

Developing employment relations teaching in New Zealand

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Recent changes in New Zealand's employment relations framework has made the topic vital for many students but its multi-disciplinary foundation and its particular historical and cultural setting have proved difficult for student learning. This paper overviews our development of employment relations teaching materials and it shows how this development has been driven by specific shortfalls in the available teaching materials and by changing student needs. It is also emphasised how the teaching and research processes are interlinked and this provides an avenue for making research-driven teaching obtainable. In order to facilitate the students' understanding of and interest in the research process we have developed a number of case studies and a CD-ROM design has been trialled in 2005. The paper overviews two of the case studies and it also details the development logic of the CD-ROM design.

The history: development of employment relations teaching materials

A number of inherent problems with teaching New Zealand employment relations became the impetus for the development of both teaching materials and our own teaching approach. During 1995 to 1997, it became clear to two of the authors that we were not meeting the needs of our students in the stage one introductory course in management and employment (at that time, teaching around 1,800 students a year) in terms of providing them with a good grounding in New Zealand employment relations theory and practice. In particular, there was no suitable New Zealand textbook and the various attempts to use a British textbook or course books (compendium of articles and book chapters) were roundly condemned in the formal and informal feedback from the students.

At the same time, it was obvious from teaching stage two and stage three courses that there was a lack of up-to-date and relevant New Zealand teaching materials in the area. This was caused, to a large degree, by the specific nature of employment relations in New Zealand, which had undergone massive legislative changes in the early 1990s and a substantial shift in its philosophical and empirical context over the previous 15 years (Deeks *et al.* 1994, Harbridge 1993, Kelsey 1997). In short, teaching employment relations was centred around *country-specific* legislation, labour market structures and trends. By 1997-1998, we realised that if the topic was to progress and if the students were to gain an understanding and a life-long passion for the subject we needed to review both our teaching tools, the methods of delivery and our teaching approach.

The initial textbook for stage one students was a brief overview of the fundamental elements of employment relations (Rasmussen & Lamm 1999) and was targeted at students with limited understanding of subject. This meant that it was short and easy to read (it was also relatively inexpensive which the students had stressed as an important feature in their feedback). The development of the second textbook was a more difficult proposition. The available textbook (Deeks *et al.* 1994) and its predecessor (Deeks & Boxall 1989) had set the benchmark for employment relations teaching at university level in New Zealand. However, the textbook was out-of-date, it was a very large book and, according to the students, its treatment of theoretical themes was confusing. It was decided, therefore, that a smaller book, but with more up-to-date theoretical and empirical material, was necessary. In the end, the

new book was 200 pages shorter than the previous textbook and still, its 400 pages contained a major extension of the theoretical and empirical foundation.

The textbooks brought us nearer to our goal of having up-to-date and relevant teaching tools which facilitated the integration of theory and practice. A further major step forward in this direction has been the development of a “living” website since 2002 in which material is continually being added and edited (refer to www.employment.org.nz). This universally accessible website is being used by both lecturers and students at the University of Auckland and at other New Zealand and overseas universities. The website has been built with several aims in mind:

- To support and facilitate the use of the textbooks in various teaching settings and to various levels of students. To this end, we have developed custom-made overheads and explanatory notes to the overheads. There are also case studies, question-&-answer sections, and the presentation of more in-depth research.
- To provide users with current information and resources as we are able to post revised teaching material in the form of new sections for the textbooks, outlines of legislative changes, references to new academic and non-academic research, additional links to important websites and, in particular, new information and new websites. The ability to provide users with the latest information is a very important aspect of the website and one of the reasons why it was decided to develop our own website instead of relying on the websites of the textbook publisher (although it is associated with one of the world’s largest textbook website run by Pearson Education and Prentice Hall).
- To facilitate the development of a wider coverage of teaching and research across New Zealand universities, polytechnics and private teaching institutions. For example, a number of teachers using the website have developed their own case studies and teaching tools to support their own teaching. These case studies and teaching tools can then be displayed on website for common use. As discussed in detail below, a colleague from another university has made a CD-ROM about the Employment Relations Act (Williamson 2005). Information about this CD-ROM will be featured on the website and it provides another exciting technological avenue for enhancing teaching materials and student access.

Case studies: the one-two-three approach

As stated, there was growing concern over the way in which employment relations was being taught. There was a need to develop an approach which would allow the student to view the topic from different angles and facilitate the exposure of the student to varying levels of detail on a particular topic. It was decided therefore to develop different versions of the same case study: *the one-two-three approach to case study development*. The short version – often 1-2 pages long with a few questions – was targeted at large class teaching and provided a limited exploration of nuances of the case study. The next version – often 4-5 pages long - allowed a more in-depth discuss of the chosen topic while the longest version – sometimes over 15 pages – was aimed at assisting students writing their essays on the topic or seeking a more comprehensive understanding. The longest version could also be used as a temporary collation of information on a topic which was still evolving, allowing student input to the subsequent re-writing of the case study.

Originally, the key purpose of developing case studies was to support textbook chapters and to highlight current key issues in employment relations. An example of this was the case study on the longest running, collective bargaining dispute in New Zealand involving the New

Zealand Fire Service and the NZ Professional Firefighters' Union (see Rasmussen & Lamm 2002: 49-52). This conflict was front-page news for several months and resulted in a national referendum. It also highlighted some of contentious public sector bargaining issues under the Employment Contracts Act 1991. Analysing this case study made employment relations teaching more exciting and relevant as students who were able to read in-depth accounts of the machinations that characterised this dispute. The case study also had a number of spin-offs, for example, media reports of the dispute were analysed in terms of their biases, (see below) and examples of poor bargaining techniques and miscommunication were highlighted using this case study.

Case studies were also developed based on one's own research which had the effect of not only refining research publications but also ensuring that the teaching material was credible and that the students were exposed to the latest discourse on a particular topic. Because there are few employment relations researchers in New Zealand, these research-driven case studies are invaluable as they are able to be presented sooner and to a wider audience than if they had been published in a journal article, as discussed below.

However, recently it has been recognised that there is a need to undertake further research in order to fill gaps in the curricula at the University of Auckland and other tertiary institutions. As a consequence a dialogue amongst a number of employment relations researchers has begun to highlight areas where there have been recent and profound changes in employment relations theory and practice and where there has been no research undertaken or teaching material developed (see below in the second case study example). This state of affairs is not unusual in employment relations where the topic's key features - such as legislation, types of work, employment practices - are in a constant state of flux. Therefore, initiating research-based case studies driven by a teaching need was not necessarily a radical approach but a more pragmatic one aimed at fostering collaborative research and teaching that benefits both researcher and student.

Thus, case studies developed by other researchers have begun to feature as part of our overall package of employment relations teaching materials. In a small country, there is little room for more than one textbook on a given topic. However, this can create problems in terms of including a variety of 'voices' and ensuring that suitable research is incorporated. In order to overcome these shortcomings, we have made it clear to our colleagues at other universities and polytechnics that we are interested in featuring *their* case studies and other teaching materials (refer to www.employment.org.nz).

The real advantage of this inclusive approach is that it accommodates the many different disciplinary fields which constitutes the basis of employment relations, including economics, political science, sociology, history, employment law (see Deeks & Rasmussen 2002: 7, 17). For example, employment law and legal precedent have taken on a life of its own following the introduction of the Employment Contracts Act in 1991 and the Employment Relations Act in 2000 (Caisley 2004, Kiely & Caisley 1993, McAndrew *et al.* 2004) and is the reason why personal grievance cases studies have become an integrated part of employment relations teaching in New Zealand.

Case study example I: employment relations in the media

'People's view of employment relations is often shaped by their own personal experiences, but an overriding influence on their attitudes and impressions is what they read and hear through the media.' (Rasmussen & Ross 2004: 21). The importance of media research has long been recognized and there have been a growing number of overseas studies on media

reporting and its economic and social influences (for example, Curren & Gurevitch 2000, Lindhoff 1998). There have also been some very significant New Zealand research on media trends and media influences (see Atkinson 1984, McGregor 1996, McGregor & Comrie 1995).

However, there have been relative few studies of media reporting of *employment relations* in New Zealand. The studies of Harbridge (1983) and Scott (1996) are the rare exceptions to the otherwise general lack of academic studies of news coverage of employment relations. In addition, there are distinct biases in the media reporting with a focus on dramatic events and personalities rather than underlying issues (Deeks & Rasmussen 2002). The shift towards decentralised and individual employer-employee negotiations and a lower number of industrial disputes in the 1990s took the media spotlight off traditional employment relations issues, such as collective bargaining, industrial disputes and unions, for a short period of time. Instead the media interest became more focused on public policy debates, as noted by Deeks and Rasmussen (2002: 14):

But while industrial disputes may no longer have been a permanently newsworthy topic in the 1990s, a profound lack of consensus over the Employment Contracts Act (ECA) kept employment relations in the media limelight. The ECA was a major political dividing line in the 1993, 1996 and 1999 general elections.

Although the lack of academic research of the area was the main driver of our development of case studies on the media, it was also driven by the research done for the *Chronicle* in the New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations. So far, this has involved on-going overviews of media reporting of employment relations for nearly a decade. The *Chronicle* was originally used in teaching as a way of providing extant teaching material. This was then further progressed by developing case studies of specific themes, for example the review and adjustment of the current legislative framework; the Employment Relations Act 2000; and nursing and employment relations (Rasmussen *et al.* 2005a & 2005b).

Finally, the attempt to create research-driven teaching has been turned on its head and we are now moving into *teaching-driven research*. This has, in part, occurred as a result of turning teaching materials into fully fledged research “outputs” to comply with the way PBRF – the new public research evaluation exercise - measures research (see Curtis 2004). The first result has been a book chapter (Rasmussen & Ross 2004). The research on employment relations in nursing and its associated case study (Rasmussen *et al.* 2005a) has also feed into other types of research. First, it provided an additional element in a larger research project on turnover costs in nursing (see North *et al.* 2005). Second, we are currently working on a similar study of the attempt to create a multi-employer collective agreement (MECA) across New Zealand universities. This will continue the research approach from the case study on employment relations in nursing. However, it will go beyond research of media reports and involve interviews of the key negotiators and a more extensive research of the attempts of the key ‘actors’ to influence media reports. This more in-depth research of the bargaining process will allow this case study to feed into Masters courses on bargaining and negotiations.

Case study example II: the Human Capability Framework

In the case of the Human Capability Framework, we started from the other end: the academic research output – a journal article – became the starting point and teaching materials and case studies followed. As editors of the New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations, two of the authors encouraged Dr Rupert Tipples to submit an article on the Human Capability Framework (HCF). It had become clear that the Framework was having a significant impact on public policy thinking. It was also being used as a research tool to explain and reconcile

labour market complexities: for example, contradictions in terms of skills shortages and high unemployment as well as employment and pay inequities between the genders and different economic and cultural groups. In spite of its popularity amongst policy makers and researchers, there were no publicly available academic publications on the topic. The resultant journal article (Tipples 2004) not only provided a useful overview of the recent developments of the HCF but it also added another dimension to labour market analysis in New Zealand.

It was envisaged originally that the article would become a seminal reading in the employment relations stage II and stage III of University of Auckland's BCom degree. In this role, the article would provide a crucial pedagogical bridge between discussions of historical, theoretical and regulatory frameworks and the associated changes in employment relations policy and practices. This would add relevance and clarity to the complex overviews and discussions of fundamental changes in the labour market. The other intended outcome was to initiate students into the realm of academic writing and in particular, to enhance their ability to understand and critique academic journal literature.

In order to facilitate the students' access to academic journal writing, two different overhead versions were developed: one overhead set provided a short overview and the second overhead set constituted an in-depth discussion of the Framework and how it could be used both academically and in public policy-making. As the practical application of the Framework is vital for its long-term importance in academic discussion, a specific case study was produced by Dr Tipples. This case study is based on a recent publicly funded report and it shows how the Framework have been used to establish future employment needs of the dairy industry. Besides illustrating the practical application of a theoretical model, the case study also points the students in the direction of available research reports.

At the point of writing, it is the intention to take the debates of the Framework further by dedicating a future issue of the New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations to research on issues and trends in the agriculture sector. These articles will then be used in teaching in a similar way as discussed above.

Case study example III: CD-ROM based teaching resources

An exciting new technological development has been the establishment by David Williamson, AUT of a CD-ROM platform for the delivery of New Zealand based employment relations teaching materials. The development of this resource was driven by a combination of specific learner needs that were identified through a series of focus groups, learning styles questionnaires and formal student feedback.

Specific Learner Needs

The CD-ROM was developed for a course titled "Hospitality Employment Relations" which sits in the third year of the Auckland University of Technology's (AUT) Bachelor of International Hospitality Management. The Hospitality Employment Relations CD-ROM is one of four CD's developed to support courses in the School of Hospitality and Tourism, funded through an ongoing series of Teaching Resource Development grants. This project was driven by a series of focus groups that identified several key changes in the educational environment and specifically in the quantity, skills, demographics and mindset of students attending AUT. The key factors were:

- The drive for more open access to tertiary education has greatly increased the quantity and cultural diversity of students attending AUT. This has resulted in larger classes of *domestic* students that cannot be assumed to have a prior knowledge of New Zealand's political, legal and cultural contexts. Traditional lectures could not deliver all the material required by these learners.
- Aggressive marketing to overseas markets has greatly increased the numbers of international students attending the School of Hospitality and Tourism, especially from China. This student body clearly required increased local cultural learning resources and being English as a second language learners, they also required innovative teaching resources that could support text based materials.
- There was a noticeable rise in domestic student feedback calling for more New Zealand based, hospitality relevant, up-to-date learning resources. There was growing resistance to the use of text books, videos and support resources based on American or European examples. The challenge was to create our own, contemporary, hospitality based resources.
- The advent of the Performance Based Research Fund has increased the desirability of the teaching/research nexus - research based teaching and teaching based research. The CD-ROM projects were seen as an opportunity to link industry based research and innovative teaching practice.

The points listed above provided the driving force for the CD-ROM project across four courses and two programmes within the School of Hospitality and Tourism. These factors were closely reflected by feedback gained specifically from students in the Hospitality Employment Relations course. Almost 50% of the students in this course were second language learners, the vast majority from China. Analysis of the international students course work from previous semesters indicated reduced levels of English language proficiency and problems with underpinning political, legal and cultural knowledge. Learning styles questionnaires run at the beginning of the course consistently show a clear preference, across the class, for activist style learning (being involved in new experience, hands on exploration, being thrown in the deep end on tasks). The learning style results also show a clear class preference for visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning. Formal feedback from the class regarding the content and delivery techniques of the course strongly suggested that more contemporary, hospitality based examples were needed to aid understanding of the theoretical concepts covered. The CD-ROM created was an attempt to meet these specific learner needs.

The CD-ROM Format

The CD-ROM format was chosen to address the specific learner needs listed above for the following reasons:

- The CD-ROM itself is robust, light, and reliable. It is capable of holding large quantities of text material and high quality video content. The technology required to run the disk is ubiquitous (the personal computer). Informal feedback has indicated that students are more likely to bring this resource to class with them and continue to use it in their professional lives, due to its light weight and small size.
- The CD-ROM allows students to learn at their own pace and at their own place. The reality of large numbers of diverse students in classes, who are predominately activist, visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners, required the creation of support material that they would use outside of lectures. It was hoped that these students would be more

likely to explore and use the CD-ROM based materials (particularly the video content), than traditional text book style resources.

- The CD-ROM format allowed us to package video interviews with text resources in an interactive format. The layout of the disk was designed to encourage the exploration of activist and kinaesthetic learners. The video content was a direct response to the needs of visual and auditory learners.
- While the creation of the CD-ROM involves a considerable amount of front end time and expense, once established, the format allows easy and highly cost effective updating. This is crucial for the ongoing capacity to keep the resource contemporary. With very little effort, new articles, readings and video content can be added to the disk from semester to semester.

The CD-ROM content

The CD-ROM has three components: text based resources, video resources, and web links. The text resources are designed to work in addition to the text book assigned to the course. These text resources are a mix of contemporary journal articles, internet based readings and newspaper or magazines articles. This material is the equivalent of a traditional, photocopied readings book, but is digital and can be updated every semester at very little cost. The web links are a collection of useful internet support sites, including Governmental employment relations sites, union sites and the support site for the assigned text. The user of the CD-ROM can simply click on a web link on the CD-ROM and providing they have their internet browser open, they will be taken to the relevant site. While the CD-ROM has a very large capacity for text based material, feedback from earlier prototypes suggested that student prefer larger collections of text material in traditional forms, either a text book or a photocopied readings book. Very few learners like reading text off the screen, and the students resent the cost of having to print large quantities of text off a disk.

The heart of the CD-ROM is a collection of six video interviews with relevant hospitality, Government and union representatives. The interviews are designed to provide the learners with key contextual information the support the theoretical concepts covered in the course. The video content allows the learners to see spokespeople for divergent perspectives on employments relations making their arguments. Three of the videos feature interviews with hospitality practitioners – owners of a restaurant, the Human Resource Manager from the Hilton Hotel and a former restaurateur who had become a Member of Parliament and employment relations spokesperson for her party. By placing these interviews in the hospitality context, the learners can see contemporary examples of how the employment relations theories they have studied are expressing themselves in the “real world”.

The remaining three video represent a cross section of political viewpoints on New Zealand employment relations. This content allows the learners to see the impact of underlying Pluralist and Unitarist assumptions on the perspectives of these commentators and also demonstrates the divergence in political rhetoric regarding how employment relations should be conducted in New Zealand. The video content was designed to allow the learners to see employment relations through the frames of diverse perspectives. Representatives were included from small business, large multi-national corporations, unions and political parties. An effort was made to direct the interviews towards the most current issues, to ensure that the material was as contemporary as possible. Interviewees were encouraged to use hospitality examples wherever possible.

Evaluation

The CD-ROM was used, on a pilot basis, for the Hospitality Employment Relations course in semester one of 2005. Formal and informal feedback was sought from the students using the disk and stakeholders involved in its production. Overall the feedback was positive, with the students finding the format and content useful. Feedback included:

- The disk was robust, easy to use and performed as it was designed to. This was an important consideration in the design process, several complex functions were left off the final disk in favour of a product that would run consistently on all computers.
- Students with English as a second language liked the drag and pause function on the video clips. This function allowed the students to effortlessly repeat sections of the video and thus fully understand what was being discussed – something they often can't do in lectures.
- The content was deemed helpful and relevant to the course outcomes. Students appreciated the hospitality context and felt the political theory involved in the course was well supported by the video content on the disk.

Considerations for the future development of the CD-ROM

- The video interviews would benefit from having clear captions that indicate what topics are being discussed
- A challenge lies in incorporating the resources on the CD-ROM into the wider course content and assessment. Students felt that the videos could be used more intensively within lectures and assessment options like an essay.
- While a considerable amount of time and money is involved in creating the disk, updating it based on initial feedback is proving to be easy and cost effective. In addition, the video content is easily transferred from the disk to other formats (PowerPoint, Blackboard) for lectures, seminars and alternative delivery techniques.

In conclusion, the CD-ROM delivery platform has proved to be an effective and flexible response to specific learner needs in an employment relations environment.

Summary

This paper has described the various ways that we have used case studies as an integrated part of our attempt to reach the 'holy grail' of academic teaching: research-driven teaching and teaching-driven research. We are still not there, but a comprehensive package has already been developed, including textbooks, websites, dedicated case studies and a CD-ROM platform. Finally, the continuous improvement of teaching materials and the development of new case studies is an on-going process and being part of that process or journey is at least half the enjoyment for dedicated teachers.

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