

# **Encouraging Associative Intelligence: Co-operatives, Shared Learning and Responsible Citizenship**

## **Plenary Presentation**

**Ian MacPherson**

George Keen, the secretary of the Co-operative Union of Canada from 1909 to 1945, was a key figure in the formative years of the Canadian co-operative movement. An English immigrant from Stoke-on-Trent, he turned to co-operatives in 1906 when working people in the town of Brantford, where he lived, organised a co-operative store. He never turned away and his involvement with co-operatives became a lifelong passion, the dominant commitment in both his public and private life.

In his work as a "propagandist for the movement" (a term he unashamedly even proudly used), Keen frequently suggested that "education was the life blood of the movement," a quotation he attributed to the British co-operator, George Holyoake. At first glance it appears to be a rather banal statement, particularly if one remembers that he was using it during the first half of the twentieth century. At that time Canada, like so many industrialised societies, was deepening its commitment to universal public education, many Canadians believing that education was the key to upward mobility and better incomes; the best preservatives of whatever status they possessed. To advocate the importance of education, therefore, was hardly unusual or earth shattering.

When placed in the context of co-operative history, however, Keen's advocacy takes on a deeper meaning, echoing beliefs and commitments within co-operative circles stretching back to the late eighteenth century. In fact, it can be argued that it advances a central consideration for anyone searching for the movement's essential core. If co-operatives, co-operators and their movements are to accomplish anything distinctive and permanent, they must ultimately be concerned with ideas not just groceries and interest rates though they too are important. In turn, ideas are the ultimate subject matter of all educational activities, be they formal, nonformal or informal, practical or theoretical.

Thinking about the educational activities of co-operative movements and their organisations is important for other reasons. A co-operative's educational activities shape its impact on its

stakeholders, members, elected leaders, staff members, and communities. They are, or should be, central in the preparation of a co-operative's social audit, now an increasingly common kind of evaluation within co-operative circles. They should figure prominently in the current discussions of the inter-relationships between co-operatives and other institutions within the social economy tradition. They should be emphasised by co-operative organisations as they aspire to live up to their obligations to their communities in keeping with the intent of the seventh principle of the International Co-operative Alliance's 1995 Identity Statement. In fact, it can be argued that in subtler but no less important ways, "education" is as significant to that principle as it is to the fifth, the one that deals specifically with education.

But what, after all, did Keen and Holyoake mean when they said "education"? For that matter, what did it mean for the Rochdale Pioneers when they used a significant portion of their surplus to establish their library in 1849 or when, in 1854, they pledged a permanent allocation of 2% of their expenditure on education, no small commitment given the low incomes of their members; one that more prosperous co-operators in other places and times have not been prepared to make or have done so with indecent reluctance?

At first glance, a plausible answer rests with the educational needs of the working class in the United Kingdom during the nineteenth century - and indeed a considerable portion of the twentieth century as well. Certainly, the Rochdale Pioneers were concerned with education because so many children of that time went from their parents' door to the factory or the mine as soon as they could be pushed. Clearly, they were trying to supplement what Sunday schools and the limited state schools were providing. From that perspective the efforts of co-operators in the United Kingdom during the nineteenth century were part of a working class struggle for enlightenment and upward mobility. It is a struggle that, in various forms, is still with us.

To the extent that it was a part of that struggle, the co-operative education impulse ultimately found its contributions overwhelmed by the advance of publicly funded education. Its earlier concerns with education encouraged a broad and deep understanding of dominant trends, a breadth of vision that approximated what the academic community would come to call political economy. For some time, in fact, co-operative educational initiatives were important shapers of public opinion in the United Kingdom. When the public school system assumed its central role in the training of young people and then gradually older citizens, the broad visions of co-operative education inevitably declined, an interesting example of how the rise

of the state circumscribed the possibilities of co-operative as well as other forms of communitarian activism.

While the tie to working class culture is obviously important historically, it is not, I think, a sufficient explanation for the rise of co-operative education. Perhaps we should not even start our discussions about co-operativism and education with the struggles of the working and farming classes of the nineteenth century. Arguably those struggles provided the opportunities for the early blossoming of co-operative education, but they were not the underlying "reason" why the movement embraced the cause of education. Rather, we should search back at least into the eighteenth century for the sources of that commitment. We should search into the age widely called the Enlightenment because of its faith in reason, its concern for education, its search for a moral basis not determined by faith, its troubling experimentations with democracy based on informed citizenship, its fascination for the world beyond Europe. The key names of that age still resonate in our era: Rousseau, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Smith, Locke, Franklyn, Paine.

In many ways, though perhaps less precisely and consciously, we are still wrestling with the great issues identified in those times: more than we generally glean, we are the somewhat confused but indebted descendants of that time. The ideas that exploded in the Enlightenment, brought into the public square by what E P Thompson called the "moral economy of the crowd" as well as the ruminations of intellectuals, were in part early powerful reactions to the growing individualism and apparent social disintegration of the period; they were not merely denunciations of the lingering orthodoxies of previous generations. They are imbedded in the origins of the co-operative movement; they are assumed - unfortunately not widely and deeply explored - in the most common examinations of co-operatives ideologies, a theme that needs to be pursued more diligently by the movement's ideologues and the academic community's researchers. They helped shape the abiding understandings and commitments for generations of co-operators after the Enlightenment era is generally assumed to have closed.

In the British experience, one of the great intermediaries between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of course, was Robert Owen. At once spiritually beautiful and physically repulsive, generously enlightened and brutally manipulative, sometimes charismatic and often boring, this remarkable personality is one of the seminal thinkers in educational history. His essential thought and act of faith - if one can talk about Owen having a "faith" - was that people were the products of their environment. Like Montessori,

Pestalozzi and the Anabaptist sects (a rather unlikely group of associates), he understood the essential importance of early childhood in shaping human personality and potential. This helps explain the classrooms he built, the libraries he helped develop, the emphasis he placed on physical development, the quest for international understanding, the emphasis on character, the support he gave for what we would call lifelong learning - all reflected in the educational programmes at New Lanark and in the other intentional communities he encouraged or which were developed in keeping with his ideas.

Shifting to the later nineteenth century, when the heritage blossomed in its most resplendent phase, our understanding is deepened because of the work of Peter Gurney. In his excellent book, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, c1870-1930*, he shows how working class culture, the rise of worker education and the co-operative movement created a movement of remarkable intensity, vision and (for a part of its history anyway) a high degree of working class engagement. As he has described it, as the pages of *The Co-operative News* readily attest, as the work and attitudes of George Keen, an ocean and decades later shows, those years saw a flowering of engaged, community-based, grass roots education of surpassing power.

In fact, the British movement, with its attachments first to mechanics institutes and then the Workers Educational Association was in the forefront of adult education as that field came to life in the early twentieth century. And came to life it did and not only in the United Kingdom. One can think of the Danish Folk Schools, the Gaelic League in Ireland, the educational/training programmes of numerous agricultural/rural organisations (many of them co-operatives) as well as the extension programmes at universities in Europe, the United States and Canada. One can think of "people's schools" that appeared under different names in various countries in the 1920s and 1930s. One can refer to the educational activities associated with labour temples and political organisations, many of them strongly tied to co-operatives. In my country one can point to the adult education movement associated with St Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia. It became a national and something of an international force for adult education and community economic development, especially through co-operatives. Finally, there were several national experiments with co-operative colleges and training centers, notably here in the United Kingdom but also in Scandinavia, Canada, some African and many Asian countries as well. The list of examples and discussions of trends could be very long.

There was arguably therefore a golden age of co-operative education that one might trace, particularly in this country, but also mine, from the later nineteenth century until somewhere in the mid-twentieth century. What were the qualities of that education? What made it so engaging, so successful?

Partly it was because it was obviously and deeply engaged with the most pressing economic and social issues affecting the masses of the population at that time. It therefore provided understanding of the major forces shaping people's lives and it advocated at least partial solutions to some of the problems they confronted. Partly it was because many of the co-operative educational activities were concerned with the development of a more perfect democratic society. They challenged the completeness of a democracy that offered only occasional opportunities for people to choose their leaders through elections or through the complexities of political parties. They wondered why democratic forms should not be applied directly to economic organisations. Those questions were as controversial and as awkward for those times as they are for our own, but they stimulated discussion, learning and reflection; they were superb subject matter for an educational process, a fit focus for considerations of citizenship then as they would be now.

Co-operative education in its glory years was also concerned with what was called by some at that time "associative intelligence", a belief that there is a special kind of knowing that emerges when people work together effectively; a conviction that people through working together could learn skills that would make collective behaviour more economically rewarding, socially beneficial and personally satisfying.

The concept of associative intelligence, which might also be traced back to the revolutionary ferment of the Eighteenth century, was reflected in many of the early co-operatives of England: those who joined them were called "associates" not "members", the name the movement ultimately adopted and still uses. It was championed through the kind of secular morality promoted by "social missionaries" (including George Holyoake), a small band of aggressive humanists who travelled throughout the country in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was embraced by the "associationist" co-operativism of France, its most complete and profound manifestation. It shares something with the mutual/reciprocal ethos that in the last century characterised the co-operative movements of Northern Italy. In more recent times, it was echoed in the sense of mutuality and community that inspired the experiments at Mondragon, at least in its early years. It resonates through some of the Asian movements of recent times: for example, parts of the

Japanese co-operative experience and some notable experiments in India, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. Today, it is perhaps most readily grasped by people involved in, or observing, a group going through the almost inevitable agonies of developing a co-operative enterprise - though only a very few, if any, would now think of calling it "associative intelligence". It might be seen as kind of social capital, although the word usage suggests quite different ways of understanding human personality and to value human growth, one that suggests the even more materialistic and the less idealistic ways of our own era.

But how can we begin to understand this dimension of co-operative learning? Alas, we cannot safely use as arresting a form of enquiry as Voltaire did when he wrote *Candide* or even as dialectical a style as Owen did in his various writings. According to the more characteristically laboured ways of our times, we would earnestly produce a list that deconstructs the words into their most obvious emphases. Perhaps the list would include the following aspects of education: the dispensing of information, providing training, encouraging reflection, creating knowledge and facilitating learning.

One could argue that the flourishing of co-operative education took place because the movement embraced all these emphases; that they were all integrated and drew on a common reservoir of understanding, theory and purpose. The history of the British movement in its golden days suggests that this approach might have some merit. It dispensed information through publications from its local associations, through a national journal, through lecture series, through its libraries, and through special public events. It provided training through special programmes ultimately centred in its own college. It facilitated learning through pioneering adult group learning within co-operatives and ultimately within its college; it was one of the originators of what is today commonly called a seminar. It encouraged reflection through the kinds of publications it produced, including an impressive array of books, and in its cultural activities, including drama and, in the twentieth century, the production of film. It fostered the "production of knowledge", including people who deeply influenced the course of co-operative thought even to this day, people such as Henry J Wolff, Beatrice Webb, George Holyoake and G D H Cole. The movement was alive with intellectual vigour, and it reached out through a variety of educational channels to a large cross section of the British public. It was an educational moment the likes of which we have not seen again. It was whole greater than its constituent parts.

It might be useful to see what happened to the educational enterprise in the intervening years and particularly each of the

emphases that once gave the movement its great vigour. There can be no hope of resuscitating the same integrated co-operative educational programmes in the old ways: the times are different if not out of joint; the structures of our society, the development of knowledge, the methods of learning are hardly comparable. It might help contemporary co-operative enthusiasts, though, to reflect on the interconnectedness of co-operative education in the golden age and envision how a similar result might be achieved in our time, but one based on their own realities, technologies and institutional associations.

### **Education as Dispensing Information**

Like any movement, like any institution seeking to establish a relationship with its supporters, the co-operative movement and its organisations have an essential need to distribute information. Historically, they did so through pamphlets, books, newspapers (though few now exist) and films (these are even rarer). The movement never did utilise the possibilities of radio or television, as it should have - and that might partly explain why it declined as an educational force generally. It is obviously a reason why it did not "dispense" information about its ideas and possibilities very effectively during the last half of the twentieth century. In fact, given that the movement has missed or nearly missed every communication revolution since the pamphlet it is remarkable that it is as widely known as it is.

Almost everywhere, too, the movement failed - or was not allowed - to establish an accurate or complete presence in the public education system. Private enterprise perspectives on economic life became the norms for study within educational institutions; alternative perspectives becoming "unfair pleading" by "special interests". Co-operative perspectives never became part of mainline economic discourse. Large faculties of business appeared in virtually every university of the industrialised world but, even today and despite the importance of co-operatives as a business form, one can prowl the halls of hundreds of them and not find one co-operative specialist. Traditional disciplines, many of them buffeted by wars between the major ideological camps of liberalism and Marxism, at best patronised the study of co-operative thought and institutions; at worst they scorned them. The inherent conservatism of curricula in most disciplines accommodated interests in co-operative thought and institutions begrudgingly if at all. Having started its educational activities partly as a way to compensate for the inadequacies of public education, the

co-operative movement generally finds itself almost totally ignored in the educational institutions that have emerged to shape the minds and predilections of youth; to retrain adults in the "information age".

Dispensing information about the movement, therefore, has become a limited and, despite the best efforts of many co-operators and some co-operative organisations, largely a matter of "hit and miss" practices within co-operatives. Until recently at least, and even now only in a relatively few instances, that information flow does not significantly extend beyond the sign-up phase of membership, and all too often, when it does it is limited and uninspiring. The amount and variety of information available to members and even more to the general public does not adequately project the power and possibilities of the co-operative form of enterprise and the nature of co-operative thought. Moreover, whatever exists has tended to become directed learning, focused on imparting facts and promoting loyalty, a kind of communication not unlike advertising, the kind of propaganda George Keen would have spurned.

Why is this so? Partly it has to do with the dynamics within co-operative organisations ... how money is budgeted, how institutions seek to preserve their competitive advantages, how power is distributed. Perhaps, too, it is a reflection of how the core behind the educational process within co-operatives is in need of refurbishment. Those who seek to reverse the trend of weakened powers of information distribution, now decades old, face an intimidating prospect.

Nevertheless, there are encouraging signs that a counter attack is beginning, most notably in increased resolve in some co-operative organisations, the more abundant distribution of information over the Internet (such as the remarkable project aimed at recovering the co-operative past through its web site undertaken by the Co-operative College), the slow but steady expansion of Co-operative Studies within the academic community.

### **Education as Training**

One of the most obvious needs people face when they start co-operatives, from the nineteenth century to the present time, is the need for training in the kinds of competencies required for the adequate performance of their duties. In the formative period of the movement in each country, the volunteer leadership, often drawn from segments of the society with limited formal education, needed to learn the skills and understandings required to run meetings, engage members, carry out simple business practices

and communicate effectively. The results were remarkable programmes in adult education; indeed, the main reason why the flowering of co-operative education occurred.

As co-operatives grew, educational and training priorities changed to focus more on employees needing skills in such fields as accounting, marketing and human resources. While the educational institutions that developed within the co-operative movement tried to meet these needs, an increasing number of co-operative organisations turned to mainstream public and private institutions for most of their training, a trend usually justified by the immense challenges co-operatives faced as they institutionalised. It was also the result of the emergence of human resource departments within co-operatives, particularly large ones, wishing to assert their independence, build their own structures, advance personal careers and utilise industry-specific training programmes.

The result has been that the co-operative component of many training programmes has tended to be isolated to a few introductory sections or modules. The emphasis has shifted to competency-based training, usually associated with specific tasks within a co-operative's management system. It has rarely included strong components on the specific requirements and the development of the kind of organisational culture necessary for a dynamic, integrated co-operative organisation. It has rarely provided the kind of opportunities required for substantial, meaningful reflection.

The biggest challenge, however, lies with the maturation of concepts about co-operative management. While several co-operative institutions and many co-operative educators have tried over the years to address the more complex issues around management, the *effort* has not achieved the goal. In a sense the problem has been caused by inadequate financial support, perhaps understandable because the costs for good management programmes are very high. Somewhat related - but a little more complicated than mere financial issues - the research base for co-operative management has been very weak, understandable enough because the gurus and the business schools rarely consider the challenges and responses characteristic of co-operative organisations. Consequently, the common practice of merely adapting what the current business literature currently endorses has become the norm: while doing so might be useful - and parts certainly are - it is not an approach that in the long run will be satisfactory or even secure the survival of co-operative enterprise. Ultimately, the only fully satisfactory body of research and training for managers - as well as employees, directors and members - will emerge when there are a sufficient number of co-operative managerial specialists

adequately supported, a kind of massive co-operative endeavour involving practitioners, researchers and trainers across several institutions, co-operative and academic. It will require far more co-ordination and - ironically - genuine co-operation within the movement and among researchers than commonly exists now.

In the meantime, several promising beginnings can be observed. The increasing attention to management training in the British movement, within a co-operative framework is encouraging. The development of co-operative managerial programmes in some universities is a positive step. There are numerous possibilities for the co-ordinated - and hence cost effective - production of training materials. There could be incredible opportunities for the greater utilisation of electronic learning and communication in the training process, but only again if there is effective co-ordination and the reduction of institutional barriers.

### **Education as Encouraging Reflection**

There has always been a tension within co-operative educational circles between those who would emphasise practical, specific training and those who would stress broader - sometimes called philosophical - education. That tension will never disappear and in balance it often leads to healthy debates. In the struggle between the two perspectives, the more practical approach usually dominated in the twentieth century. Partly, that was because co-operative leaders by instinct and often by necessity are practical people, typically most concerned with resolving the daily issues of their co-op. Partly, it was because basic issues were ignored or downplayed on an international level because of seventy years of uncertainty over the nature of co-operatives in the former USSR as well as the complexities of co-operative development in many southern countries. Consequently, the movement tended to address more successfully practical, specific problems and to avoid the more contentious theoretical issues.

To some extent, the pendulum swung back to theory with the international discussions about values and identity during the 1990s as the Soviet regimes crumbled and the problems confronting both southern and northern societies could not be avoided. It would be unfortunate, though, if the reflective impulse ended there. Some tasks emerging out of those discussions, notably the working out of operating principles for each of the co-operative sectors, remain to be done, particularly around issues of management, capital and workers. Even more importantly, the movement is confronting some major challenges that demand reflection. Some of them, such as

creating adequate capital resources, might seem to be specific and practical but in reality they are virtually all connected to the extensive adjustment going on in the world today, whether it be called the New Economy or globalisation or some other term.

Addressing underlying "philosophical" issues is never easy and seldom immediately rewarding. It requires reflection, which in turn requires time, that most precious of human gifts. In the golden age much of the reflection was the result of class association, the fact that key members of the intellectual leadership were from the moderately "leisured" class and had time to donate to a movement in which they deeply believed. Much too came from a working class leadership that was prepared to contribute vast amounts of time, in evenings and weekends, to a movement ingrained in their popular culture, one that met basic needs - and that gave them status.

Today, the pressures of time for most people seem overpowering, the opportunities for reflection and exchanges of considered opinion infrequent. Cell phones and emails continuously interrupt our days, reducing reflective moments to sound bites not unlike those that are too often the insights on which we develop our world views. Within the co-operative world the requirements for accountability lead to unceasing rounds of meetings, many of them hearing reports on actions already taken, few of them really engaging the minds and spirits of their participants. There is so much doing there is little time for thinking; the world's minutiae are too much with us.

Reflection also flows from deepening understanding and in our times that partly involves research and the preoccupations of the "chatting classes", in the media and in the universities, by and large two wastelands for co-operatives. An encouraging counteraction to this unfortunate state of affairs is the gradual development of Co-operative Studies as a field of enquiry. It is one of the most promising developments for the stimulation of reflection - if it has the opportunity to grow as it could. It will help to create the new knowledge - and the new ways of thinking about old issues - upon which more meaningful reflection can be based. It could provide the space - intellectual and programmatic - that co-operators have long said they wanted in the academic community, still, despite the pressures, one of the few possible locations for sustained, reflective discussion.

### **Education as Creating Knowledge**

In its halcyon days in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, co-operative education enjoyed the benefits of a rich and

expanding, fresh and controversial, base of knowledge. Much of it was experiential, derived from what co-operators were learning in their local societies. It was concerned with such basic questions as the following. How to take stock in the local stores? What amount of stock was reasonable? How to set budgets? How to distribute work? How to decide what a board should do? What a manager and staff should do? Should the co-op extend credit to members? As the wholesale emerged - and with it its banking, insurance, farming and worker co-partnership enterprises - the questions became more complex: How to structure second and third tier organisations? How to accommodate the demands of workers? How to adapt democratic forms to steadily more complex institutions? How to develop appropriate relationships with movement in other countries? How to transcend different understandings from different cultural backgrounds and types of co-operative enterprise? They were challenging questions that drew the best co-operative minds of the times and a variety of different answers. The results can be found in the writings, speeches and activities of Gide, Woolf, the Webbs, Greening, Mitchell, Holyoake, all "knowledge producers" who influenced seventy years of co-operative thought. There was "crackle" in the air at co-operative gatherings of those days; serious issues were addressed not ignored.

The great promise of Co-operative Studies is that it can help to create the same intensity of debate over issues confronting co-operatives and co-operative thought in the modern era. What can co-operatives contribute to a world in which communications systems are transforming relationships around the world? Can co-operatives effectively use those technologies? What does technology mean for democratic practice - in co-operatives and in the world generally? How can co-operatives contribute to the preservation and expansion of civil society? How effective can co-operatives be in assisting communities to sustain their economy and be "masters of their own destiny" (to use a phrase that used to have currency in the co-operative movement)? What can co-operatives do to help preserve and enhance the environment? Can they be useful for young people striving to create their own kinds of political economy? How can people build effective transnational organisations rooted in communities and based on democratic premises? Can we shape an economy with a social conscience? Can co-operatives contribute to that end? Are there ways in which members of large co-operatives do not have to feel alienated?

The issues are as pressing, as large in scope as those that called forth many fine co-operative minds a century ago. Will the

current generation of co-operative leaders and supporters be able to respond as well? Will the movement tolerate them? Will it encourage them? Will the rest of the world notice?

### **Education as Facilitating Learning**

Beneath the co-operative approach, particularly in the golden age of co-operative education, there was a boundless faith in the capacity of the human mind and spirit: the optimism of Robert Owen about human nature and sometimes even a little bit more. The challenge was not so much what should be taught but how to facilitate the natural human capacity to learn. And learning took many forms, embracing the arts and sciences as well as bookkeeping. It usually involved learning in groups, in sharing ideas, in appreciating differences, in fostering openness. For the true co-operative visionary, it was the encouragement of associative intelligence.

In short, it was, at its ideal, co-operative learning, engaging both the young and old. It was a conviction that human beings continuously learn, a belief long held in the movement before the 1990s created the buzzwords of lifelong learning. These convictions can be seen fairly readily in the curriculum, the teaching methods, the resource materials even the architecture of buildings preferred by co-operative educators. It is perhaps the subtlest of emphases within the co-operative educational tradition. It tended to lose out because of the greater attractions of other kinds of education. It may be the hardest to recapture; it may be the most essential to the revitalisation of an honourable tradition. It may be the best contribution the co-operative movement can make to an informed, resourceful and empowered citizenry, the essential requirement for a genuinely democratic society.

**Ian MacPherson is Director of the British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies, University of Victoria**