



Co-operation and Education: Historical Perspectives

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The history of the British consumer co-operative movement reveals strong affinities between co-operation and education. Following the historical chronology of the movement helps to illuminate diverse meanings and practices of co-operative education. From the early nineteenth century, through long periods of growth and subsequent decline, many educational initiatives and experiments, both informal and formal, have been visible. While each of these were products of particular times, there were many interconnections between them and they continue to be of interest to co-operative educators.

Introduction

The history of the consumer co-operative movement reveals strong affinities between co-operation and education. Historically, these two forces have been locked into a mutual and dialogic relationship. Co-operators are often educators and vice versa. The objective of co-operatives is to meet the needs of members — needs which have included learning which may allow a co-operative to thrive. In turn, the characteristics and qualities of members will define the nature of their co-operative and co-operators have commonly asserted the need for higher levels of education to meet the new needs thrown up by changing circumstances. Learning itself can similarly be conceived of as a mutual process — knowledge may be augmented and shared indefinitely without necessarily reducing the learning of others. Indeed, the history of education itself has been caught up in contrasting tendencies of learning as a universal possibility alongside its constriction by institutions, qualifications, and regulations.

For Fred Hall and W. P. Watkins, writing in *Co-operation* (1948), co-operation and education were conjoined twins which thrived on each other. Their historical analysis testified that co-operation should be conceptualised as an educational movement that utilises economic means, rather than an economic movement that uses education. The insight was to be adapted by José María Arizmendiarietta in the Basque country, who fostered an educative process of Catholic social action which led to the setting up of a professional school that, in turn, supported the creation of a successful network of co-operative enterprises (Molina & Miguez, 2008). Many other examples could be cited of the ways in which co-operation spread through word of mouth and emulation across Britain and beyond. As co-operators from around the world met at annual

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meetings and congresses, they shared ideas and practices which eventuated in a wide range of co-operative and mutual enterprises — a significant example of transnational history in practice. Instead of a simple, unidirectional model of learning from the British example, multiple traditions developed.

Following the historical chronology of the British consumer movement helps to illuminate diverse meanings and practices of education. In the early nineteenth century, working class co-operators aimed to gain some control over their lives in the context of rapid social change. Following the Rochdale Pioneers, the development of a successful model of co-operation proliferated throughout the nineteenth century. Co-operation became part of a progressive narrative of improvement, democracy, education, literacy, and economic growth, all seemingly acting in concert. However, by the twentieth century, the movement faced new challenges, including intensifying capitalist business opposition, a more interventionist state, and a labour movement increasingly focused on electoral politics. Co-operative learning also took place in relation to empire and commonwealth, where notions of hierarchy and difference all blended with one another in diverse ways. During the post war years, a time of democratic and economic expansion, the consumer co-operative movement would also have to adjust to decline, especially visible from the 1960s. In a restrictive atmosphere, early progressive ideas had to be reined in. Nevertheless, in the context of a slowly diminishing movement, there have been periodic rediscoveries of co-operative values and principles in which education has played a central role. In the major reformulation in 1995, Principle 5 of the Statement on Co-operative Identity focused on ‘education and training’:

5. Education, Training, and Information. Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public — particularly young people and opinion leaders — about the nature and benefits of co-operation. (International Cooperative Alliance, 2015, p. 105)

At each stage of this history, dilemmas and contradictions permeated co-operatives and co-operative education, which may retain some relevance for contemporary times. As Raymond Williams noted, in different approaches, “History ... teaches or shows us most kinds of knowable past and almost every kind of imaginable future” (McCabe & Yanacek, 2018, p. 177). Equally, it is necessary to pay attention to the various contexts in which such educational initiatives arose, as the same practice may carry different meanings across time. The assumption that history progresses in developmental stages has come in for considerable criticism. Such stadial thinking has been hard wired into the way that human development has been conceived since the enlightenment, tendencies which certainly pervaded the ‘grand narratives’ constructed by liberalism, Marxism, and labour movements over preceding centuries. We are now more alert to unintended consequences, unexpected opportunities, exclusions, and the continuing possibilities of rekindling residual practices. It is with these provisos in mind that we can usefully outline a few key developments in the way that co-operative education has been conceived, drawing upon scholarly work (see Woodin, 2019).

Education and learning visibly suffused the early co-operative movement, explicitly in William King’s *Co-operator* or in the work of Robert Owen at New Lanark, as well as in the various attempts to establish workable co-operatives in which radicals were clearly learning from one another as they tested out new forms and attempted to build a movement. However, Sidney Pollard’s (1960) essay argued that, in the nineteenth century, the educative/utopian/visionary activity made way for more mundane business activity, characterised as a shift from community building to shop keeping. Stephen Yeo (1988), Peter Gurney (1996), and others subsequently showed that the utopian aspects of co-operation continued into the later period, often supported by education and learning. More recently, some of the educational aspects of co-operation have been examined, paying attention to both the formal and informal educational work of the movement (Diamantopoulos, 2023; Vernon, 2011, 2013; Woodin, 2011, 2019). By contrast, there has also been a focus on the ‘business’ side of the movement (Wilson et al., 2013). In addition, the role of co-operation in empire and international contexts is being re-evaluated (Rhodes, 2012; Windell, 2022; Woodin et al., in press). Finally, studies of co-operation in

schools and universities illustrate how historical practices of co-operative education have been adapted to contemporary practice (Ross & Noble, 2019; Woodin, 2015).

Early Co-operatives

Early nineteenth century co-operative movements responded to the political, social, and economic ferment of the period. They were part of working class attempts to alleviate poverty and gain some control over what they viewed as a general breakdown. The linguistic attempts at representing their purpose would hardly distinguish learning and co-operation: 'union' would refer to a broad number of attempts at working class emancipation, often informed by the idea that 'knowledge is power'. Co-operatives emanated directly from educational work such as mutual improvement societies, religious groups, and other networks. The model founded by the Rochdale Pioneers proved to be workable, selling unadulterated goods at market rates and then returning part of the profits to members in the form of a dividend. Educational change was central to this process and the Pioneers would devote 2.5% of profits to educational activities. Initially it was not clear what this was to be spent on, but the principle of education chimed with an experimental spirit. In time, the Society would fund libraries, reading rooms, purchase newspapers and books, and host lectures and classes which were, at times, aided by state funding. George Jacob Holyoake's *Self-help by the people: The history of the Rochdale Pioneers* (1858) played a crucial educational role in stimulating societies into existence. Rochdale was a key location for the university extension movement whereby travelling academics gave lectures to co-operators among others. Later the movement would provide a democratic model of practice for the Workers' Educational Association. Co-operatives might also serve a range of purposes including being a meeting place, an educational resource, a shop, and a means of employment — all representing the coming together of diverse motivations and needs of different groups. Collective social creation stimulated strong bonds of ownership over 'our co-operative' (Gurney, 1996; Woodin, 2011).

Economic participation in co-operatives necessitated learning to work together, organise finance, resources and people, and to run meetings. Addressing and anticipating new needs implied the democratisation of economic life. Visions of improvement were viewed in both individual and collective terms, in which learning was central. The organisation of working-class people pre-supposed resources and regularity, an ability not just with literacy and numbers, but to work collectively. Individuals incrementally pooled their meagre resources and were brought into a mutual set of relations with their societies — the more they shopped at co-operatives, the greater the personal benefits and the more the collective grew. Thrift and regularity were encouraged to help working-class families avoid debt and to squeeze unscrupulous traders out of existence. Notions of the co-operative commonwealth foresaw the gradual extension of co-operative forms across society which was to be based upon a version of what later came to be called the 'knowledge economy'. For much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was a mutual process that gained momentum as part of a shared understanding of general improvement and progress. As co-operatives became a way of life, daily existence helped to generate longer term visions.

The actual meanings of learning and education were notably much wider than those in the nascent world of formal and compulsory education. Shopping, public meetings, the opening of buildings, the range of newspapers and publications, and taking on elected posts all contributed to the formation and learning of members. In the words of Holyoake, the 'spirit of association' was to help co-operators work together in solidarity to foster change and prepare members for companionship:

They did not require classical, scientific, and historical knowledge in order to sell oatmeal and candles. It was the social education which goes before and after which they had primary need.

Education is not co-operative, because it is given by co-operators to co-operators, unless it is conducive to the formation of the co-operative mind ...

The education of the schools is of supreme service in public citizenship, but co-operation is a school of social citizenship, which erudition does not supply. (Holyoake, 1898, p. 7)

However, at the turn of the twentieth century, a formalisation and institutionalisation of education was taking place. As a result of the various education acts after 1870, a compulsory system of elementary education was being constructed, while secondary schools and universities were also expanding. State provision of libraries and adult education classes replaced some areas of co-operative practice. The general co-operative response was to focus on specifically co-operative education rather than general, liberal, or scientific learning that was covered by the national and local state. But the replacement of general co-operative activity did have the effect of stimulating a specific and specialised educational structure which became divided according to age and ability with levels, examinations, and certificates. This division of labour also reflected the growth of the movement which found itself having to introduce levels of representation (Vernon, 2013; Woodin, 2011).

Formalisation and Divisions of Labour

Formalisation could lead to new educational activity through channelling education into discrete organisational forms. Although many societies declined to set up education committees, new classes on co-operation developed elsewhere and new forms such as the Co-operative College would attract co-operators from Britain and the world. Significantly, the two key courses that the movement taught were in co-operation and bookkeeping (Woodin et al., in press). These two courses encapsulated the co-operative tension between the immediate and the utopian, the prosaic and the visionary. Accordingly, the movement helped to 'produce' and educate co-operators who became fluent in both bookkeeping and values (Woodin, 2011). The propagation of co-operative education gave rise to new ideas about educability, learning, and social change.

In addition, the spread of the state led co-operators to engage with it more productively, not least in terms of citizenship and many co-operators stood as magistrates, representatives on school boards, local government, and, ultimately, national government. The Women's Co-operative Guild carried out intensive forms of education based upon concerted efforts to bring about change in areas affecting working class women, such as maternity and poverty. Knowledge was shared on key topics, women were trained and given opportunities for public speaking, and personal experience of members was utilised to bolster the need for change (Davies, 1978, 1984; Scott, 1998). Despite the fact that many co-operators had been historically wary about the state, the movement had, and would continue to, use state funding to develop co-operative educational programmes, for instance from the Art and Science Department in the late nineteenth century or the 1918 Education Act (MacPherson & Yeo, 2005).

A new definition of co-operative education embraced both the need for autonomy and distinctiveness as well as an outward looking citizenship:

primarily the formation of co-operative character and opinions by teaching the history, theory, and principles of the movement, with economics and constitutional history, in so far as they have bearing on co-operation, and secondarily, though not necessarily of less import, the training of men and women to take part in industrial and social reforms and civic life generally. (cited in Hall & Watkins, 1948, p. 168)

This kind of approach was characteristic of the movement which attempted to handle contradictions and provide bridges between practices that were often opposed in the wider society.

In the twentieth century, the increasing specialisation of educational activity created problems for a movement which had supported educational reform. It attempted to encompass technical education, liberal education, and a notion of education as fostering social change. The movement had to think about educating its workforce to be technically proficient, but also

articulate and able to understand something about the history and scope of the movement. Educating the member in the history, principles, and ambit of the movement necessitated an understanding of the business, especially for board members. Consumer co-operatives never fitted neatly into the prevailing distinctions in adult education, which tended to eschew technical education while becoming embroiled in debates between advocates of liberal learning and education for social change (Rose, 2001; Woodin, 2007). A brief glimpse at the curriculum of the Co-operative College reveals technical courses in window dressing, accountancy, and shop management, secretarial courses, 'social' courses on the history and theory of co-operation, and 'colonial' courses dealing with what would later be called 'developing' countries. Given that the College was separated into discrete faculties and that students did not take all of these subjects, common courses on ethics and 'western civilisation' were introduced to foster mutual understanding. As in co-operative stores, the urge to be a general supplier of goods made it difficult to adjust to the need for specialisation in both business and education. However, Robert Marshall, the postwar principal of the College was clear that both social and technical students were concerned with means and ends and that a liberal all-rounded person could emerge from the technical training at the College. It was not always easy to amalgamate C. P. Snow's 'Two Cultures', but that is what was attempted (Snow, 1964; Woodin et al., in press).

The vesting of co-operative education in the educational secretary, answerable to an educational committee, was necessary to facilitate new activity, but also carried dangers of dampening down enthusiasm and spontaneity on the part of committees and members. As the movement grew, it attracted an increased membership of roughly three million by the outbreak of World War One, and ten million not long after World War Two (Woodin et al., in press). The complex organisational structure of the movement offered a necessary representative structure, but there were drawbacks in terms of ensuring democratic accountability and popular participation. For instance, one nagging complaint about the College was that it was too much of an elite institution, a 'snob factory', even though societies and individuals did not always make the effort to avail themselves of its services. Indeed, many in the movement continued to value experience over formal learning and qualifications (Woodin et al., in press).

One response to this dilemma was to develop popular educational activities within local societies in order to muster and channel enthusiasm. Of note here are cultural activities that Joseph Reeves developed at the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society (RACS) where members became researchers, producers, and consumers of research projects, film, drama, pageants, choirs, bands, dance groups, and other performing arts. Discussion groups also became popular in many co-operative settings, offering both learning and sociability (Attfield, 1981).

Within a movement which dedicated itself to greater equality and equity, wider social divisions could not always be managed effectively and might be reproduced in new ways. For instance, from the early twentieth century, notions of ability came into widespread use, so that many in the labour movement argued for an education suited to the different needs of all. The idea of recapitulation theory appealed to people in the Woodcraft Folk, which asserted that the maturation of the child progressed through stages which paralleled those of humanity, from 'savagery to civilisation', ideas developed from those of G. Stanley Hall (1904). Early proposals for comprehensive schools, known as multi-lateral schools, where 'different abilities' and interests would be catered for, also attracted co-operators concerned about the marginalisation of vocational education. While there were egalitarian reasons to support these developments, unwittingly, they might feed into wider inequalities (Woodin, 2019; Woodin et al., in press).

Co-operative educational models were also extended beyond the shores of Britain to colonial and commonwealth countries. For a time, policy makers started to recognise the long-term educational impact of the movement. Co-operatives appeared to square a circle in connecting traditional modes of life with the desired modernity and development of the post war years. The Co-operative College would be selected by the Colonial Office to train registrars, civil servants, and co-operative officials. At one level, this work tied the movement into a process of 'co-operative rule' in which the British attempted to cede independence while retaining its global influence. It has also been conceived as an attempt to spread democratic forms of economic

organisation. Indeed, co-operative colleges would be formed across Asia and Africa, where some of them would develop in new directions, for instance, into higher education institutions, including Moshi Co-operative University in Tanzania and the Co-operative University of Kenya (Shaw, 2019; compare Windell, 2022 and Rhodes, 2012).

From the 1960s, and perhaps earlier, the consumer movement has had to deal with a prolonged period of slow decline, losing out in a highly competitive market (Walton, 2009). The dividend itself became problematic and could not be maintained. There was a turn away from co-operative distinctiveness, values, and education. The cultural meanings and practices of co-operation were drained away, and elected posts, educational committees, and activities all haemorrhaged. At its height, there were thousands of elected posts in the movement. With the contraction of the movement, the relative importance of institutions such as the College grew, although it too would be marginalised in the attempt to maintain a distinctive public presence (Woodin et al., in press).

As co-operative businesses attempted to survive, they modelled themselves more upon their competitors. The rationalisation and enlargement of individual societies through the transfer of assets brought increasing divisions of labour in which the distance between leaders, elected officials, and members widened. For a time, the College was able to provide for the learning needs of senior leaders, although this capacity weakened over time. Larger societies increasingly organised their own training in-house. Some of those leaders continued to feel close bonds of loyalty to the movement and this helped them to react to business and consumer demands. Others, however, tended to drift away from any notion of co-operative democracy in highlighting the purely business aspect of the movement, or at least prioritised this approach while demoting the educational and visionary aspects as secondary or antiquated. In certain cases, boards of directors, comprising elected members, were not always able to control their societies effectively. Some chief executives were able to manipulate their boards, gaining benefits in pensions and pay and offering board members expenses and honorariums. At its most extreme, carpetbaggers attempted to demutualise the Co-operative Wholesale Society, a move seen off by the then chief executive, Graham Melmoth (Wilson, 2011). These kinds of issues stimulated the training for directors for which new frameworks were developed. Most recently, the Myners Report was highly critical of the way that boards were constituted and run, rejecting the claim that elected members without adequate technical experience could run businesses, irrespective of their education and training. The underpinning model has shifted considerably from that of a 'successful co-operative business' to greater emphasis upon shareholder capitalist firms (Co-operative Commission, 2001; Myners, 2014). Reconnecting these divides remains a challenge for any large-scale co-operative business, and is one which continues to exercise co-operatives globally.

In such inauspicious times, rediscovery and renewal have nevertheless been pursued periodically, notably in 1995, with the renewal of co-operative values and principles as central to co-operatives (MacPherson, 1995). In turn, this raised questions about whether such values and principles might be applied to other areas of activity such as care, leisure, and sport, with different incarnations termed 'co-operative development' and 'new mutualism'. This was an idea that has had mixed results but continued to attract attention, as it had in colonial countries at an earlier point in time. The assumption that self-help could be stimulated from above could be problematic but did have some potential. For instance, co-operative schools for a time became a vibrant network which generated mutual energy. The impulse to build a 'co-operative university' out of the Co-operative College also gained momentum, but became unstuck in a difficult regulatory environment.

Conclusions

This brief outline gives an indication of the range of educative and learning activities in which the co-operative movement has been involved. It is necessarily a complex history which has had to respond to the needs of different constituencies, as well as the collective learning and

action which has infused co-operatives when at their most effective. For much of its existence, the consumer movement was searching for a distinctive curriculum and pedagogy suited to its co-operative nature. It is not a neat developmental story. Each initiative certainly developed in a specific cultural and social context, although educational forms could prove to be persistent and malleable to rediscovery and reworking in a new context. In that sense, none of them has necessarily been lost, but may retain relevance. These tendencies may receive another boost since the change of UK government in 2024.

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