

Industrial Relations Education in Canada: The Perspective of Vocational/Technical Educators

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Article abstract

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This paper discusses the relevancy of industrial relations education in the formal education systems in Canada, and through analysis of a survey of vocational and technical educators, examines their perceptions of IR education in Canada generally, and in vocational/technical institutions specifically.

In our society, there exists a variety of educational activities designed to improve the functioning of our economy and our industrial relations system. Most of this activity has focused on programs designed to improve the functioning of the labour market and the level of productivity of the work force. Both public and private institutions sponsor a complex network of educational and support programs geared to skill upgrading, retraining, job search, relocation, etc.

Until very recently, far less attention has been paid to educational or support programs as a method of improving the functioning of our industrial relations (IR) system. Aside from the short courses for practitioners in the field (and these courses are not overly plentiful) there are basically two sources of educational programs available to workers in the labour market which concentrate on the functioning of the IR system. The primary source is labour education programs run by union organizations at the local, national, or federation level.¹ The second

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¹ For a short description of these, see Claire BOOKER, «CLC Education Programs» *Canadian Labour*, Vol. 21, No. 4. December 1976, pp. 11-12. For a complete analysis of union involvement in education, see Coolie VERNER and Gary DICKINSON, *Union Education in Canada, Educational Activities of Labour Organizations*. Labour Canada, 1974.

source of programs is the university, or community college labour studies program, which is typically developed with considerable trade-union involvement.² The large grant recently announced by Labour Minister Munro³ should have an impact on the quantity and quality of union-sponsored education.⁴

It is obvious that the majority of unionists and educators in the field have directed their attention to adult extension programs. Because of the nature of the sponsorship, and the limited number of training slots available, these two sources tend to serve trade union activists — the stewards, committeemen and local leaders who have the most immediate need for training. While education of union leaders is a very important objective, there is a large portion of the work force (both union and non-union) which has a much less than complete understanding of our complex IR system. This situation reflects the fact that very little attention is paid to IR in the formal education provided to Canadian youth.

This study undertakes to make a preliminary assessment of IR education provided in a particular segment of the formal education process — the vocational/technical stream. The study begins with a discussion of why IR subjects may be considered appropriate for vocational/technical students, and then examines the delivery of IR education by drawing on the results of a mail survey of members of the Canadian Vocational Association.

² University sponsored programs are not as well developed in Canada as they are in the United States. Herbert LEVINE, «A Case for University Involvement in Canadian Labour Education», *Labour Gazette*, Vol. 76, No. 12. December 1976, pp. 639-643. However, the Labour College of Canada has helped to meet this need. Jean BEZUSKY, «Labour College of Canada», *Canadian Labour*, Vol. 21, No. 4. December 1976, pp. 9-10. An innovative investigation in Manitoba has recommended a college level program for that province, and a regional center is operating in the Maritimes. Marc SWELLING, «A Manitoban Approach to Labour Education», *Labour Gazette*, Vol. 76, No. 12. December 1976, pp. 647-649. Mark ALEXANDER, «ARLEC is Helping Things Happen in the Maritimes», *Labour Gazette*, Vol. 76, No. 12. December 1976, pp. 644-646. *Labour Education in Canada*, Brian PEARL, ed., Labour Canada, 1975, provides a variety of views on the subject, as it reports the results of the National Conference on Labour Education held in Ottawa that year.

³ Labour Canada, *Information*, May 20, 1977.

⁴ The preliminary plans of the Canadian Labour Congress are laid out in Larry WAGG, «Toward A Labour Studies Center», *Canadian Labour*, Vol. 21, No. 4. December 1976, pp. 2-3.

WHY IR EDUCATION AT THE VOCATION/TECHNICAL LEVEL ?

The assumption behind this paper is that, generally speaking, workers who understand the functioning of the IR system will, over the longer run, make better decisions concerning their employment relations than they would without that knowledge.⁵ (Of course, the same would be expected to hold for management, union leaders, and government officials as well.)

This assumption is not without some support in the literature. Mangum, an American labor economist with considerable expertise in the area of vocational education notes:⁶

To be adequately prepared for employment, the vocational student must come to the labor market armed with a general understanding of the workings, values and the institutions of the American economy, the information and wisdom for occupational choice, a motivation to produce, and an ability to do so. All of these need not be provided by vocational teachers, but it is the responsibility of vocational leadership to see that the requisite knowledge is obtained.

Rupert Evans, in his *Foundations of Vocational Education* suggests that one of the four basic criteria to be used in answering the question «what should be taught?» is that «...each student should understand, be able to control, and be confident in his environment.»⁷ The world of work contains a complex variety of institutions, which are often competing and the worker may be a member of many of them concurrently. While we cannot expect even the ideally well-informed and rational worker to control his environment absolutely, we can expect him to appreciate the degree of control that is, or may be, available to him. Just as important as the degree of control is the *consequence* of utilizing that control. For example, the worker may be a member of a primary work group, a union local, a consumer association, and a shareholder. In each of these groups the worker has a degree of

⁵ This assumption is cast in the longer run because in the short run, emotions surrounding the issue at hand will likely color the workers' decisions. However, over the longer run, an individual having an appreciation for some of the complex relationships among IR variables may be in a better position to evaluate the consequences of previous decisions. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that a lack of knowledge of IR matters has dysfunctional consequences for the individual or the nation.

⁶ Garth MANGUM, *The Economic Education of Vocational Educators*, Columbus, Ohio: Center for Research in Vocational and Technical Education, 1969. Quoted in Rupert EVANS, *Foundations of Vocational Education*, Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1971, p. 123.

⁷ EVANS, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

influence or control available to him (by persuading, voting, etc.). Programs such as restrictive practices, strikes, or boycotts may have major consequences in terms of effort required, working conditions, wage levels, and the duration of employment for the individual worker and members of the groups with which he is associated.

It is particularly important for graduates of vocational and technical institutions to be aware of the control available to them, and the consequences of exercising that control effectively in our complex industrial environment. It has become a cliché to say that our society is becoming more and more technologically oriented. With this change over time, the importance of skilled workers in our society has increased. They are in a strategic position: their importance can be measured both in terms of costs of goods and services, and also in terms of the availability of these goods and services. For example, consumers complain on the one hand about the cost of hospital services, or repairs to their television sets or plumbing; and, on the other, they complain of not having that service immediately available to them because of a strike. In our society, the consumer will not tolerate either a high cost (and a quick settlement?) or a long strike (and perhaps a lower wage rate and therefore cost?) What are the implications for the worker who produces those goods or services? What are the potential costs and benefits of a relatively large wage increase as compared to little or no increase, or alternatively a strike of some unknown duration? Should the worker consider the current state of the economy or the product market or the labour market when making decisions such as voting for a strike or accepting a particular wage rate? An appreciation for the relationships among the variables in the IR system suggested by these questions may have an effect on both the degree of control which the individual may exercise over his environment *and* the consequence of the use of that control.

IR EDUCATION IN THE CANADIAN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

To obtain information about practices and perceptions of IR education, a mail survey of all members of the Canadian Vocational Association was undertaken. The results are presented here with the caveat that there are differences across Canada in the IR systems and the educational delivery systems. In the results reported here there is no attempt made to account for these differences.⁸

⁸ One thousand and nine questionnaires were sent. The usable response rate was 42%. Using categories established by the CVA, the following is a break down of

The need for IR education

Of those who responded to the questionnaire,⁹ 75% (311/408) agreed with the statement that «people entering the world of work have a less than adequate understanding of industrial relations.» An additional 16% indicated new entrants have «no understanding.» This general question does not, of course, take into account where the individual leaves the educational stream; at best it is a general observation by persons involved in vocational and technical education on how the educational systems in Canada prepare new entrants to the labour market. One respondent wrote:

The school system seems to be doing a wretched job of preparing young people to operate realistically and effectively as citizens. Most young people tend to see IR in a stereotype of good guys vs bad guys — depending on their social background, etc.

Where does the responsibility lie?

Respondents were asked to rank educational institutions according to whether they should undertake primary, secondary, or tertiary responsibility for IR education. The results are given in Table 1. There was a widely held opinion (51%) among those responding that Canadian high schools should accept the primary responsibility for this subject matter. There was a somewhat less pervasive opinion (33%) that post-secondary institutions (institutes of technology, community colleges, CEGEPs, and universities) should share the secondary responsibility. It should also be noted that 32% felt that non-formal sources of education (trade-unions, employers) should have secondary responsibility.

There was a common thread running through the responses and comments in this portion of the questionnaire. This was the often expressed opinion that education concerning employment relationships should *not* begin earlier than junior high school, and should continue to

respondents: Administrator-Local (98), Administrator-Provincial (41), Administrator-Other (39), Supervisor (26), Consultant (18), Researcher (5), Teacher/Instructor (119), Counsellor (20), Teacher-Educator (17), No Information (34). A comparison of the distribution of respondents by category and by Province with distributions of the total CVA membership suggests there are no major differences. While there is no way of establishing if the survey either encouraged or discouraged a particular group from responding, a review of responses and comments indicated that there were as many responding who opposed the subject matter or the nature of the survey, as there were who were in favor.

⁹ The number responding to individual questions varies, and wherever it differs from the total sample, the figure is given in the text.

the students' terminal program. There are two issues which need to be addressed here. First, if it is considered valid to begin education on the world of work and its occupations in earlier grades, as advocated by the proponents of career education,¹⁰ why is there a belief that education on the employment relationship should not begin in earlier grades as well? Secondly, if the material is to be offered only or primarily in the students' terminal program, as many as those surveyed suggested, how does one determine which is the terminal program? This method would undoubtedly lead to duplication for those continuing to higher levels.

TABLE 1
Respondents' Assessment of
Locus of Responsibility for IR Education

	Frequency of Ranking					
	<i>Primary</i>		<i>Secondary</i>		<i>Tertiary</i>	
	<i>N</i> ^a	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Elementary	5	1	1	—	6	2
Junior High	24	5	18	5	7	3
High School	238	51	44	12	28	10
Post Secondary	96	20	120	33	37	13
Adult/Continuing Ed.	20	4	57	16	59	21
Trade Unions	36	8	64	18	67	24
Employers	42	9	52	14	72	26
Other	8	2	6	2	4	1
	469	100%	362	100%	280	100%

^a The total exceeds the sample as some respondents assigned the same rank to more than one category.

Several important issues were raised by the respondents in their assessment of responsibility. First, there was recognition by several respondents that while employers and trade unions should have an important input, their efforts were likely to be biased, since they are interest groups so closely involved with the subject.¹² Secondly, several

¹⁰ For a brief review of this concept, see C.R.P. FRASER, «Career Education in the U.S.», *Canadian Vocational Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Summer, 1973, pp. 8-11.

¹¹ Indeed, students at earlier levels may be ready for discussions on the subject, especially when they have been affected by a teachers' strike. The author has run a prototype of a collective bargaining game for grade one students to illustrate some of the basic concepts involved in this kind of a situation.

¹² The labour movement is very frank about its biases. The National Director of Education for the CLC writes, «We expect that these programs [community college labour education] will be taught with a union bias and thus the instructors must be familiar with the goals and structure of the labour movement.» WAGG, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

respondents suggested that the media in news and public affairs programs should accept greater responsibility for educating the general public on the subject.¹³ Thirdly, one respondent wrote, "should the young person not find out some of these things from home, and from life itself?" There is an opinion on the part of some educators that institutions other than the formal school system should accept some of the responsibility for educating our present or future work force in the subject of industrial relations. The recognized difficulty is that many of these sources are suspect on the grounds of self-interest, bias, or a genuine lack of knowledge to do a proper job. This will become more evident in the discussion below on perceived barriers to IR education.

An assessment of the current state of IR education

This portion of the paper reports on the responses of about 150 individuals who are directly involved in delivering education.¹⁴

TABLE 2
Type and Frequency of Vocational/Technical Courses
with Some IR Content

<i>Secondary</i>		<i>Post Secondary</i>	
Man in society	1	Industrial arts	1
Economics	1	Economics	1
Industrial relations	2	Supervisory practices	1
Business education	3	Business education	1
Various technology courses	4	Industrial relations	2
		Personnel/human resources	3
		Various technology courses	5

Thirty-one percent of those responding (49/156) reported that there were courses in their institution which covered IR subject areas adequately. Table 2 gives an indication of the kinds of courses which were reported to contain IR content. The information provided suggested that the IR content of the technical courses was in most cases less than 5% of the total. Coverage of IR does not seem to be the general rule.

There was, however, a rather generalized opinion among this group that the material should be covered in their institutions. Seventy-five

¹³ For a good discussion of this issue, see Wilfred LIST, «The role of the media in industrial relations.» *Labour Gazette*, Vol. 76, No. 7, July 1976, p. 360-364, and *comments*, p. 364-370.

¹⁴ While there were 119 teacher/instructors responding, others who have recently been teachers or who teach in addition to other primary duties also completed this portion of the questionnaire.

percent (114/151) answered in the affirmative to the question, «Do you feel IR matters should be dealt with in the courses you teach?» The majority of those who felt their courses should *not* cover IR, were of the opinion that the material should be provided in separate courses. If it is the case that there is substantial support for IR in the curriculum of these institutions, why is it not present?

Barriers to IR education

Two questions in the survey instrument attempted to obtain information on why IR might be limited or not be included at all in the curriculum. First those directly involved in instruction were asked if their institution favored, opposed, or hadn't considered IR education. Secondly, they were asked whether or not there were any barriers to providing IR education within their institutions. A cross-tabulation of these responses is shown in Table 3. As would be expected, there is a clear difference in the teaching of IR in those institutions where no barriers were perceived, and also where the institution has a policy of favoring IR education. (Since the two categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive, a three-way table is not included).

Many of the twenty-seven percent (43/159) who perceived barriers specified the nature of the problem. This information has been categorized and is given in Table 4. Clearly, there is no single problem area. Many of the comments reflected the conflicting values inherent in the IR subject matter. Unions, several respondents noted, suspect the school system as it represents middle class values. One wrote, «The difficulty is the presentation of a balanced view of the subject. The school system is generally upper middle class and reflects their values.» Employers, on the other hand, may fear the opposite effect, perhaps because many vocational teachers are or were trade union members.¹⁵ A post-secondary teacher observed, «If responsibilities for IR education could be shared by management and unions, then barriers could easily be overcome. The question of who benefits most would have to be resolved.» It is likely that the opposition to IR education from those involved with policy and administration (e.g., Departments of Education, Boards, and School Administrations) reflects, in part, the controversial nature of the subject, and pressure from both the trade union movement and employers who fear that one or the other will gain an unfair advantage.

¹⁵ Seventy-three percent (305/417) of survey respondents indicated they were members of a craft, industrial, or government employees union. Eighty-three percent (96/115) of those classified as teacher/instructors reported they were members.

TABLE 3
Relationship Between
Frequency of Coverage of IR Materials, and
Obstacles to IR Coverage

<i>(A) Perceived Barriers</i>		<i>Barriers to IR coverage</i>	
<i>Course covers IR material</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>NO</i>	<i>YES</i>
	<i>YES</i>	42	7
	<i>NO</i>	70	35

<i>(B) Position of the Institution^a</i>		<i>Institutional position</i>	
<i>Course covers IR material</i>	<i>YES</i>	<i>Favors</i>	<i>Hasn't Considered</i>
	<i>YES</i>	36	12
	<i>NO</i>	23	80

^a In only one questionnaire was «opposes» checked. This has been dropped from the analysis. The «don't know» and «hasn't considered» have been combined, as they both indicate a lack of policy.

TABLE 4
Perceived Obstacles to IR Education in
Vocational/Technical Institutions

<i>(A) Opposition of an Interest Group/Installation</i>		<i>Frequency</i>
Students		1
Provincial Departments of Education		2
School administration		3
Unions		3
Teachers opposed to unions		3
Employers		4
Boards		5

<i>(B) Lack of Resources</i>		<i>Frequency</i>
Appropriate materials		2
Unqualified teachers		3
Financial resources (staff)		5
Time (more priority subjects)		8

It is also likely that much of the opposition from Departments of Education, Boards, and School Administrations stems from a lack of resources (time, money, staff, and materials). In the final analysis, what is offered in a curriculum is a matter of setting priorities. One teacher-educator commented, «I would be opposed to IR education as

part of a B. Ed. program for industrial education teachers because I can think of other things to which I would give a higher priority which we now omit, for example, industrial first aid.» An adult educator added, «Simply a priority for student time. The curriculum is already overloaded.»

DISCUSSION

If the findings of this brief survey can be accepted as providing an indication of the state of, and attitudes toward IR education, several policy issues emerge.

First, vocational and technical educators perceive a need for new entrants to the labour market to have an improved comprehension of the functioning of the world of work, not just the skills associated with a particular occupation.¹⁶ Second, at least in the view of the respondents, the formal educational system seems the appropriate institution for providing this form of education. As Evans points out, «Nothing should be taught in school that will be learned adequately and effectively in another of society's institutions.»¹⁷ Under current conditions, other institutions lack the necessary neutrality, resources, or knowledge to undertake primary responsibility. Labour education may meet the needs of union members but adult extension programs do not at present serve a large proportion of the work force. Third, given the current set of priorities and limited resources, it seems clear that no one level can do an adequate job of providing all the necessary

¹⁶ This view is supported in the scant literature available on the topic. On the lack of coverage in Manitoba schools, see Harvey SMITH, «Do our schools suppress information on labour unions?» *The Manitoba Teacher*, Vol. 53, No. 1, September 1974, p. 4. The remaining critical literature refers to the United States. For an excellent, comprehensive empirical study, see Robert E. DOHERTY, *Teaching Industrial Relations in High Schools. A Survey of Selected Practices*, New York: State School of Labor and Industrial Relations, Cornell University, 1964. A more localized study, with similar conclusions is Will SCOGGINS, *Labour in Learning. Public School Treatment of the World of Work*. Los Angeles: Institute of Industrial Relations, UCLA, 1966.

On coverage at the advanced levels, see Robert BANBAUGH, «Labour-management relations in advanced general business,» *Business Education Forum*, March, 1963, p. 12-14. For criticism of the adult level, see George V. BOYLE, «Defining Labor Education Needs,» *Adult Leadership*, March 1970, p. 278-292. On the shortcomings of materials, see J. H. FOEGEN, «Labour in textbooks: Adequate coverage,» *Labor Law Journal*, June 1968, p. 329-334. There is a much larger body of literature on labour education-adult programs run by or on behalf of the trade unions.

¹⁷ EVANS, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

understanding to all students. At the same time, the problem of duplication of the same materials at different levels must be avoided.

One way to get around this two headed problem may be to begin the broader concepts of IR at an earlier age, and build on them by providing the appropriate specialized knowledge in the particular terminal program, similar to career education concepts. In this way, IR content could be added to current curricula and the need for additional courses could be avoided. In doing so, the school system must be careful to choose instructional materials carefully. For example, it is potentially possible to provide students at less than the high school level with an understanding of the functioning of the IR system, and also an appreciation for the *range of values* associated with it.¹⁸ The choice of a particular set of values should be up to the student, and undoubtedly the family environment will play an important part in this aspect of education.¹⁹ Developing a value free curriculum is no easy task, but if developed with the aid of labour and management jointly, one of the major barriers to IR education in public institutions could be avoided.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to provide a preliminary analysis of industrial relations education at the vocational/technical level in Canada. While no attempt was made to account for what are likely to be considerable regional differences, the survey conducted indicated that IR is seldom included at this level, and that most people involved with this level of education believe responsibility lies primarily with our high schools. Further, there are barriers to providing education on this subject, and these are based on (1) the controversiality of the material flowing from differences in values held, and (2) on the priority given to the subject in the competition for scarce resources. Finally, the data reviewed raised several questions concerning IR education in Canada generally. In response to these, the suggestion was made that IR materials be integrated into the regular curricula, following the career education format.

¹⁸ For an example of the debate raised when values relating to industrial relations are interjected into the education system see Doug COLLINS, «Who should run the schools,» *Vancouver Sun*, February 12, 1977, p. 6.

¹⁹ For a good account of attempts to have labour relations included in high schools in Ontario, see Greg MÚRTAGH «Labour Studies in Ontario High Schools,» *Canadian Labour*, December 1976, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp. 7-8.

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Des cours sont à la disposition des militants syndicaux pour leur faciliter la compréhension des questions se rapportant aux relations du travail et pour leur permettre d'acquérir une certaine compétence dans ce champs d'activité, mais les programmes scolaires réguliers n'en offrent guère aux travailleurs en général.

La littérature sur le sujet enseigne que, pour être efficace dans le monde du travail, les salariés doivent avoir la possibilité de connaître les institutions et les valeurs qui actionnent l'économie. Ceci est vrai tant en ce qui a trait à la formation professionnelle proprement dite qu'à la façon dont ces connaissances sont utilisées par chacun. Les décisions touchant les relations de travail peuvent être améliorées, présume-t-on, par la compréhension de la société à l'intérieur de laquelle ces décisions sont prises.

D'une façon générale, selon la perception qu'ont les professeurs d'enseignement technique et professionnel, on n'accorde que peu d'attention à l'enseignement des relations de travail. Cela est surtout vrai dans le secteur de la formation professionnelle et technique, tel que le démontre une enquête faite parmi les membres de l'Association canadienne de la formation professionnelle.

Parmi les constatations les plus significatives de cet enquête, on peut signaler les suivantes :

- 1° La majorité des répondants estiment que les écoles secondaires devraient assumer la responsabilité première en matière d'enseignement des relations de travail et les écoles post-secondaires ainsi que les corps intermédiaires, soit les syndicats et les associations d'employeurs, devraient jouer un rôle de suppléance.
- 2° Trente-deux pour cent d'entre eux considèrent que leur institution donne une formation adéquate en cette matière, tandis que les trois-quarts répondent qu'elle devrait dispenser cet enseignement.
- 3° Les obstacles à l'enseignement des relations de travail réfléchissent la nature controversée de ces questions et le manque de ressources (temps, argent, matériel didactique) disponibles pour le traiter convenablement.

Étant donné le manque de formation en matière de relations de travail et les obstacles qui s'y opposent, ne serait-il pas souhaitable que cet enseignement soit incorporé dans les programmes en prenant soin d'y insérer toute la gamme des valeurs et d'intensifier les connaissances spécialisées à mesure que le cours progresse vers sa phase terminale.