Review of *Union Learning Representatives: Challenges and Opportunities* Edited by Alex Alexandrou (Routledge)

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This book first appeared as a collection of papers in a special issue of the *Journal of In-Service Education* (volume 34, number 4) devoted to presenting research on union learning representatives (ULRs). It is a welcome development to see the collection now published in book form, and my understanding is that this is evidence in itself of increased interest in the work of ULRs. I was particularly interested in the collection therefore because it relates directly to my recent professional role. Until May 2010 I worked for a major union in the UK, representing members in a wide range of educational roles (principally teachers, but support staff also) and working across all education sectors (from pre-school to further and higher education). The union has a strong commitment to supporting and developing its ULRs, and my role related specifically to this objective. In short, my work was to develop the union's ULRs as part of its commitment to building the union and supporting members. As a union organiser I was interested in scholarly work, but in particular as it helped me to understand and develop my role. Academic work can be intrinsically interesting, but its real value emerges from its ability to reflect, engage with, and develop practical activity 'on the ground'. This is how I approached the papers presented.

This is a book that is trying to tell the story and life of a ULR and, on the whole, it delivers on that. There is some narrative, but on reflection and after some time away from the book, I am unsure whether I have remembered that story. What I do remember is the large amount of repetition on the birth of the ULR, but very little on the child or adulthood. Putting together a collection of papers by a diverse range of authors, and to make that book tell that story in a way that is cohesive and 'makes sense' must be difficult and I can appreciate that the editor has had some success in framing the book this way. However, I came away from the book overall with a feeling of a lack of coherence, struggling to gain some real insight that could help me make sense of my own personal experiences as a union organiser working with ULRs. Perhaps this a feature of a book based on papers submitted to a journal, rather than written for a single volume book *per* se. However, as a reader this was a source of some frustration. That said, there are some excellent papers that work as individual pieces or part of a smaller group, and I would

highlight two of these which, although very different, I felt moved away from rather dry analysis to something I could work with and which spoke to my experiences.

Firstly, the contribution by Sian Moore and Cilla Ross (*The evolving role of union learning representatives*) on the evolving role of the union learning rep is an excellent example of what practitioners need from a practical angle. It is a thoughtfully articulated piece that showed relevancy and true understanding of what it means to be a ULR. I could relate to the work, and I could see where my own work fitted into wider themes that ULRs are experiencing. To this end, I would look forward to reading a more expanded piece on this by them as it seems that with some more examples, they could have covered the title of the volume comprehensively by themselves. If you want to know what it's like working with, or being a ULR, this is the 'go-to' article!

On the other hand, Howard Stevenson's paper (*Challenging the orthodoxy: union learning representatives as organic intellectuals*) offered a more refreshing conceptual note, questioning the very notion of ULRs within the professional based unions, an area of debate lacking in our general practitioner discourse. My plea for academic material that provides me with practical value is not a plea for only 'practical research'. The value of academic work often lies in the ideas it presents, and the way that it can challenge us to think differently. When we are busy in the day-to-day realities we look to 'academics' to help us see the bigger picture, or a different picture. Stevenson's paper did this, and in a sea of practical 'what's going on' pieces, this is an area of research and thinking that should be developed more.

In summary, the book gives readers a good overall understanding of ULRs and the wider union learning community. It makes a valuable contribution to the academic literature, and wider conversations about developments in industrial relations. However, as someone working 'on the ground', and dealing on a daily basis with the issues raised by this book I did not come away feeling there were either enough practical ideas or conceptual challenge. Academic work has much to offer in this field, as we seek to further develop the roles of ULRS, but I fear the academic community needs to work a little harder to present its work in a way that makes it relevant and practical to those in the frontline.

[1] For more on the subject of dwindling numbers of tenure-track jobs, see: Lewin, Tamar. "At Colleges, Humanities Job Outlook Gets Bleaker." *New York Times* 18 December 2009, New York: A22. Print; Golden, Serena. "Bleak News on the Front Lines." *Inside Higher Ed* 4 January 2010: n. page. Web. 28 Jan 2010. <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/01/04/jobs>; Jaschik, Scott. "No Entry." *Inside Higher Ed* 4 January 2010: n. page. Web. 28 Jan 2010. <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/01/04/nojobs>. For a first-person take on the situation, written by a visiting assistant professor at Clemson, see the following blog entry: Croxall, Brian, "The Absent Presence: Today's Faculty." December 28, 2009. Web. 28 Jan 2010. <http://www.briancroxall.net>.

[2] Bousquet, Marc. "Introduction: Your Problem is My Problem." *How the University Works*. Pages 1-2. All other citations of this work will be made parenthetically in the body of the text.

[3] Sawyer, Ben. "Serious Games: Improving Public Policy Through Game-Based Learning and Simulation. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2001. Page 28. Also cited in Bousquet, *How the University Works*, page 72.

[4] Trachtenberg, Stephen Joel. "Putting the Ph.D.'s to Work." *Inside Higher Ed* 21 January 2010: n. page. Web. 28 Jan 2010.
<http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2010/01/21/trachtenberg>.