan could be improved.

5. Further course work can be done on analysing the information and developing a plan. In order to make the INFORMATION stage of PIP work, however, it is necessary for the course members to have a simple structure of information sources available to them. We look at this in the next section.

SIMPLE STRUCTURES

In order to deal with a large amount of information effectively, we have to develop frameworks to sort the information out. This is especially true in trade union education. Often we are forced to introduce trade union students rapidly to new sources of information, and often we ask them to carry out complex tasks using it. Part of the approach developed in TUC Education is to offer students a simple structure for sorting and dealing with information, in order to help them with the sort of tasks described earlier.

Examples:

The Stage 1 course uses the PIP method of defining problems and information needs. The information the reps should look at has this structure:

1. union policies
2. agreements
3. legal standards
4. codes of practice

For each problem looked at in a course ability, the reps are asked to find out what union policies are, what their agreements any, and whether where are any legal or other official standards. They become familiar with this way of sorting through a mass of detail to find relevant policies and standards.

The safety courses rely on the reps becoming familiar with the 'structure of health and safety standards':

1. The Health and Safety at Work ACt
2. Factories Acts and Regulations
3. Codes of Practice
4. HSE Guidance Notes
5. International Standards

The pensions courses use this structure:

1. Minimum standards for pensions schemes to contract out
2. Maximum benefits
3. Union aims
4. Best practice

DEVELOPING INFORMATION SKILLS

So far, we have looked at handling information in different activities. But union educators must plan their approach to information skills over a whole course. Here are some guidelines to what will be involved:

* start by asking the course members to find relevant basic information, if necessary in a pre-course letter

* introduce a simple structure for the information relevant to the course through basic activities in the first two days

- move on from becoming familiar with the information to using it and explaining the issues to members and union activists

- build on methods which stress self-reliance and development of confidence such as comparison charts, worksheets, and the PIP approach.

TUTOR SHORTAGES

We now look briefly at the twin problems of tutors who are short of 'expertise', and 'experts' who are short of teaching skills. The second is perhaps easier to deal with, in that there are well established courses in educational methods run at the TUC National Education Centre. These courses have attracted a growing number of specialist staff, such as research and other head office personnel, as well as union officers and EC members. The courses set out to illustrate how all learning can be approached actively, even on very complex topics. Participants are assisted in designing educational materials to suit their own union priorities.

There are no short cuts to developing expertise in trade union tutors. The TUC approach, however, is to encourage tutors not to over specialise, but rather to be prepared to take on a wide range of different topics. Team-teaching or new courses can help, especially where someone with experience of the topic can be matched up with someone with general educational skills. The TUC full-time officer courses on special topics can often be a helpful way-in for tutors wishing to extend their knowledge of complex topics.