

Co-operative Learning and Responsible Citizenship in the 21st Century

Introduction

This series of papers is based on plenary session contributions to the conference *Co-operative Learning and Responsible Citizenship in the 21st Century* organised by the Co-operative College and the International Association for the Study of Co-operation in Education (IASCE) in Manchester in June 2002.

The Conference brought together two sets of experiences that contribute to active citizenship. These two trends are reflected in the papers that follow.

The International Association for the Study of Co-operation in Education promotes the exchange of good practice and research in co-operative learning. It examines how co-operative learning can help address issues of social inclusion and the promotion of equal opportunities. The International Association for the Study of Co-operation in Education has established a network of academics and teachers throughout the world committed to co-operative approaches in education, and sees co-operative learning strategies as essential to address contemporary issues that are at the core of the citizenship debate.

In the UK, educators and co-operators have worked together to develop a further dimension to this work, looking at how co-operative learning can link with the co-operative movement, and explore the use of co-operative businesses as a context for learning. The importance of that work to democratic membership based organisations cannot be over stated. If young people do not get opportunities to learn of, and experience co-operation in their school life, and leave school with no knowledge of co-operation, it becomes more difficult to attract them as new co-operators in their adult life. This point is well made in the recently published DTI Social Enterprise Strategy which recognised the importance of awareness raising, if young people are to consider employment in social enterprise.

But successful co-operatives though need more than just an awareness amongst potential co-operators. Democratic leadership, democratic control and good governance in co-operatives require skills that are at the heart of active citizenship.

It is not only the case that co-operatives need these skills to be regularly renewed and reinvigorated by a new generation,

committed to core values, but they need people who can apply them in a rapidly changing world. Such co-operators will also take those skills into a range of community networks in which they are involved, and help counter the huge alienation from participation in the political process today. That is one of the co-operative movement's distinct contribution to citizenship.

The debate on co-operation and citizenship could not be more relevant at this time. Co-operatives are self help organisations that emerged successfully by meeting the needs of the members and the communities they served. They developed strong self regulatory governance mechanisms, based on accountability to the members and the communities they served. Today, in the wake of the governance scandals in the private sector, there is a danger that the desire for greater regulation to curb the excesses of the private sector will sweep over into the co-operative, voluntary and public sectors. This poses dangers to the active citizenship epitomised by elected members, democratically controlling their organisations. Self government could easily be replaced by growing professionalisation of structures.

The challenge to co-operatives therefore is not simply to defend their methods of governance, but to meet the challenge of rising standards. That means not only ensuring the continued supply of members qualified with the skills needed for governance, but providing them with development support so that they can respond positively to new governance expectations. Put simply, co-operatives need more members as active citizens. Co-operatives who produce active citizens make a real contribution to active citizenship in wider Societies - Co-operative learning is one of the best ways of developing the citizenship skills that societies and society needs. Active citizenship needs the co-operative movement in the same way that the co-operative movement needs, and feeds, active citizenship.

The conference brought together participants from over 20 countries. The papers provide a small insight into it. In the coming months they will be added to by the development of resources for schools, updating materials and piloting new projects to raise awareness of co-operative and social enterprise in schools.

We hope that these papers will inspire more co-operators and societies, to engage with schools, and help develop a new generation of co-operators.

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