1. Introduction

Managing conflict in the workplace has long been acknowledged as a key challenge for all organisations (Costantino, 1996; ACAS, 2006; Ridley-Duff and Bennett, 2011). Similarly, the value of promoting learning in the workplace and, in the context of this article, specifically through partnership between trade unions and their management, has increasingly gained justifiable recognition (Shelley, 2007; Stuart et al., 2010a). What is less well researched is the potential efficacy of learning in also reducing conflict in the workplace. The aim of this article, drawing on work undertaken for TUC Unionlearn, is to critically analyse the views and experiences of a cross section of managers and trade union representatives on this question who have worked together on a number of particularly successful learning projects in North West England.

Furthermore, contextually it is of note that, despite the change in UK government in May 2010 and more significantly a change in employee relations policy and strategy in contrast to the previous government (BIS, 2011), an on-going commitment to the Union Learning Fund demonstrates that the added value that union-led learning brings to the economy continues to be recognised (Union learning fund, 2012). The key objective of the article is to establish the degree to which such programmes of learning not only increase the individual and collective knowledge and skills of organisations but also tangibly reduce the level of conflict in the workplace. It is rightly suggested that some in the union movement see learning as less of a priority when other more pressing employee relations issues arise (McIlroy, 2008). Conversely, it might be argued that the employee relations climate could be worse still if not for the activities of promoters of learning. The study was approached with these key questions in mind.

The article is based on face to face interviews, and a smaller number of telephone interviews, with thirty-two management and trade union representatives in order to gain their views on the impact of learning within a cross-sectoral sample of organisations. The article is structured to first offer an overview of current research and thinking on learning and conflict in the workplace. This is then followed by a discussion on the chosen methodology and a presentation of the findings. The article closes with a critical reflection on those findings. The article is framed in consideration of two key research questions: How does union-led learning impact specifically on individual conflict? How does union-led learning impact specifically on collective conflict?

2. Literature review

Recent employee relations research has generated valuable insight into the strengths and limitations of management and union partnerships and their impact on conflict (Oxenbridge and Brown, 2002; Martinez Lucio and Stuart, 2005). Furthermore, Munro and Rainbird (2004) have noted more specifically the ‘distinctive form’ of the learning partnership in terms of shared objectives focussed primarily on employee development. The aim of this article is to build on this knowledge by considering how learning partnerships may also reduce individual and collective industrial action in the workplace. To that end, this section first considers some key aspects of organisational conflict in terms of its causes and consequences, before turning to a critical review of the current literature on the nature and influence of union-led learning initiatives in the UK.

Causes and consequences of conflict

Conflict is often about different perspectives and that if both parties can be assisted to better understand the other's perspective this may result in the resolution of that conflict. Similarly, if the parties in dispute can gain a better understanding of the other's interests, the conflict resulting from those different interests may be reconciled to the satisfaction of both parties (Costantino,1996; Lipsky, 2007) . It can be argued that it is the task of managers and unions to devise and utilise processes, practices and a working relationship that will aid the management of this conflict in the workplace (ACAS, 2006, 2011). In terms of this article, the learning agenda is seen potentially as one such option.

Workplace conflict can arise for many reasons. For instance, implementing change in terms of work organisation, roles and responsibilities without prior consultation with the worker involved can lead to an individual feeling aggrieved and thus in conflict with management; or could lead to a collective grievance if the action has affected a group of workers (Ridley-Duff and Bennett, 2011). Such actions can have a damaging effect on employee relations in the workplace, leading to workers' reaction being both overt and covert in nature. For writers like Marchington, regular 'downward communications' that inform staff so that they are more likely to accept management plans' should be a standard element of 'good management practice' (2001:235).These processes could include: one to one discussions with individuals, team briefings or the use of collective channels when appropriate.

However, if channels like collective bargaining or consultation committees are not utilised when available to discuss, and when appropriate negotiate on, the reasons for management actions this can lead to conflict. There are a number of other potential causes of conflict in the workplace that it is important to consider; for instance, poor management skills, style of management, perceived lack of promotion opportunities or development and poor personal relationships between staff or with their manager (Watson, 2006). Critics rightly note that downsizing, and in particular the poor management of redundancy, is also a potential cause of conflict (Redman and Wilkinson, 2009; Ashman, 2012). This is certainly so if not just the implications of resultant job losses but also the rationale and 'fairness' of the overall process is not made clear to the workforce, both to those leaving the organisation and to 'survivors' of the process (Redman and Wilkinson, 2009). In general, if clear policies and procedures are not in place with respect to all elements of managing the employment relationship then this can lead to uncertainty for all parties which again can lead to conflict (ACAS, 2006; Saundry and Jones, 2012).

A number of writers have usefully highlighted the consequences of industrial conflict, both in a collective and individual sense (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004; Rollinson and Dundon, 2007). The outcomes of collective conflict are various but generally more visible. At their most extreme, it can result in the withdrawal of collective labour in the form of the strike. Less extreme, but arguably no less damaging to the organisation is the slow-down of work through 'work to rule' action or overtime bans. There are also the less visible incidences of 'industrial action' that can be taken by the individual. Kersley et al. (2006) in their analysis of the 2004 workplace employment relations survey identify key 'potential indicators of discontent' reported by respondents to the survey. They note that, 'studies have clearly indicated how absenteeism and resignations may be used by employees as alternative means of expressing discontent when …[other forms]… of expression are either unavailable or are less attractive' (ibid:230). Similarly, Dunn and Wilkinson (2002) highlight the growing

realisation within organisations of the damaging effects of a lack of effective management of staff absence. Crucially individual conflict can result in either action being taken by that individual or conversely increased pressure being put on the worker. In this sense, sickness absence may not always be a choice.

Such conflict can cause individuals to feel ignored, harassed, bullied or discriminated against and can lead to a severe degradation of their quality of life. This in turn can have an adverse effect on their health and well-being. Vakola and Nikolaou (2005) identify poorly managed change initiatives as a cause of stress. Significantly, organisations who do not have effective harassment and bullying policies and procedures can leave themselves open to improvement notices under current UK health and safety legislation (HSE/ACAS, 2009). It is of note in the discussion that follows that TUC Unionlearn had recently developed tablet software designed specifically to helping learners also address issues of stress and well-being in the workplace.

Promoting learning through partnership with the trade unions

Arguably one of the most successful initiatives by the union movement in last fifteen years has been the development of a network of union learning representatives (ULRs), trained to give advice and guidance to employees and employers in the areas of training and development and lifelong learning (Moore, 2009; Stuart et al., 2010b). It is an initiative that has arisen partly in the context of the continuing pressure on the UK government and employers to find supply-side solutions to the increasing demand for the new and updated skills needed to remain globally competitive (Stuart, 2007). As part of a government-sponsored strategy for learning partnerships, dedicated union learning funds (ULF) for Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales have been in operation for over a decade to allow unions to bid for resources to initiate and run learning projects.

Reviews of the ULF have reported many positive outcomes in terms of learner engagement and benefits to the organisation through improved productivity (Stuart et al, 2010a, 2010b). Furthermore, Wallis and Stuart (2007) usefully capture key 'barriers' and 'organisation facilitators' (2007: 22), such as 'high trust' and 'stable industrial relations', with respect to learning outcomes. Specifically in relation to managing conflict, Stuart et al. also note the additional but 'less reported' outcomes of ULF projects that have particular significance for the discussion that follows:

> The findings are equally positive for employee outcomes and industrial relations matters. Around four out of ten employers claim that union learning has contributed to an increase in staff morale (42 per cent) and employee commitment (39 per cent). Turning to the wider industrial relations environment, the findings offer strong support for the contribution union learning can make to improving levels of trust between management and unions (42 per cent) (2010b:17).

This initiative, however, has not been without its critics in terms of both delivery and, it is argued, 'the weaknesses inherent in a supply-side strategy for vocational training and skill development' (Stuart and Cooney, 2008: 347). Furthermore, for some commentators, a partnership strategy built around learning consigns unions to a more junior role in terms of the balance of power with employers. McIlroy (2008), for instance, is highly critical of the notion of workplace learning in its current form as a means of union revitalisation. He argues

that the evidence available suggests rather that the TUC is reduced to the role of 'state agent' for learning, and the notion of social partnership is mere rhetoric whilst any legal requirement for training remains absent from the collective bargaining agenda (ibid.: 297). More recently, Keep and James (2012) have been critical of the current strategy of work-based learning in the UK. They question the quality of the training available, facilitated to a degree through the union learning route, to really equip workers with new skills and knowledge that could make a tangible difference to their working lives. The extent to which the ULR role can specifically revitalise trade unions has also attracted critical comment in the literature. Hoque and Bacon (2008; 2009) counsel caution in overestimating the influence of the ULR. Their studies found only a weak link between ULR activity and recruitment of new members.

In contrast, Warhurst et al. report that some new ULRs were attracted to the role, 'believing it to involve less confrontation' (2007: 19). They also report that 'there was evidence of ULRs going on to take up other, broader representational roles' (Warhurst et al., ibid.). Likewise, in terms of renewal, recent research suggests that the learning agenda is allowing the unions to build up new partnerships with different bodies and establish some degree of collective bargaining over learning objectives (Stuart and Wallis, 2007). Overall, having gained statutory rights in 2002 (Wallis et al., 2005) the ULR is now well established at union branch level, with unions having clear strategies for recruiting, training, organising and supporting ULRs. Furthermore, recent research has revealed that learning has enabled the unions to utilise these new resources in terms of being better organised to support their members more generally, and so offers an opportunity to revitalise their broader position in collectively representing their members in the workplace (Hollinrake et al., 2008; Heyes and Rainbird, 2011; Findlay and Warhurst, 2011). Stuart et al. (2012) offer the most recent critical review of the efficacy of 'the union-led model of skills development in Britain'. Their findings are particularly valuable in the context of this study in that they specifically identify gains for both employers and unions that could impact on how conflict is subsequently managed in the workplace. Reporting on the views of union project officers, it was found that ULR activities were more integrated into the branch structure and increasingly linked to unions' organising strategies. Furthermore, there had been an increase in workplace representatives' capability and interest in taking up union roles. Significantly, from the employers' perspective, Stuart et al. (2012) note that employers reported increases of 46% in general consultation and 40% in negotiation around learning in organisations where union-initiated learning was taking place. These studies will be valuable in critically assessing the findings that are reported below.

3. Methodology

An initial study of existing TUC project reports, and discussions with officers at TUC Unionlearn in the North West, helped identify a number of potential case study organisations and union projects which were seen as representative of successful learning partnerships in the region. The sample was subsequently decided in part on the basis of negotiating access to the organisation. For instance, a couple of highly successful local authorities declined to be involved, the researcher suspects, on the grounds of 'research exhaustion' because they had already featured in a number of TUC and other reports. Nonetheless, the organisations willing to participate still allowed the researcher to study a sample of organisations from the public and private sector and also representing both large and medium sized firms. It is of note however as in any case study research that the extent of generalisation of the findings

must be treated with caution. The issue of the sample choice is critically reflected on further in the concluding section.

From this initial research, the subsequent study was based on semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of thirty-two managers and union learning co-ordinators from the case study organisations and ULF projects, and union project workers and TUC officers who have supported those organisations and projects. The majority of meetings were face-to-face with a smaller number conducted by telephone. Interviews averaged an hour in duration. Table 1 gives a breakdown of the respondents.

The choice of respondents in each individual organisation was informed to large degree by the advice of TUC union support officers and project workers from affiliate unions who identified local branch reps and managers that had been a 'key player' in the success of the learning partnership in each respective organisation. Therefore, training managers, branch secretaries and lead ULRs, for instance, all figure prominently in the choice of respondents. With respect to the choice of ULF projects for the research, the senior TUC union support officer identified a number of potential research partners in the region from which the final two were chosen. This choice again was partly on the basis of access, but also because their respective projects offered a valuable insight into learning partnerships across sectors and with respect to a number of employers in those sectors.

In terms of data collection, all TUC officers and full-time union project workers were interviewed face to face to obtain a more detailed understanding of learning initiatives across sectors within the region. In addition, the TUC officers and union project workers interviewed were also currently supporting each of the five organisations and so were able to offer an in-depth account from their perspective of the nature of each of the learning partnerships. Furthermore, with the exception of two managers, all of the 'key players' in the five participating organisations were interviewed face to face. It can be seen from table one that at a minimum the lead local rep and their management counterpart were interviewed and their views and experiences captured in depth. Because of location, staff from the two ULF projects were interviewed by phone but it is strongly felt that this did not detract from the quality of the data gathered.

Insert table 1 here

All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. The interview data were analysed through the use of template analysis (King, 2004). This process entailed the construction of an initial template, whereby early categorisation could be made based on the initial questions put to the respondents. Key areas of discussion with respondents included:

- The causes and consequences of conflict
- The state of employee relations pre and post establishing the learning agreement
- The type of learning initiatives taking place in the organisation
- The impact of learning on individual conflict in the organisation
- The impact of learning on collective issues around conflict in the organisation

In the findings and analysis section, in addition to a critical discussion of the key themes arising out of that analysis, the reader is offered where appropriate verbatim contributions from respondents. This was in order to highlight specific examples to support the general views of participants but also to seek to capture the richness of passion and commitment expressed by the majority of the respondents to this research. The overall research objective then was to establish the degree to which successful union and management learning partnerships also have an impact on reducing conflict in the workplace. This led to the consideration of two key research questions:

- How does union-led learning impact specifically on managing individual conflict?
- How does union-led learning impact specifically on managing collective conflict?

4. Findings

The context

Despite the Government's on-going commitment to the Union Learning Fund (Union learning fund, 2012), most union respondents to this study reported that in order to successfully maintain that financial support a key element of the learning agenda was to achieve clearly identifiable outcomes in terms of members' learning and its impact on themselves, their organisations, the economy and increasingly their communities. In that sense all interviewees stressed the importance of a clear learning strategy for their union and their organisations with equally clear benefits in terms of the 'bottom line'. This imperative to justify funding and achieve targets did not, as the discussion that follows indicates however, pre-empt for the majority of union respondents the scope to derive other benefits from the learning agenda, and thus supports recent research findings (Heyes and Rainbird, 2011; Findlay and Warhurst, 2011; Stuart et al, 2012). Unsurprisingly, the current economic climate and the pressures it put on organisations was also to the fore in most discussions. In the public sector in particular, potential causes of conflict were the current round of staff cuts and work reorganisation in general. In this context, all respondents cited the key role of learning when dealing with the consequences of economic pressures, primarily in managing larger scale redundancies. This is an area of potential individual and collective conflict that figures significantly in the discussion that follows.

Crucially, in terms of understanding the foundation of the learning partnerships reported on in this section, all organisations had a learning agreement covering time off for ULRs, the support available for learners and the overall ethos and practice of the project. Furthermore, all lead ULRs had dedicated 'buy out' to undertake their learning role and all organisations had, what Perrett, and Martinez Lucio (2008) identify as a key component of effective union learning project, a functioning and well-resourced learning centre to supporting learners in house. As Stuart et al (2012) also stress in their review of the efficacy of ULF projects this type of foundation is a pre-requisite for a successful learning partnership. The question was to what extent did this also provide the basis for better conflict management?

The potential impact on individual conflict in the workplace

Unsurprisingly, incidents of conflict traversed for respondents the individual and collective. As Blyton and Turnbull argue, 'while organised conflict is seen to be both formal and collective, and unorganised conflict both informal and individual, [in reality] there is a

considerable grey area in between' (2004: 351). Nonetheless, in the context of developing a model of promoting learning amongst sites where his union had recognition, the following contribution from a regional officer is instructive of the individual issue of conflict and the impact of learning captured in the research:

> I think this will be a good model it's improved morale your productivity is going to go up, there's going to be less sick time. Hopefully there's going to be less conflict in regards to people being disciplined for doing things wrong because they might not have understood instructions and things like that. So these are the benefits obviously from our perspective, we are helping our members out, we are empowering them

A significant finding from the research is that learning and development have a clear impact on pre-empting potential performance issues for individuals. It is argued that this can happen in a number of ways. One TUC officer's view was typical of the project workers and support officers generally in that the ULR can sometimes be the first point of contact for both disciplinary and learning issues:

> I think one of the things in there is that before ..[something].. escalates..They might not have gone to the stewards but they have come to the union learning rep and said 'actually this is happening and I don't know what to do'. Then the union learning rep has gone 'okay then let's go to the [steward].. and sort it out. Let's see what it is or what is happening'.

This articulated 'expansion' of the ULR role supports Findlay and Warhurst's (2011) and Stuart et al.'s (2012) argument that the learning agenda was broadening resources available to the union branch in supporting members. More specifically in the context of discipline and performance management issues in the workplace, the following contribution was evidence of an outcome of learning not really captured in other research to date:

> [It's] to do with …..employees not having the right skills to do the job which then ends up with them not being able to perform properly which then puts them in a position where the manager then pulls them up for you know the job, for performance issues. …….I think a learning avenue has a real effect on performance issues which [otherwise] brings conflict (Union ULF1 project worker).

The value of identifying and addressing a member's learning needs to pre-empt later formal competence procedures was cited by many of the union representatives interviewed. Similarly, the value of regular appraisals was also a key theme for addressing potential individual conflict through learning and development identified by all respondents. Discussion with a number of union representatives highlighted many good examples of how learning can also address potential discrimination against individuals or groups. For instance, respondents cited occasions were ULRs had agreed sign language for 'people that were deaf on the shop floor' to improve health and safety provision for a disadvantaged group. Other union reps reported learning support for migrant workers as a valuable strategy for reducing workplace conflict between groups. The link between learning, discrimination and personal conflict is particularly well highlighted by the following contribution from a local authority union rep:

> I had one lad who did seem to have a lot of conflict with management and when we were looking at the numeracy and literacy he had a problem on his literacy….. I mean he has only just been found this lad actually but it looks like he might be dyslexic… The supervisor in question now does speak to the staff as well as handing any paperwork out and it has been dealt with better and this lad in question is having less conflict with management.

Examples of the value of individual and group learning support to members are well captured in the current union learning literature (Warhurst et al., 2007; Wallis and Stuart, 2007; Hollinrake et al., 2008). It is the link, however, to also reducing individual workplace conflict that is it is argued is new knowledge of the union learning agenda. Larger scale redundancy programmes were also a regular topic of discussion with respondents in the context of conflict and learning. Nonetheless, the majority of the interviewees from both management and the union side were agreed that learning can impact positively in managing potential individual disputes. In particular, and as argued in previous literature on redundancy (Redman and Wilkinson, 2009), supporting members through retraining for redeployment was seen as a key outcome of the learning agenda at all those sites faced with downsizing. As the union co-ordinator at the NHS trust reported:

> I mean we've got staff now who are on the At Risk register and are managing to secure employment as a healthcare assistant. I'm just signing up at the minute clinical healthcare support apprenticeships, so they're all signing up to do the Level Two because it's giving them that expertise. I had one member of staff who's just, her job ceased to exist. She's [now] got a job as a pharmacy assistant, she's just started on the Level Two pharmacy apprenticeship.

A key theme from the findings was the almost universal belief amongst respondents that learning and development are crucial for maintaining and where possible enhancing the employee perception of how they are valued by their employer. This occurred in a number of ways but it was argued if done effectively it could impact on staff motivation and commitment and engender greater trust in the employer, supporting the findings of Stuart et al (2010b). In terms of individual conflict, it was felt that these 'under-valued' workers were thus accorded more recognition and, therefore, less likely to initiate 'unorganised conflict' (Williams and Adam-Smith, 2010: 344). As the lead ULR at the NHS Trust explained in relation to their cleaning staff:

> They got a better knowledge of infection control, and the training they were given made them understand it, and understand the consequences if it wasn't done properly. [This] made them take pride in what they were doing because they were part of the team who were fighting infections, they weren't just the cleaner.

Health and safety is related to both the collective and the individual management of conflict**.** However, well-being and stress, it is often rightly argued, has its focus more typically on the individual (HSE/ACAS, 2009). Crucially, for all union respondents it was legitimate to see stress as a precursor to conflict because it could otherwise cause staff to raise grievances, go

off sick or leave the organisation, and accords with Blyton and Turnbull's (2004) and Rollinson and Dundon's (2007) view key sources of individual conflict. It is of note that TUC Unionlearn had recently also innovatively developed tablet-based 'apps' to help ULRs work with members to identify and address potential stressors in their life as part of the broader learning agenda. As one TUC officer reported, addressing individual conflict can be done very effectively by what we might term a 'learning and lifestyle approach'.

.

In closing this section, the link between learning and career development was also clearly evident in the data. Supporting earlier findings (Stuart et al., 2010b; Stuart et al., 2012), evidence from this research suggested that increasingly this was seen by all partners as a key aspect of their learning strategy and agreement. A good example was at the food manufacturer, where shop-floor operatives needed to pass a maths and English test to progress to the next grade. Previously, 'failure' left the individual isolated and therefore disillusioned. Both the training manager and the local union officer stressed that the union co-ordinated on-site learning centre now offered employees an opportunity to be coached to prepare for and be better placed to subsequently pass the test.

The potential impact on collective conflict

With respect to the impact on collective conflict, the results of the research support earlier findings from a survey of participants in ULF projects over a number of years that recognised, 'the [significant] contribution union learning can make to improving levels of trust between management and unions' (Stuart et al, 2010b: 17). Both management and the unions in this study generally reported that greater trust developed out of a genuine commitment to learning; as witnessed at all case study sites by the signing up to a learning agreement. In addition, it was felt by the majority of those interviewed that suspicion on both sides based on previous experiences were assuaged by agreeing to work to a 'common agenda' and 'shared objectives', supporting the findings of Munro and Rainbird (2004).

This was evidenced in a number of key elements of managing collective employment relations which could otherwise have been sources of subsequent conflict. These included promoting better communication and consultation, managing change and dealing with redundancy. Reinforcing the findings of Stuart et al. (2012) and specifically in terms of union organisation, union respondents also reported that a key outcome of the learning agenda was to be better organised generally as a union at the local level and to work better with other partner unions.

As Blyton and Turnbull (2004) rightly argue, conflict can be both individual and collective. This is very much so in terms of negotiation over job losses and redundancy. Despite legal obligation on consultation, often the timing of the decision to downsize or the rationale for that strategy is not shared with the workforce due to poor communication (Ashman, 2012).. In contrast, most union respondents in this study reported how the learning agenda can positively affect communication and, therefore, assist in reducing potential collective conflict. In relation to downsizing and redundancy, and supporting the arguments put forward by Redman and Wilkinson (2009), evidence suggests it is a key element of collective disputes that learning initiatives by the union can help in part to address.

Project workers from across the TUC and all the unions involved in the research consistently cited the need for early access to workers facing redundancy, and the possibility for that early intervention to then facilitate more options for those workers in terms of retraining, redeployment and assistance with CVs and job searches. As one union project manager reported:

> It's more direct. For example, if a branch secretary or a full time official rings me up and says, 'Fred….We've just had an announcement, there's going to be hundred redundancies, we've got staff that have never done CVs, they've, they've difficulty with literacy, numeracy etc., can you help us?' I don't then have to go running round wondering who I'm going to upset. I'll say, 'Yes'. I'll look at my team's diaries, tell them … Arrange with the branch secretary and full time official, bang, that's it and away it goes (ULF project2).

Furthermore, with management more fully communicating with the union and its members, all respondents consistently stressed the real value of union-led learning initiatives in addressing the broader consequences of downsizing. This manifested itself in two distinct ways. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, making workers redundant is only one of a number of options under downsizing (Redman and Wilkinson, 2009; Ashman, 2012). Redeployment is a key alternative open to management that was identified by respondents as a strategy strengthened by the intervention of union learning reps in the workplace. As the branch secretary at the trust explained in terms of managing what could have become a collective dispute:

> A prime example of why it was necessary to work together in partnership…. Medical records were going to shut completely. There was about 50 odd people working in medical. Now as a result of the technological change all that was going to change, there'd be no need to store the record. It's all stored electronically. So as a result of that their jobs are going to disappear, what do you do with them? Luckily enough there was a lead in time for this, and what it gave both the union and the employer time to do was to sit down and think how we were going to manage that situation. If we'd have done nothing that place would have closed and the staff would have been redundant. So we developed a plan…and that was where retraining [to enable redeployment] was part of that.

From the discussion so far in this and the previous section, it is clear that redundancy is a key element of collective and individual conflict. Evidence suggests that if it is handled and perceived to be handled fairly by staff – and the learning strategy is timely and effectively applied – it can help reduce that conflict. This it may be argued is in terms of those who remain at the company, thus countering the possibility of 'survivor syndrome' (Redman and Wilkinson, 2009). Conversely, staff who leave the organisation feel that they have been fairly treated and supported through the process.

In closing this section, a key overall finding of the study in terms of delivering effective learning outcomes, and in terms of the focus of this study of enhanced management of individual and collective conflict, was the role of 'key players' in the union's learning strategy. The research supports Heyes and Rainbird's (2011) conclusion that the utilisation of

dedicated union learning project workers 'adds value' to the services unions deliver more generally to their members. Similarly, echoing the findings of Wallis and Stuart's earlier ULF evaluation, all the cases in this study were founded on good 'inter-union' relations. This 'stable industrial relations' climate was further facilitated by the 'commitment of key actors', such as training managers and the lead ULRs, who 'shared understanding and goals' and thus developed 'high-trust relationships' in their respective organisations (2007: 22).

Table 2: A summary of the findings

Impact of learning on workplace conflict	**Key findings**
Context for the conflict	• On-going government support for union learning projects • Pressure to deliver learning outcomes • Pressure of current economic climate and in particular job losses
Facilitative nature of the learning partnership	• Based on a learning agreement - Agreed funding arrangements - Time off for lead ULR - Support for learners • Clear joint objectives identified • On-site learning centre • On-going project worker support • Inter-union collaboration • Role of 'key players' in organisation
Managing individual conflict	• Encourages members to share workplace problems with their ULR • Pre-empts performance issues through early intervention in training • Addresses disadvantage • Engenders employee commitment • Promotes well-being • Supports career development
Managing collective conflict	• Facilitates systematic deployment of ULRs to manage redundancy and redeployment • Promotes better trust between partners • Develops inter-union co-operation • Enhances branch organisation

5 Discussion and conclusion

There is an extensive and critical literature on the impact of union-led initiatives with respect to the development of both individual and organisational learning in the workplace (Warhurst et al., 2007; Hollinrake et al., 2008, McIlroy, 2008, Hoque and Bacon, 2008,

2009). Furthermore, earlier discussion in this article has reflected on the many causes and consequences of workplace conflict (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004; Ridley-Duff and Bennett, 2011; Saundry and Jones, 2012). In contrast, the focus of this study has been to assess the degree to which learning initiatives may also have an impact on the managing of conflict in organisations, be that individual or collective disputes.

Reflecting on the summary of the findings in table 2, a number of key outcomes of the research are worthy of reflection. Overall, the findings support earlier research that learning partnerships can have positive outcomes, both in terms of 'staff morale' and 'employee commitment' and in 'improving levels of trust between management and unions' (Stuart et al., 2010b; Stuart et al., 2012). An interesting and important theme to emerge from the findings was that, with respect to individual conflict, learning initiatives can help broaden our understanding of how that conflict can be better managed in practice. The analysis of the findings was able to extend the focus on manifestations of conflict such as absence and resignation to no less important areas of the employment relationship like health and safety, recognition and commitment. A key finding of the research, for instance, was the relevance of addressing employee 'well-being' through learning and lifestyle. The unions and the TUC had extended their remit by helping members to consider broader lifestyle issues that could impact on their well-being and ultimately reduce the pressure and stress in the workplace that can be often associated with individual conflict.

Significantly, union project workers consistently argued that if an employee is supported in identifying their learning needs, be they numeracy, literacy or more technical skills, then they have been able to support that learner in improving and addressing any skills gaps. In terms of individual conflict, this strategy has enabled the ULRs to pre-empt their member otherwise facing performance management issues with their line manager. Furthermore, the majority of respondents maintained that when learning is perceived by the recipient as an acknowledgement of their development needs, and their contribution to the effectiveness of the organisation, this leads to a more motivated employee with 'less gripes' about her employer.

It became clear in the analysis, and is a significant finding of the research, that learning also impacted on collective employee relations in many ways, which included: managing change, better communication, more extensive consultation, managing redundancy, managing redeployment and strategies to address discrimination through learning. In terms of union organisation, findings also indicated that the learning agenda facilitated greater co-operation and less conflict between the different unions, confirming the findings of earlier research (Wallis and Stuart, 2007).

It is of note that whilst the overall value of learning partnerships and their broader contribution to the employee relations climate were clearly recognised by both union and management representatives, the specific focus of this study on individual and collective dispute resolution elicited more detailed responses from the union side. This outcome of the analysis highlights the need for further research using this and other data sources to more fully capture the view of the employer on some of the core learning related issues of conflict management.

Unsurprisingly given the current economic climate and government strategy, a particular challenge reported by most respondents was dealing with downsizing. Discussion revealed

that despite those challenges, utilising the learning agenda had proved useful in both first seeking to redeploy employees through retraining or, if necessary, equipping them with better skills and preparedness if they were forced to seek new work outside the organisation. Crucially, all union representatives reported that when approached in this way, and with full consultation from an early stage by management, the 'worst effects' of downsizing had been easier to manage. Mirroring Redman and Wilkinson's (2009) analysis of downsizing and best practice, evidence suggested that when the learning resources of the union are employed in such a programme, the rationale, selection, communication and management of the overall process, and thus its outcomes, are more likely to be seen as legitimate by the workforce.

In closing, the aim of this article has not been to suggest that learning is in any form a panacea for the conflict that is an inevitable part of any employment relationship, and in that sense the choice of 'willing partners' is a limitation of the study. However, it is argued that given the common aims and objectives that a workplace learning partnership can realise, an important added outcome of that strategy could potentially be less individual and collective conflict within that organisation. Crucially, and in support of recent findings by Stuart et al. (2012) all organisations in this study had learning agreements which it can be argued is a fundamental element for success in any learning partnership**.** Conversely, it is of note that managers participating in this research reported candidly that despite the success of their respective projects, not all their management colleagues were as unreservedly convinced as themselves of the impact of learning on employee relations. Significantly and pragmatically, the projects for a number of management respondents succeeded because senior management 'allowed' it to proceed. Similarly, union reps cautioned that in many unions colleagues still needed convincing of the value of learning above the many other employee relations challenges they faced on behalf of their members. Overall however, all respondents emphasised that learning had made a significant contribution to a better employee relations environment.

Nevertheless, it is still recognised that the case study organisations that figure in this report were chosen because they had established themselves as examples of best practice in the region with respect to union/management co-operation in learning. However, it is this facet of best practice in promoting learning through partnership that, potentially, also offers a template, through a critical reflection on the evidence reported in this research, for its utilisation in a broader agenda of dispute resolution in the workplace. It has been be argued that the balance of power in terms of union influence, despite the current government's support for the ULF, will always favour the employer more when the Labour Party is not in power (Coats, 2012). However, the findings suggest that the potential benefits of learning partnerships may to a degree transcend that inevitable divide. Furthermore, as Milne (2012) rightly argues:

> A generation after Thatcher's assault on the trade unions, they are still treated as dangerous or embarrassing outsiders. In reality, they are not only far and away the largest voluntary organisations in the country, but now the only major area of public life where working class people are properly represented. Their agenda on recovery, jobs, services, inequality, privatisation, public ownership and the

democratisation of economic life is closer to where public opinion is than the main parties' front benches.

Further research is needed to test the findings of this study within and across other unionised sectors. However, the findings of this research indicate that that 'democratic dividend,' with the right support and common strategies, can also find expression in the endeavour of union learning reps across the workplaces of the UK.

References

ACAS (2006), *Managing conflict at work*, ACAS Publications, London.
ACAS (2011), *Mediation explained*, ACAS Publications, London.
Ashman, I. (2012), "A new role emerges in downsizing: Special envoys", *People Management*, September 2012.
Bacon, N & Hoque, K, (2008), *Opening doors to learning. Union learning representative survey report 2008*, London: Unionlearn.

Bacon, N. and Hoque, K. (2009), *The impact of the union learning representative: A survey of ULRs and their employers*, Research paper 9, April 2009, London: Unionlearn.

BIS (2011), *Resolving workplace disputes: Government response to the consultation*, London: Department for Business Innovation and Skills.

Blyton, P. and Turnbull, P. (2004), 3rd Ed., *The dynamics of employee relations*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Coats, D. (2012), "The long road ahead", *New Statesman* supplement, 7-13 September 2012

Dunn, C. and Wilkinson, A. (2002), "Wish you were here: Managing absence", *Personnel Review*, Vol 31 No. 2, pp. 228-246.

Costantino, C. (1996), "Using interest-based techniques to design conflict management systems", *Negotiation Journal*, July 1996, pp. 207-215.

Findlay, P. and Warhurst, C. (2011), "Union learning funds and trade union revitalisation: A new tool in the toolkit", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol 49 No 1, pp. 115-134.
Heyes, J. and Rainbird, H. (2011, "Mobilising resources for union learning: A strategy for revitalisation?", *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol 42 No 6, pp. 565-579.
Hollinrake, A., Antcliff, V. and Saundry, R. (2008), "Explaining activity and exploring experience – Findings from a survey of union learning representatives", *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol 39 No 5, pp. 392-410.

HSE/ACAS (2009), *Stress at work* , HSE publications, London.

Keep, E. and James, S. (2012), "Are skills the answer to bad jobs: Incentives to learn at the bottom end of the labour market", in *Are bad jobs inevitable? Trends, determinants and*

responses to job quality in the Twenty-First Century, Ed Warhurst, C. Carre., Findlay, P. and Tilly, C., Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, UK.

Kersley, B. et al (2006), *Inside the workplace: Findings of the 2004 workplace employment relations survey*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon.

King, N. (2004), "Template analysis", in Cassell, G. and Symon, G. Eds, *Essential guide to qualitative methods in organizational research*, Sage, London.

Lipsky, D. (2007), "Conflict resolution and the transformation of the social contract", *Labor and Employment Relations Association Series Proceedings of the 59th Annual Meeting* January 5–7, 2007, Chicago, Illinois

Marchington, M. (2001), "Employee involvement at work", in *Human Resource Management: A Critical Text* ed J. Storey, Thomson Learning, Mitchum, Surrey.

Martinez Lucio, M. and Stuart, M. (2005). ''Partnership' and the new industrial relations in a risk society', *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol 19 Iss 4, pp. 797-817.

Milne, S. (2012), "The problem with unions is they're not strong enough", *The Guardian* 11th September 2012.

Moore, S. (2009), "Integrating union learning and organising strategies: Case studies of good practice", *Unionlearn Research Paper* No. 8, London, TUC.

Munro, A. and Rainbird, H. (2004), "Opening doors as well as banging tables: An assessment of UNISON/employer partnerships in the UK public sector", *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol 35 Iss 5, pp. 419-433.

Oxenbridge, S. and Brown, W. (2002), "The two faces of partnership?: An assessment of partnership and co-operative employer/trade union relationships", *Employee Relations Journal*, Vol 24 Iss 3, pp 262-276.

Perrett, R. and Martinez Lucio, M. (2008), "The challenge of connecting and co-ordinating the learning agenda: a case study of a trade union learning centre in the UK", Employee Relations, Vol. 30 No. 6, pp. 623-39.

Redman, T. and Wilkinson, A. (2009), "Downsizing", in *Contemporary issues in human resource management*, 3rd Ed. Ed. T. Redman and A. Wilkinson, FT Prentice Hall, Harlow.

Ridley-Duff, R. and Bennett, A. (2011), "Towards mediation: Developing a theoretical framework to understand alternative dispute resolution", *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol 42 Iss 2, pp. 106-123.

Roche, W. and Teague, P. (2012), "The growing importance of workplace ADR", *International Journal of Human Resource Management* Vol 23 Iss 3, pp. 447-458.

Rollinson, D. and Dundon, T. (2007), *Understanding employment relations*, McGraw-Hill Higher Education, Maidenhead.

Saundry, R, Antcliff, V. and Jones, C (2008) "Accompaniment and Representation in Workplace Discipline and Grievance", *Acas research papers*, London: ACAS.
Saundry, R., McCardle, L. and Thomas, P. (2011). *Transforming conflict management in the public sector: Mediation, trade unions and partnership in a PCT,* ACAS Paper 1/11.

Saundry, R. and Jones, C. (2012), "The practice of discipline: evaluating the roles and relationships between managers and HR professionals", *Human Resource Management Journal,* Vol 22 Iss 3, pp. 252-266.

Shelley, S. (2007), "Multiple partnerships in trade union learning", Shelley, S. and Calveley (Eds), M. *Learning with Trade Unions: A Contemporary Agenda in Employment Relations*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., Aldershot, England.

Stuart, M. (2007), "Introduction: the industrial relations of learning and training: A new consensus or a new politics?", *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol 13 No 3, pp. 269-280.

Stuart, M. and Wallis, E. (2007), "Integrating learning into workplace bargaining: case studies of evolving trade union learning agreements", in Shelley, S. and Calveley, M. (Eds), *Learning With Trade Unions: A Contemporary Agenda in Employment Relations*, Ashgate, Aldershot

Stuart, M. and Cooney, R. (2008), "Editorial: Training and the limits of supply-side skills development", *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol 39 No 5, pp. 346-353.

Stuart, M., Cutter, J., Cook, H. and Winterton, J. (2010a), *Evaluation of the Union Learning Fund rounds 8 to 11, Unionlearn: Final report,* TUC, London.

Stuart, M., Cutter, J., Cook, H. and Winterton, J. (2010b), *Assessing the impact of union learning and the union learning fund; Union and employer perspectives,* CERIC Policy report 4.

Stuart, M., Cutter, J., Cook, H. and Winterton, J. (2012), "Who stands to gain from union-led learning in Britain? Evidence from surveys of learners, union officers and employers", *Economic and Industrial Democracy* published online 19 April 2012 DOI: 10.1177/0143831X12442579

Union learning fund (2012) '*Unions to play greater role in Government's skills agenda, says Vince Cable'* **http://www.unionlearningfund.org.uk/news/news.cfm/newsid/51** accessed 24th August 2012

Vakola, M. and Nikolaou, I. (2005) "Attitudes towards organizational change: What is the role of employees' stress and commitment?", *Employee Relations Journal,* Vol 27 Iss 2, pp.160 - 174

Wallis, E., Stuart, M. and Greenwood, I. (2005), "Learners of the workplace unite!: an empirical examination of the UK trade union learning representative initiative", *Work, Employment & Society*, Vol 19 No 2, pp. 283-304.

Wallis, E. and Stuart, M. (2007), *A collective learning culture: A qualitative study of workplace learning agreements,* Unionlearn Research Paper No. 3, TUC, London.

Warhurst, C., Findlay, P. and Thompson, P. (2007), *Organising to learn and learning to organise,* Unionlearn Research Paper No. 2, TUC, London.

Watson, T. (2006), *Organising and managing work*, Pearson Education Limited, Harlow.

Williams, S. and Adam-Smith, A. (2010), 2nd Ed. *Contemporary employment relations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.