

Across The Ditch - April 2009

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Training at the moment seems to be the current buzz word. Keen to downplay the long term effects of the global financial crisis and the resulting recession, NZ Prime Minister John Key, at a recent job summit, put training high on the agenda, vowing to at least keep up with the levels of industry training established under the previous government, with hopes to increase it.

Not surprisingly, John Meeuwsen, Chair of the Industry Training Federation, welcomed this commitment and the hope it brings to the many apprentices and trainees fearing lay-offs as the recession bites¹.

However, I can't help wondering how much of this is political rhetoric. Looking around it seems to me that people are not waiting for the government to finish talking. It appears that action is being driven by people on the ground working on local initiatives, keen to ensure that skills and knowledge don't become casualties of these difficult economic times.

Two such initiatives caught my eye recently. Both are simple concepts but each demonstrate that training is being kept alive by those at the grass root level who have faith that investment in training will pay off in the long term. The first example is designed to keep alive a trade that could easily disappear. The second is aimed at ensuring that locality and culture are not barriers to learning and that learning is an investment for the whole community.

The first example is the Building and Construction Industry Training Organisation, who have set up a two-week course in the specialist techniques of solid plastering, the traditional craft of working with the ornate ledges and pillars of old buildings. The scheme offers some practical experience with the contractors who are working on the refurbishment of Wellington's Supreme Court building. Course participants, as well as working alongside contractors, are also allocated mentors, aged between sixty seven and seventy eight, who have offered to pass on their skills to the next generation to stop this art from dying out².

The second example comes from the Wairarapa region north of Wellington. Here Maori and Pakeha (NZers of European origin) have been proactive in looking at ways to encourage youth to upskill, through Marae³ Based Trades Training (MBTT). They have been developing a programme to provide Maori with an opportunity to learn a trade within a safe cultural environment with the expectation that on completion the students will give back to the community. Chairman of Nga Kanohi, Edwin Perry says that this trades training differs from other initiatives aimed at training youth in that it was initiated from the bottom up rather than being a governmental programme from the top down⁴.

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It occurs to me that both these examples have a key thing in common. They both rely on the personal touch. It is easy to forget sometimes that formal training courses are often not the best way to learn. Rather, the hands-on approach with mentors and role models has much going for it. So despite the grand words of government, I suspect it will be the dedication of individuals that will see training survive the recession.

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- 1 Industry Training Federation Media Release, 3 March 2009.
- 2 <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/education/1756598/Plastered-for-a-good-cause>
- 3 A marae is the location of the Maori community buildings used for tribal and family gatherings, cultural exchange and the honouring of ancestors and tribal customs.
- 4 www.stuff.co.nz/dominionpost/4859809a27729.html

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