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**ICTs & INNOVATION IN TRADE UNIONS:
INTERNET TRAINING IN EUROPEAN TRADE UNION CONFEDERATIONS AND
WORKER EDUCATION ORGANISATIONS**

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ABSTRACT

The paper draws on the evaluation activities of a European transnational ICT training programme involving trade union confederations and other worker education organisations. Three complementary views of the role of ICT in worker education are identified and discussed

ICT as a topic of training: ICT training becomes increasingly diverse as it moves beyond the introductory, reflecting the diverse organisational and environmental influences;

ICT as a tool for delivering training: distance learning is becoming an increasing significant issue among European trade union educators;

ICT in the mediation of changing relationships between union education and organisation. In some cases, confederations are using ICT as part of a wider reappraisal of the function of trade union education, viewing trade unions themselves as learning organisations and potentially blurring the organisation between trade union education and organisation.

There is no inevitable progression through these views of ICT: the outcomes of ICT use are dependent on a range of interacting influences that are likely to result in a diversity of patterns of ICT use.



INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, trade union organisations around the world have been under increasing pressure. Changes in work organisation, changes in the composition of the labour market, widespread anti-union legislation, technological change and increasingly intense global competition have all contributed to these pressures (Olney, 1996). Increasingly this has led trade union organisations to seek to innovate, including creating new types of relations with members and with other social organisations (Hyman 1996; Munch, 1999). One aspect of this has been increasing use of information and communications technologies at both national and international levels, and in a wide range of union functions including education, service provision, research, campaigning and organising (e.g. Mather & Lowe, 1990; Reardon & Mather 1992, 1993; Labour Telematics Centre 1994; Lee, 1997; Shostak 1999).

Education is an important function of trade union organisations, and one with an important organisational dimension, being widely used as preparation for social and economic action (Miller & Stirling, 1998). Trade union educators have often been involved in the exploration of ICTs in trade unions at both national and transnational levels (e.g. McAlpine, 1992; Taylor, 1996; Creanor & Walker, 2000; Köpsén 2000; Salt, 2000).

This paper examines ICT use in trade union education in Europe, as seen through the participation of trade union confederations and worker education organisations in a European ICT and training project, ETUE-net II. After a short overview of the structure of the training activities that formed part of the ETUE-net II project and its associated evaluation activities, it discusses three dimensions of the relationship between ICTs and trade union education identified within the project evaluation.

ETUE-net II: Overview of Internet training for trade unionists

The ETUE-net II (European Trade Union Education Network) project was led by the European Trade Union Collegeⁱ with the support of the European Union's 4th Framework Telematics Applications



Program. The project as a whole involved twenty national trade union confederation and other workers' education organisations and aimed both to:

- promote Internet uptake of the Internet among trade unionists, primarily through a programme of training;
- support the development of a transnational network of trade union educators through the use of ICT.

This paper is concerned primarily with the training activities associated with the first of these objectives. The results presented here are drawn from the project evaluation activities, in which data was gathered by interview, group discussion and questionnaire from course participants, trainers and training managers (Walker, 2000). While the results discussed here draw on the project as a whole, there is a particular emphasis on case studies on four partner organisations whose participation in the project, and its relation to the circumstances of the partner, were tracked in more detail.

The training activities were organised as a 'cascade' in which a transnational training programme for trade union educators from partner organisations sought to prepare the participants to deliver similar training programmes at national levels through their organisations. The transnational training was organised in two modules (see Figure 1 below):

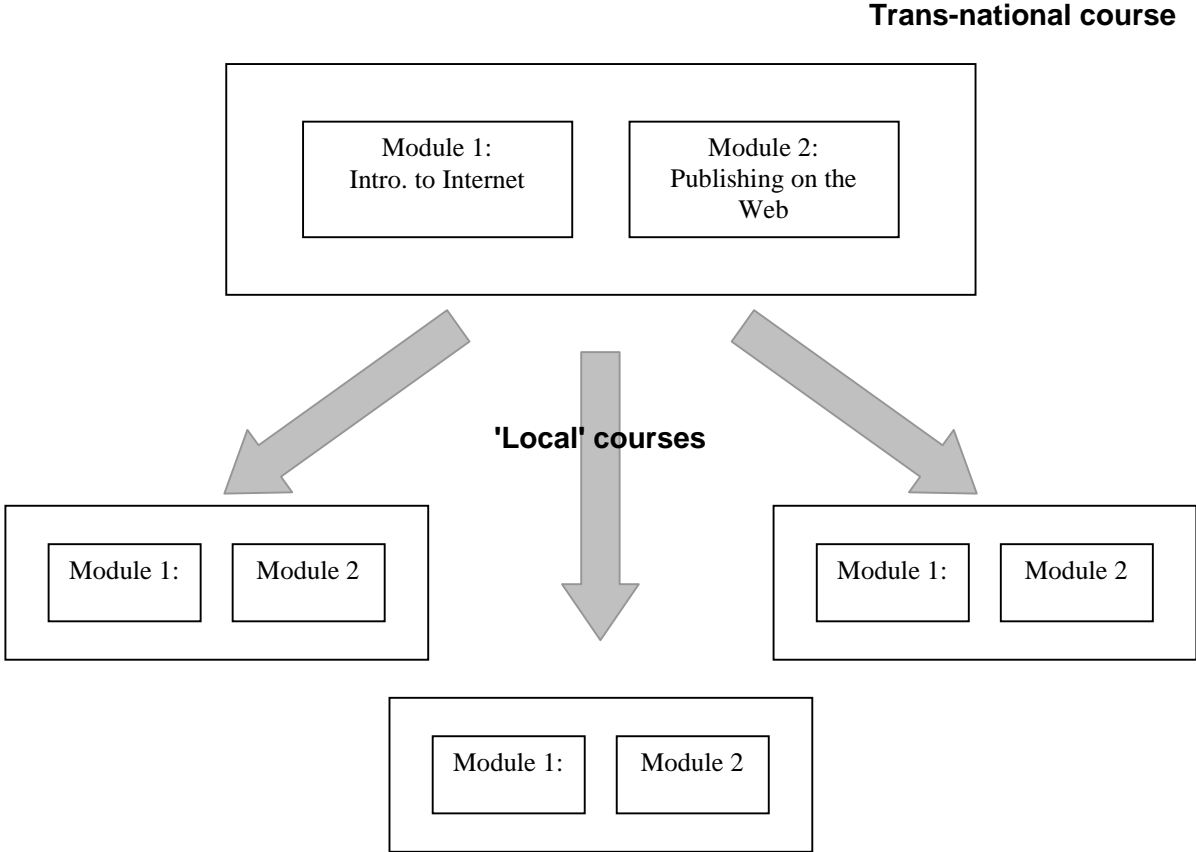
- Module 1: 'Introduction to the Internet', which introduced the use of the Internet by trade unions and covered basic Internet skills including the use of email and Web browsers, searching on the Web and use of Web conferencing.
- Module 2: Publishing on the Web, which training concentrated on the production of Web pages, including an introduction to the fundamentals of Web page authoring, Web page design and resource implications of Web publishing.

The two modules were conceived as a straightforward progression through apparently generic skills, with an emphasis in the second module on organisational and design issues rather than the purely technical.



The participants in the transnational training were all experienced trade union educators. Although the participants reported varying prior experience in specifically ICT training, most considered themselves

Fig 1: ETUE-netII Cascade Training Programme



to be experienced users of IT and the Internet. The educators' participation as learners in the transnational training programmes had a primarily pedagogic function in giving them a 'learners-eye' view of the modules before delivering them as tutors. The transnational modules also included sessions discussing pedagogic and organisational issues in the delivery of ICT training including reviewing training materials produced centrally, prior to translation for subsequent localⁱⁱⁱ use. Following the transnational training, participants were committed to delivering similar courses locally though with freedom to localise the content and delivery to suit their particular situations.



From the various ways in which partner organisations have adapted and used the resources available for ICT training through the project, three views of the relationship between ICTs, education and organisational innovation can be identified:

- ICTs as a topic of training for trade unionists;
- ICTs as a set of tools for delivering trade union and worker education;
- ICT use in the mediation/facilitation of changing relationships between training/education and trade union/worker organisation.

These views are not mutually exclusive, nor do they necessarily represent stages through which partners pass. While seeing ICT use as a way of changing the relationships between union education and organisation may tend to follow on from practical experience of ICT use in the delivery of education, there is no apparent inevitability in this progression. For example, some partner organisations appear instead to have followed what might be termed an 'entrepreneurial' route, using ICT-mediated delivery of education as way of attracting external funding to expand current training provision, or to extend it into to new 'markets'. Similarly, while the use of ICT in the delivery of computer-mediated distance learning may require ICT skills for learners and educators as prerequisites, it is does not appear to be an inevitable consequence of those skills being available. For example, concerns over equity have caused at least one partner organisation to be cautious about moving to base distance learning solely on ICT.

ICT as a topic of training

The training activities of ETUE-net II (as with its predecessor ETUE-net I) sought primarily to address training in the use of ICTs, contextualised for trade unionists. This training was conceived as primarily technical training, progressing from introductory Internet use through to the production of Web pages. A specifically trade union dimension was given through examples of trade union use of the Internet and through discussion of resource implications as they affect unions. The evaluation highlighted two difficulties with this approach. Firstly, the volume of demand for training (at various different levels of



technical competence) varied among partner organisations. Secondly, and more significantly, as training moved from introductory Internet skills, the educators' perceptions of what the Internet means for their organisation began to diverge substantially in their varied conditions and with their varied priorities.

Comparison of levels demand for ICT training. A little under three quarters (72.5%) of the 91 courses delivered in the project covered introductory topicsⁱⁱⁱ, defined as including all or almost all of the topics covered in Module 1 of the transnational training and materials. However, demand for such training was not even across partners. The reported demand for introductory Internet training among the four case organisations can be explained with reference to wider national levels of Internet use. Where domestic Internet access is lowest, in Portugal, union members' access to the Internet is a major difficulty. Establishing a physical infrastructure of local training centres to provide Internet access has been a prerequisite to ICT training for the Portuguese case organisation. At the other extreme, and perhaps more surprisingly, demand from trade union staff, officers and workplace representatives for introductory training, and even some kinds of more technically-based follow-on training, such as Web-authoring, appear already to have been satisfied where overall Internet use is high as in Sweden (despite the Swedish case organising primarily among 'blue collar' workers, where levels of Internet use might have been expected to be lower). Table 1 below summarises the reported demand for introductory training in the four case organisations and national levels of Internet uptake.

Table 1: Introductory training needs and national Internet diffusion

	Internet Diffusion Proactive International (2000)	Reported Introductory Internet Training Needs
Sweden	65.2%	No demand either for introductory or follow-on training.
Denmark	54%	Introductory training will be continued over the next year, though maybe nearing 'bottom of the barrel'.
Austria	39.7%	Introductory training has been well-supported and will continue over the next year.
Portugal	11.4%	Emphasis on access as well as introductory training, through network of satellite centres.



Comparison of the nature and content of ICT training. While many basic Internet skills appear relatively generic, there is inevitably a need in a project such as ETUE-net to localise training and materials. In addition to the translation of materials into partner organisations' languages, adaptations were also required to take account of technological variations, for example the different Web browsers, email clients and conferencing systems used by partners. However, the nature and content of the delivered training, particularly the follow-on training originally conceived in the content of transnational training Module 2, diverged rather more substantially. This divergence can be seen primarily in content but also, to a lesser extent also in the organisation of the training. Module 2 was originally designed to cover Web-authoring and electronic publishing issues for trade unions. However, among the courses actually delivered, three broad groups of training courses can be distinguished:

- Web design and authoring: 13 of the 91 (14%) courses covered the Web authoring and design issues (including issues associated with the commissioning and managing of Web sites) originally envisaged as the 'next step' once participants had acquired introductory skills. The second transnational module and the associated materials specifically addressed these issues.
- Subject- (or practice-) specific networked information search and handling skills: 8 of the 91 courses (9%) addressed more advanced information presentation and Internet searching techniques, including compiling collections of links to Internet resources in specific subject domains (e.g. European Monetary Union; Norway and international trade unions, politics & education). In one case, this training was implemented for a specific pre-existing network of trade unionists concerned with the domain.
- Preparation for participation in computer-mediated distance learning: in 17 of the 91 (19%) courses, training was at least partly contextualised as preparation for participation as for participation in later computer-mediated distance learning. This is discussed in more detail later in this paper.



Looking at the case organisations (summarised in Table 2 below), two - the Austrian and the Danish organisations - covered Web authoring, though in different contexts. For the Austrian organisation, the target audience comprised trade union works councillors, with the Web presented as a tool for communicating with members. Related to this, and following on from experience of workplace dispute over ICT use, ways of negotiating access to corporate networks for trade union communication represented a second major theme in this training. Additional Web-design courses were arranged in response to demand expressed during the introductory training by the participating works councillors and shop stewards. The Danish case organisation also addressed Web authoring in their follow-on training, aimed at a target audience of national officers of affiliated unions responsible for maintaining web sites. Many of these unions are small, some with as few as 5,000 members nationally. Limited IT resources have meant that in many cases non-specialists have assumed responsibility for the management of the national union Web sites. The follow-on training, organised in a workshop format, provided an arena for less experienced Web authors to share problems and ideas with more experienced Web designers from larger unions. It also provided an opportunity to discuss possible future joint developments where resources may be pooled. This relatively technical approach to training has also been facilitated by the overlap of technical and educational staff which, while enabling a high level of technical content may also have encouraged conceptualisation of Internet training as primarily a technical issue. However, the issues raised in these workshops addressed organisational as well as technical issues, particularly that of editorial control of the Web page content and its relationship with unions' existing media and editorial procedures.



Table 2: Summary of audience organisation and content of training in case organisations

	Audience	Organisation	Content
Austria	Works council members and shop stewards	3-day face to face	Introduction to Web publishing; Designing a Works Council Web Page; union access to/use of company networks; organising for network access in the workplace. Examples of workers council intranet pages .
Denmark	National officers of affiliates responsible for maintaining Web pages.	2-day face to face + 1-day workshop to establish network of union web-masters.	Developments to date. Future plans in confederation and confederation's network; Future plans for the affiliates. Role of the web-masters in the unions. Issues with the role of the web-master. Software.
Portugal	All training was 'introductory', including preparation for subsequent distance learning		
Sweden	Workplace reps & trainers	3-day face to face	Internet information search and handling techniques; topic-related information resources.

The Swedish case organisation reconsidered initial plans for training in Web-authoring, after reports from regional officers indicated that there was insufficient demand: those members who wanted the skills already felt they had them. The training was subsequently reframed to assist the development of a network of workplace representatives and trainers which had already formed to examine issues relating to European Monetary Union - at the time a major issue of debate within the Swedish partner organisation. The follow-on training allowed network members to develop collections of online resources that could be used to inform this debate. The technical component of the training included information presentation skills as well as Internet use. For the Portuguese, the emphasis remained with introductory training, seen as contributing to building a 'telematic culture' in the confederation.. The training contributed to a wider programme of activity by preparing participants for subsequent involvement in computer-mediated distance learning courses. Plans had been prepared for future vocational training in Web site authoring and computer programming.



The pattern of training highlights the varying contexts and views of the relation between education, technology and organisation among partners. At an introductory level, the divergence of the training as actually delivered can be viewed as necessary localisation of fairly generic sets of skills to particular environments. As training provision has moved beyond this, however, the training priorities have varied quite substantially between organisations. These technologies appear differently and require different patterns of skills among partners, varying for example, between more sophisticated Web development techniques in one case and bargaining skills relating to technology access in another. Rather than encouraging a convergence of ways of working, as is frequently suggested in the literature on Internet use, the training issues associated with its use appear to have diverged quite early.

ICTs and the delivery of trade union and worker education

Potentially, distance learning offers opportunities to trade unions by extending the reach of education activities both geographically, to those remote from existing education facilities, and socially, for example to potential learners unable to attend conventional trade union education because of 'atypical' work arrangements or caring commitments. Given increasing difficulty in members getting access to paid time off for conventional union education (Miller & Stirling, 1997) it seems likely that there will be increasing demand for distance learning from those in more 'conventional', unionised workplaces also.

Although not the focus of the ETUE-net II project, interest in using ICT in the delivery of trade union and worker education has emerged as a major issue for many of the partner organisations, and one which several partner organisations have sought to use their participation in this project to develop further. At the start of the project, eight of the twenty partner organisations reported using ICT in the delivery of training. Six of the partners were simultaneously involved in a parallel project exploring computer-mediated distance learning in trade unions (Creanor & Walker, 2000). This interest was reflected in ETUE-net II in two ways:



- One partner delivered their introductory ICT training by distance learning, as part of wider online courses on topics such as civic studies;
- Seven partner organisations ran a total of 17 courses (19% of project courses) either wholly or partly as a part of preparing for participation either as tutors or learners in future computer-mediated distance learning activities. For learners, this training introduced both general Internet skills and the particular virtual learning environments used by partner organisations. For tutors preparing to deliver distance learning, the training included topics such as facilitating on-line conferences for educational purposes.

Of the four case organisations two had substantial involvement in distance learning prior to the ETUE-net II project. The ways in which these organisations have approached CMDL are substantially different, however. The focus of the Portuguese partners is primarily (though not exclusively) on using computer-mediated distance learning (CMDL) to extend the reach of vocational training. As with their conventionally-delivered training, the distance learning aims to increase employment skills among a primary audience comprised of individual unemployed workers and workers in SMEs. The distance learning is organised through a dedicated national centre, with financial support from national government and through various European Union education and training programmes. Delivery of the distance learning relies on physical access to the union distance learning conferencing systems provided by the local access centres.

The Swedish case organisation is among the most experienced trade union organisations in using ICT to support distance learning, having been experimenting for over a decade^{iv}, working closely with one of the Swedish Folk Highschools. While most training is conducted conventionally, ICT is used significantly, particularly in university-level trade union courses where it is used alongside face to face training in 'combined mode' courses. Currently, ICT is being used as part of an attempted strategic rethinking of the role trade union education, discussed in the next section.

Neither of the remaining two case organisations were offering computer-mediated distance learning at the start of the ETUE-net II project. Eighteen months later, one organisation (Austrian) had developed



plans to include distance learning as part of the national training programme, and the other (Danish) had established a working party to explore the topic further with affiliates.

Despite this growing interest, however, it is becoming clear that the use of ICT in distance learning can be problematic. Initial reports from those partners who had experience of distance learning prior to participation in ETUE-net II has been mixed. While, for example, one Italian partner reported little difficulty in motivating learners to join and participate in distance learning, others (for example in Norway and Denmark) have reported significantly more difficulty in involving learners. The experiences reported by partners in ETUE-net II, and the experience of other national and transnational distance learning initiatives to have highlighted a range of pedagogic and organisational issues, including variable learner motivation, provision of technical support for learners, tutor training, and systems development (ETUDE, 2000; Salt, 2000; Creanor forthcoming).

ICTs in the mediation of changing relationships between education and organisation

Discussion of the role of ICTs in the changing nature of post-compulsory education is widespread, particularly in higher education (e.g. Laurillard, 1993). These have highlighted some of the institutional changes that are currently underway in some educational organisations, and appear imminent in many others. Similarly, the ways in which ICTs are associated with organisational change in business organisations have been widely discussed. The evidence of the ETUE-net project is that at least some confederations are now exploring how ICTs can help to integrate education and training into wider trade union organisation.

Since the late 1990s, the education department of the Swedish case organisation have been developing a view of using ICT in "*transforming education into something else*". The centrepiece of their educational use of ICT is a large scale project which aims to explore the reorganisation of trade union education strategically, making it more responsive to emerging learning needs at the local/workplace levels and to the organisational development needs of affiliates. As an officer of the confederation described it:



"What we are trying to do is ask the question of how could you find IT based or methods with the support of new techniques, new technology to underpin and support trades union work and workplace based developments. It could be how to develop the trade union functioning, it could be work organisation development and so on. And the thing that we are supposed to support must be part of implicit needs of the local union or the employees at the workplace. It's very much of finding a way of doing this on the distance."

Rather than simply using ICT to remove barriers to access, the aim is re-evaluate the role and nature of trade union education in response to individually and collectively articulated learning (in the widest sense) needs in the workplace. The outcomes of this in any particular workplace may include, for example, vocational training, trade union organisational development or research and training relate to a specific issue. The response may be organised by a mix of face to face and computer-mediated methods.

Others are also examining the role of ICT and education in a more strategic light. One Italian confederation, for example, has similarly been making extensive use of ICT as a tool to support strategic attempts at the transformation of the confederation into a 'learning organisation' (Biliotti & De Sanctis, 1997).

Such approaches potentially change the relationship between traditional areas of trade union education and of workplace organising. At an educational level, they require a re-evaluation of the pedagogy of trade union education to enable a participative and technically mediated practice which addresses both individual and organisational learning needs - a process which is evidently problematic (Köpsén, 2000). They do, however, provide potentially new ways of involving trade union members in shared activities which can contribute directly to their individual and collective learning in the workplace. This collective learning is itself a form of workplace organisation, and may influence both existing workplace organisational forms, and the relationship between the local and other levels of union organisation. These developments also suggest other union functions, most immediately those directly



concerned with information such as researchers, journalists and documentalists may be involved in the renegotiation of roles, but this may also extend to other union officers and union structures.

These more far-reaching views are not, however, inevitable outcomes of the use of ICT in trade union education: other confederations with apparently similar levels of experience of using ICT in education have chosen alternative approaches. These initiatives do, however, offer important visions of ICT use in trade unions.

Discussion & Conclusions

This discussion has sketched out three approaches to using ICT in trade education: ICT as subject of study, ICT as means of delivery of education, and ICT being used as tool in the transformation of the organisation and function of trade union education. These are not suggested as stages through which worker education organisations have passed or will necessarily pass in the future, but as complementary views of how ICT can interact with trade union education. Particular instances of educational ICT use will be the outcome of a range of interacting social, organisational, economic and personal factors (see Kling, 2000). Given the nature of the ETUE-net II project, this can be most clearly seen here in the way ICT is conceived as a topic of study. In following the case organisation's implementation of ICT training we can identify a number of factors which have influenced the nature of the training including: organisational size, the location of education and training activities in the organisation (and particularly the relationship between technologists and educators), availability of external resources, industrial relations settings and histories, and the wider level of Internet uptake in national settings (Walker, forthcoming, 2001). Also, while not directly visible in the project evaluation activities, it may be reasonable to assume that the nature of the training and the involvement in the project will have been the subject of internal negotiation within each partner over the way the resources made available through participation might be used.

The use of ICT in mediating organisational change in the function in education may have significant effects on trade union education and organisation more widely. It may also prove to be the area of greatest diversity among confederations and worker education organisations, where the technological



affordances interact with other influences in confederations and unions working in very different industrial relations settings. Given this, generalised predictions on the outcomes of ICT use are probably unwise. However, transnational networks may prove important in contributing to the learning processes that will necessarily be involved. While the variety of settings immediately poses problems for projects such as ETUE-net II conceived of primarily in terms of technology diffusion. The range of contexts means that a single model of training and technology is unlikely to be appropriate, particularly as they each change across time. An alternative approach, drawing on ideas of situated learning (Wenger, 1998) might focus instead on facilitating exchange of ideas and practice between diverse communities of practice within wider constellations of practice of trade union education (Walker & Creanor, 2000).

Finally, the experiences of the ETUE-net II project caution against a tendency to technological determinism in some accounts of trade union use of ICT, where progress is measured against particular models of the 'cyberunion'. The ways in which ICT training has been conceived and implemented within this project illustrate varied organisational responses negotiated in diverse contexts.



ⁱ ETUCO is one of the training agencies of the ETUC.

ⁱⁱ The subsequent training was 'local' in an organisational sense, in that each organisation delivered subsequent training to its own constituency using its own resources. Geographically, this training was frequently national in scope, though in countries in which there was more than one partner organisation there were generally more than one distinct national training programmes.

ⁱⁱⁱ The organisation of the courses varied enormously: for example, in some cases, both introductory and follow-on training were carried out in a single course of up to 5 days duration. In other cases, the topics were covered in separate courses for different groups of learners.

^{iv} The organisation's involvement in distance learning actually began in the 1920s with the introduction of correspondence courses. Following pilot programmes, inclusion of computer-mediated distance learning in mainstream learning activities began in the mid-1990s.



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