



# Eau de Co-operation: An Exploration of the Essence of Co-operative Learning

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At the Co-operative College we conducted action research to explore co-operative learning and what this means to others. Over a period of four months, some of our learners, members, College team, and participants from the further and higher education sectors all took part in a variety of interactive workshops using co-operative learning approaches. We used a qualitative research method to gather participant thinking, which was underpinned by a metaphorical framework: the art of distilling fragrances. Fragrances are created through the process of blending a variety of different ingredients (notes) that produce both range and depth; these top, base, and heart notes are distilled together to produce a unique fragrance. What is more, each fragrance profile is endlessly adaptable, changing its character through time, space, and context. Co-operative learning too is built on a blend of ingredients, such as individual and co-operative values, lived experience, and a range of participatory learning theories. The findings suggested that top notes happen before the learning takes place, while heart notes occur during learning, and the base notes come about after the learning process. Equally, throughout the whole learning process it became clear that for co-operative learning to be effective, each stage is blended through common themes which were identified. Analysis of the data collected identified that six consistent learning influences are present within the top, heart, and base notes of learning, namely social, environmental, equitable, cultural, behavioural, and developmental influences.

## Introduction

This research study builds on the concept of co-operative learning and what this means in practice, using a metaphorical framework based on the process of fragrance distillation. The pedagogical approach of the teaching staff at the UK Co-operative College is underpinned by participatory, dialogical, and collaborative learning theories. However, to gain a deeper understanding of this approach and define what the College means by 'co-operative learning', it felt important to draw on the views of others. The aim of the research was therefore to establish and collate the thinking of participants into a 'learning distillation'. This process, grounded in shared values and lived experience, aimed to understand what co-operative learning means to different groups of people and how this contributes to socially just co-operative education.

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## Background

Co-operative learning research to date focuses on the idea that students work in groups towards a shared goal in the live classroom to collaboratively complete activities, tasks, and assessments under the supervision of the teacher (Davidson, 2021; Werdelin & Howard, 2021). The instructions are given and monitored by the teacher and each student is accountable for their group's success.

However, the research does not consider co-operation as a way of being and there is a lack of evidence supporting the practice of co-operative values and individualised learning to ensure the learning journey is equitable for all participating. Arguably, with existing research focusing on co-operatives as "Of or relating to co-operation; having the quality or function of co-operating; that works together, or with another or others, towards the same end, purpose, or effect; collaborative" (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.) and co-operative learning being about the range of teaching methods to encourage students to work together (Davidson, 2021), this may not have been a priority.

As such, is it useful to consider the Statement on the Co-operative Identity, which defines a co-operative as "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise" (International Co-operative Alliance, 2015, p. 105).

This sense of being and way of life is further accentuated with co-operatives being grounded in a set of shared values underpinning everything they do. Therefore, surely co-operative learning should be viewed through the lens of co-operative identity and practising values, to ensure economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations are at the heart of the learning, as opposed to purely individual or group academic attainment. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that Robert Owen, the 'Father of Co-operation' who believed passionately that everyone was entitled to participate in learning, encouraged children as soon as they could walk to experience education, not only through books but by taking part in nature walks and practical learning (Lonergan, 2019).

Noble and Ross (2020) identified that conceptualising co-operative learning can come with challenges, one of those being that co-operative learning is considered 'unstable'. They attempt to address challenges of understanding co-operative pedagogy as a "combination of ideas and approaches which are brought and held together by dynamic, intersecting processes. The value of these is known in isolation but the total value becomes more powerful when bundled" (Noble & Ross, 2020, p. 25). Using Manet's (1880) "Une botte d'asperges", a still life painting of a bunch of asparagus, as a metaphor, they outline the 'theoretical bundle' as being the twine. They relate it to three different themes: how we learn and make new knowledge, what we learn, and where we learn. Based on these ideas it could be argued that co-operative learning is about ensuring education is equitable, democratic, anti-capitalist, and challenges injustice, exploitation, and inequalities in all their forms, underpinning the co-operative identity through shared values.

From an earlier theoretical position, literature suggests that the current method and vision of teaching and learning at the UK Co-operative College is grounded in the work of educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire, who was influenced by Marxist and existential philosophy in education for social justice. Freire focused his work on the inequalities of capitalist societies, especially in the context of education, framing the idea that educational systems oppressed those who were already oppressed in society, giving them no choice or freedom to participate in education that was liberated, transformational, or allowed participants to think for themselves (Mollick, 2021). Dialogue was paramount to Freire's (1972) work, with students encouraged to be the drivers of their own learning, sharing words and experiences that were meaningful to them. The concept of praxis, defined as "reflection and action upon the world in order to change it" (Freire, 1972, p. 51) was also a significant part of his work, underpinning the importance of the learner being located centrally to the learning environment, rather than the teacher being the bearer of knowledge.

Likewise, the opportunities for continued reflection and action, providing the learner with the skills, knowledge, and behaviours to not only participate in the experiences of learning but being an owner of it too. It is the learner who leads the way through their lived experiences, values, and each other, whilst the teacher steps back and holds the space for others to thrive. This method of teaching and learning has the power to demonstrate equity, equality, and inclusion to value the difference in all individuals. Likewise, participatory learning and learners being present as equals creates an anti-competitive culture, equality of voice, and authority is de-constructed by a collective critical practice building solidarity through dialogue and shared values (hooks, 2009).

Freire was also influenced by John Dewey's concept of experiential learning — *learning by doing*, where the teacher provides opportunities for learners to actively learn rather than merely listening and writing (Nweke & Owoh, 2020). Concerned with the importance of experience in learning, Dewey claimed that education does not have enough focus on the learner's own individual experiences or opportunities to share these within an education community, suggesting this to be known as 'miseducation' (Pring, 2000). Dewey's work was focused around seven principles, which capture the need for freedom, creativity, and interactivity within the learning environment to develop and prepare learners for a democratic society, thereby enabling them to participate in social change (Bates, 2019).

The theories of John Dewey and Paulo Freire are significant contributions to the background research of a co-operative learning vision, and although they do not specifically link to co-operative learning prescriptively, the ideas within their educational philosophy are relevant. Indeed, as with the work of Noble and Ross (2020), there is evidence to suggest that Dewey and Freire are also concerned with challenging the injustices existent in education. Therefore, the theoretical perspectives provided above are imperative in supporting our vision of what co-operative learning means on a practical level and to be able to articulate what this looks and feels like to all involved.

## Methodology

This study, framed within participatory action research, was undertaken with a range of participants from staff, students, and members of the UK Co-operative College, to practitioners working in the further and higher education sectors. As action research "integrates the development of practice with the construction of research knowledge in cyclical process" (Noffke & Somekh, 2005, p. 89) it was felt to be an appropriate approach, given the overall aim of understanding the practice of co-operative learning to inform curriculum development. Furthermore, it aligns itself to the co-operative values and principles with its focus on group activity and democracy (Cohen et al., 2007).

Locating the study within the interpretivist paradigm, capturing the views, thoughts, and experiences of the participants was central to the research (Bryman et al., 2016). Interpretivism is based on the view that the social world cannot be studied through a scientific model (Bryman et al., 2016). Instead, interpretivism provides a subjective perspective on understanding, knowledge, and lived experience, separating findings and methods from an objective stance. As such, the research method was influenced by phenomenology as we wanted to gain a deep first-hand understanding of participants' thoughts and experiences of co-operative learning. Indeed, in the assumption in phenomenology that individuals see things differently, with a person's version being recognised as valid (Denscombe, 2017), the application of the co-operative value of equity is present.

Visser-Wijnveen et al. (2009) suggest a metaphor "can be used as a vehicle to say what is actually meant but is difficult to explain" (p. 675) and so used metaphors to explore academics' conceptions of knowledge, research, and teaching. Given the challenges of conceptualising co-operative learning (Noble & Ross, 2020), we decided to use a metaphor of distilling fragrance in a group activity undertaken by participants to identify and explore the components of co-operative learning.

Participants all took part in an 'eau de co-operation' workshop either in person or online via Zoom. Workshops were held with the UK Co-operative College staff team, a group of learners who were on a study visit to the UK, Co-operative College members, and with participants at a research conference who all worked in the further and higher education sectors. All participants were asked to complete the same activity in groups, except for those at the research conference who, due to time constraints, completed the activity individually. It is important to note here that all the workshops adopted a co-operative learning approach as we currently envisioned and practised. As educational practitioners, we felt it was necessary to practise what we were researching, or what we assumed based on learning theories and our own lived experiences of teaching and learning. Therefore, workshops embodied practicalities from the work of Paulo Freire and John Dewey, ensuring that there was a practice of care and equality, allowing participants to work collaboratively, explore their lived experiences, and be led by them rather than us, the teachers.

At the start of each workshop, participants were introduced to the concept of co-operative learning at the UK Co-operative College as a blend of 'ingredients' underpinned by collaborative and participatory learning theories, with the golden thread of co-operative values and principles. Using a worked example to explain and model they were then asked what they considered to be in the blend: the ingredients of 'eau de co-operation'. It is thought by Sherrington and Caviglioli (2020) that explaining and modelling key concepts, along with the successful completion of activities, are useful to learners because they reduce the load of cognition required to not only understand how to complete the activity, but also think about the answers required. In Figures 1 and 2 below, the art of distillation has been modelled for both fragrance and learning. The diagrams provided further insight into the meaning and purpose of top, heart, and base notes. Both diagrams were presented to participants in the workshops to illustrate the distillation of fragrances and underpin what we mean by terminology such as blend of ingredients, distillation, top notes, heart notes, and base notes. In addition, to further demonstrate our own ideas, we provided the image in Figure 2. The images remained the same as in Figure 1 (barring the blend of ingredients) and examples were provided that mirrored the distillation of fragrance, however, in the context of learning. Using the metaphor of fragrance distillation, participants were asked to identify the top, heart, and base notes of their fragrance, and to record their thinking on flip charts (in person workshops) or on a Mentimeter (online workshops). The results were then shared with participants during the live session and used to form a collective discussion, inviting reflections from different voices.

Figure 1: Fragrance distillation based on Brown (2022)

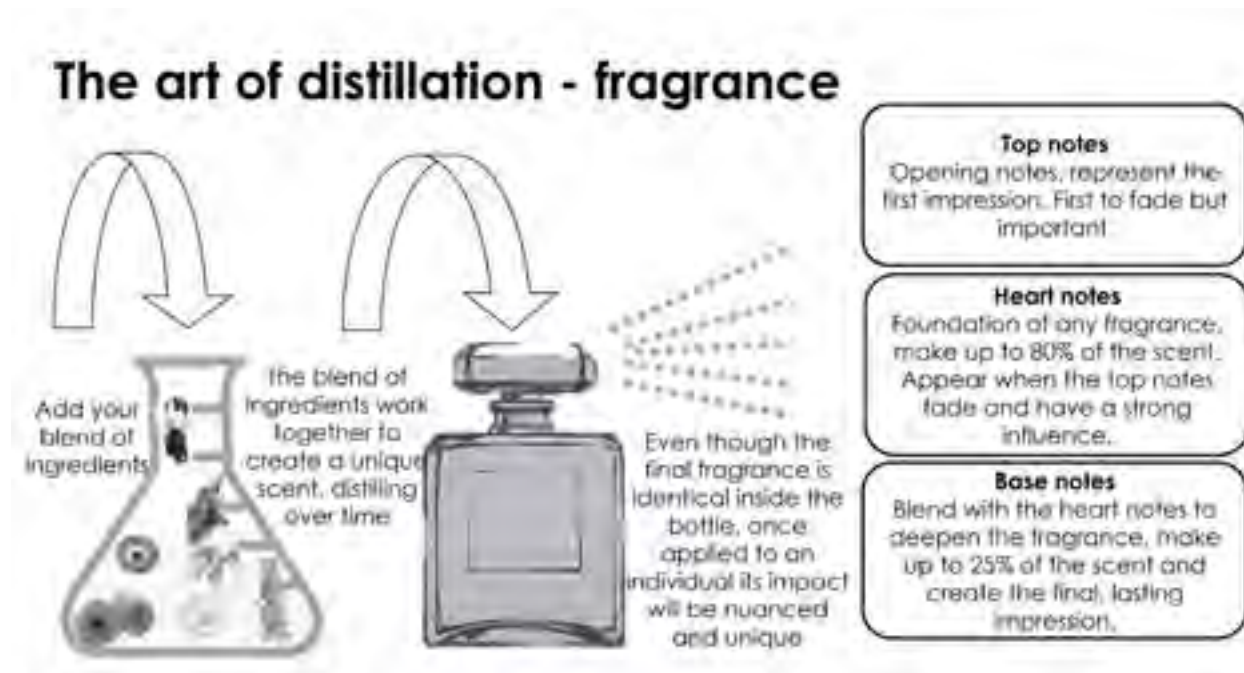
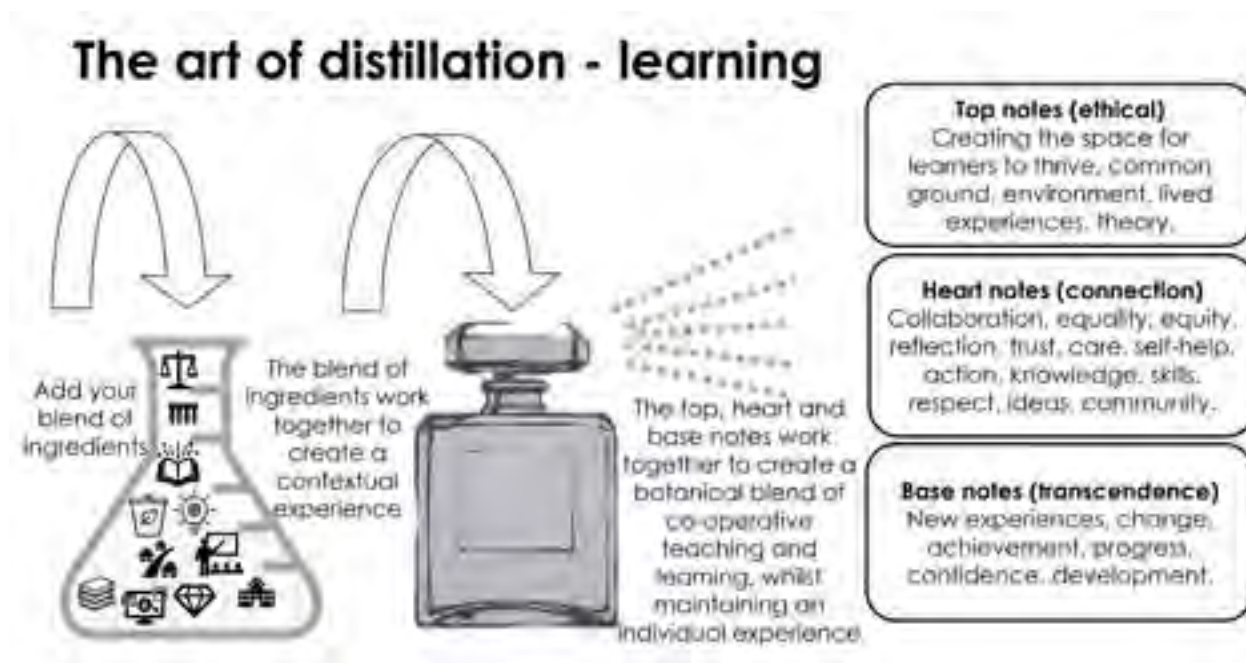


Figure 2: Learning distillation created by Co-operative College (2023)



## Summary of Findings

A thematic data analysis was undertaken and common themes appeared throughout the top, heart, and base notes, which could suggest the categories (raw materials) of ingredients which are added to at the beginning of the distillation process. For example, in fragrance distillation the category could be fruit with ingredients such as oranges, limes, or lemons. In learning distillation, a category of culture has been identified and ingredients include values, collaboration, and agreement. Other categories/raw materials found in fragrances include flowers, leaves, grasses, balsams, and woods. Likewise, within the research data further themes were identified as social, environmental, equitable, cultural, behavioural, and developmental — each one inclusive of various entries from participants. In Table 1, a brief overview of each theme and the number of entries in each theme against each note has been collated. The numerical data represent all participants.

The themes in the table were identified through completing a thematic analysis, as opposed to being stated during the different workshops, the reason being we wanted the data to be gathered naturally from the participants' individual views, as opposed to guiding them into pre-defined themes. Therefore, the themes of social, environmental, equitable, cultural, behavioural, and developmental emerged from the participants' responses and subsequently led to the total number of responses in each column differing. We discovered patterns in the data that could suggest top notes are present before the learning, heart notes during learning, and base notes after learning. The top notes focused on creating the right social conditions for people to take part in learning through a sense of equitable access. The heart notes were dominated by the cultural aspects of the learning, what actually happens in the learning space, and how it happens. The base notes clustered around the positive change that takes place for the learner, influenced as much by the content of the learning itself as by a range of other factors such as individual and shared experiences during the learning process. However, this is not prescriptive and there was evidence of all the notes blending into each other; like the ingredients of a fragrance, they may fade but their tones are still present and can appear at different stages on application of the fragrance.

Table 1: Identified themes and occurrences in top, heart, and base notes

	Top note	Heart note	Base note	Total
<b>Social</b> — the people involved and the relationships and connections they have. What people need and want to participate in learning.	11	9	5	25
<b>Environmental</b> — the place and space people learn and the resources they have so they feel they belong and are safe to learn.	5	2	3	10
<b>Equitable</b> — all learners have everything they need so that they experience the same opportunities as their peers. All systems, processes and strategies are fair and just.	8	14	2	24
<b>Cultural</b> — the norms, symbols, artifacts, values in all phases of learning, and the way people work and learn. An agreed co-designed system.	6	23	5	34
<b>Behavioural</b> — reactions of people in relation to social stimuli, the environment, the culture. The reactions of people in relation to ways of learning and working.	1	9	6	16
<b>Developmental</b> — related to the growth of an individual based on the experience of learning, whether that be from the tutor, reflection, peers, or independently.	6	6	15	27
Total	37	63	36	137

Here, a brief overview of the qualitative data has been provided as a way of sharing findings, with the text in bold representing quotes taken from the raw data.

### Top notes

- **Social:** The entries received related to that idea of setting the scene before teaching and learning but also seeping into the live aspect of teaching and learning. For example, **“using a ‘hook’ to build curiosity, developing that idea of understanding that gets people/individuals interested”**.
- **Environmental:** The entries focused on **“finding the common ground”** indicating that perhaps for learning to happen co-operatively it is important everyone can **“learn together”** in a place that is **“safe”**, where a **“sense of belonging is created”**.
- **Equitable:** Responses in the top notes identified themes such as fair processes, which are inclusive, diverse, and accessible. This was also linked to the culture and social setting of the teaching and learning and the initial meeting within the learning environment. Entries included links to **“supporting the wellbeing of learners”** and **“financial support being available, making learning economically accessible for everyone”**.
- **Cultural:** The cultural theme is representative of the process and the values. For example, **“creating conditions, building relationships, openness, and trust”**. This suggests learners are able to come into a space that is **“equal”**, with a **“sense of belonging”** and is **“built on shared values allowing people to build relationships”**.
- **Behavioural:** The behavioural theme at this initial point is linked to **“feeling safe”**, you can **“make a mistake and not be judged”**. Behaviour, although it’s very limited at the top notes, is where it begins and then it is something that is developed further throughout the blend through collaboration, shared values, and working practices.
- **Developmental:** The developmental theme can be identified as growth from experience. For example, **“feeling free to share your ideas without judgement, no stupid questions”**. An opportunity for people to come to a learning experience with their own **“lived experiences”** and to support others in their development as well.

## Heart notes

- **Social:** It is clear from the responses that 'social' has seeped through from the top notes into the heart notes, with nine responses. The social theme is **"values-driven"**, for example entries include **"valuing and considering all points of view of experiences each group member brings to the conversation"**.
- **Environmental:** The space people learn in and how that is set up is important for progress, similarly if learning happens outside or inside, linking to the **"learning environment"**.
- **Equitable:** There was a strong link to **"offering choices to learners in terms of activities and resources"**, that will **"empower"** them to decide how they want to learn.
- **Cultural:** Entries link to **"spontaneity"** but with a relationship to agreed parameters. For example, the norms of any class, team, or learning environment is about creating those **"shared accountability measures, those shared parameters"**.
- **Behavioural:** Entries here include, that we are **"pledging to continue or to do something differently"**, suggesting a sense of accountability over what I'm going to do, how I am going to do it, and where I will end up.
- **Developmental:** The developmental theme in the heart notes is linked to opportunities to reflect, receive feedback, and learn from it. For example, **"opportunities for learners to use their new skills in context"**, thinking about the learning about what is improved and the **"next steps"**.

## Base notes

- **Social:** Here the social theme represents what people do with their learning, and how they can make change for themselves and their communities. It is clear from the entries that there was a common understanding about learners **"using their experiences to inspire others"** and for them to **"become changemakers"**.
- **Environmental:** The base notes in this category were more limited, but these suggested the space/place people learn and take their learning.
- **Equitable:** The data have suggested **"individualised outcomes"**. Everyone is included in the decision-making process and the design of their learning outcomes. For example, learning outcomes are designed with the learner, rather than broadly as a whole class.
- **Cultural:** The idea of **"collective values being the base of learning, experience and learning from others can translate into action plans and working groups"**. This is very much linked to the idea of the base notes being something that comes after the learning experience.
- **Behavioural:** Some of the entries link to the outcomes of the session, for example **"learning outcomes that we can apply to our life, building accountability through communities of learning and practice"**. Holding ourselves accountable for what we need to do next.
- **Developmental:** Entries for this section are vast and an example is **"the learning you take away and that stays with you or that helps you change or act that is useful to your role, your life, and your ongoing learning journey"**.

## What the Data are Telling Us

As educational practitioners, the data encouraged us to reflect on the learning theories that were underpinning our practice. We went beyond making connections between the work of Freire and Dewey and the findings coming out of the data, leading to the blend of learning theories underpinning our co-operative learning approach to grow. All continued to be grounded in participation, dialogue, and collaboration, but by connecting them to the themes identified in the top, heart, and base notes, a more nuanced theoretical underpinning is formed, supporting 'how to' create a learning environment which contains the 'blend of ingredients' identified by participants.

For example, the top and heart notes create the conditions for praxis (Freire, 1972) leading to base notes reflecting positive changes taking place for learners. The importance of well-being, feeling safe, and no judgement was common across all themes, and so when considering how these conditions are — and can be — created, we were reminded of the application of Kline's (2009) Thinking Environment, which has belonging, democracy, and equality of thinking at its core. Furthermore, Kline advocates the importance of place, where an environment is created that lets learners know that they matter. Indeed, unless learners feel valued, how will the behavioural and developmental themes, reflective of praxis, be possible?

The themes that emerged in the top, heart, and base notes were social, environmental, equitable, cultural, behavioural, and developmental, all of which reflect the co-operative values. They represented categories of ingredients of co-operative learning and so, when considering each theme, the practical application of further learning theories was evident, though it must be acknowledged that, as with the top, heart, and base notes, the themes blended into each other.

For the social and cultural themes, the importance of valuing lived experiences and dialogue between learners was paramount, lending itself to the creation of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), where people with common interests come together and learn how to do something better through the interactions they have. Values were at the forefront, and this leads us on to the theme of equitable as, to bring equity into interactions, all those present need to have a voice and know that they will be listened to, lending itself to the use of thinking rounds (Kline, 2009) to support equitable and democratic participation. This theme also highlights the importance of a shared accountability and a sense of belonging which relates to the co-design and collective decision-making element of the cultural theme. How this is done draws on Cormier's (2008) concept of rhizomatic learning where the community is the curriculum. This in turn, leads into the behavioural and developmental themes, and they return us to the Freirean concept of praxis and the actions that will be taken because of the learning. However, the question must be asked of what makes the application of these themes different to other teaching contexts influenced by collaborative, participatory, and dialogical learning theories?

## How Will this Influence Our Practice?

The original aims of the Co-operative College, as it was set up in 1919, were twofold. The first was to provide co-operators with the knowledge and skills to run successful values-led enterprises, guided by the co-operative principles. The second was more concerned with the behaviours that supported being an effective co-operator, such as building the co-operative identity and the co-operative spirit (Hadfield, 2019). Influenced as much by the changing adult education landscape as by the evolution of the co-operative movement, the College of today has less of a role in teaching the technical and operational aspects of running co-operatives, and a much stronger emphasis on the values and behaviours required for working together effectively. In some ways, this has led the College to a degree of existential reflection in recent decades as it seeks to define its new identity and reflect on the scope and possibilities of the co-operative identity and values-focused education that is needed to support it to grow.



Much of the current literature on co-operative learning focuses on the technical aspects or tools that can be used to create a collective and shared learning experience, where learners are equally responsible for creating outcomes. Our aim at the College was to examine what we meant when we discussed our co-operative learning approach, knowing it was more than merely group or collective learning, and that it was framed as much by the 'doing' of co-operation as the 'being' a co-operator. Also, while it is important to factor in the not-insignificant legacy and heritage of the Co-operative College in terms of its position within the movement, it remains imperative that the College retains its relevance and has the confidence to forge its own path by examining and refreshing its approach to co-operative learning.

Our current Co-operative College (2022) strategy describes this approach as “always collaborative, where teaching and learning is as much steered by our learners as it is by us” (p. 3). This research and its findings have been a first step in collaboratively defining and steering what the College means by its distinctive learning approach. Throughout this process we have discussed the difficulties of landing on one succinct and static description of what this means. The findings of this research have so far underscored how our respondents perceive that co-operative learning is a mix of different themes which can influence the experience at different stages of learning. This backs up our current practice of creating unique learning experiences for the learners we work with, based on bringing the co-operative values to the fore of our practice, and has helped us in giving us a framework, derived from qualitative responses for defining our approach. The co-operative values are as follows:

### **Self-help**

The research told us that people want to be able to have practical outcomes from training that they can apply to their own context or role, with clear next steps. We structure our sessions so that our learners have the opportunity to take an active role in setting their own goals, and using their own skills, experience, and knowledge to make the connections between their learning and the context in which it will be used or applied.

### **Self-responsibility**

Our findings suggested opportunities for learners to use their new skills in context were important to them and putting their learning into action. We encourage our learners to take responsibility for their own learning and to make connections between their learning and their own roles, specifically encouraging them to give examples of how (and when) they are going to put their learning into action.

### **Democracy**

The theme of democratic learning spaces where all people are able to participate and share skills and knowledge without judgement came through strongly from the research. Our training is based on participatory practices and giving learners an equal voice to influence the session and make decisions about how they would like to learn.

### **Equality**

Our research indicated that respondents considered it was important to make learning accessible for everyone as well as offering choices that empower them in how they want to learn. We rely heavily on discussion-based, learner-led training and regularly respond to learners' interests and priorities to ensure participants have a voice in setting the scene for their learning.

### **Equity**

The importance of individualised outcomes and the sense of valuing and considering all points of view and experiences was highlighted in our findings. Our training spaces are created using techniques such as those from Thinking Environment (Kline, 2009) practice, based on behaviours that can create transformative impact through valuing everyone equally as a

thinker. The Thinking Environment is a philosophy of transformative communication, using ten components: attention, appreciation, ease, encouragement, diversity, information, feelings, equality, place, and incisive questions.

### **Solidarity**

The research underlined how creating a sense of belonging and finding common ground was important for learners to feel safe. As above, using tools such as Thinking Environment (Kline, 2009) practices, we aim to create safe and respectful spaces based on building strong relationships where our learners are able to do their best thinking.

### **Ethical values of openness, honesty, care for others, and social responsibility**

These ethical values were touched on in each of the top, heart, and base notes of the research, particularly in the sense of creating safe spaces that were open, non-judgemental, trusting, and which enable people to build relationships, as well as the idea of using the learning to become changemakers. A key part of our training approach is to create a values-focused space where both participants and trainers can be open and honest, removing the distance that often exists in traditional learner/teacher relationships and dynamics. We actively invite people to share their own knowledge/expertise and to provide constructive challenge, while also taking responsibility for their actions and considering the needs of others, both as part of the learning as well as applying this outside of the learning space.

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to investigate the co-operative learning approach as something distinctive which is used at the UK Co-operative College, as a way of building on education that is socially just and equitable for all. The findings substantiate co-operative learning to be a mix of different themes that influence the experience at different stages of learning and reflecting on this has helped us to frame our approach using the lens of co-operative values. Future research will form part of our ongoing commitment to continue exploring co-operative learning in action. Examining how this plays out with specific groups of learners, such as in our youth-focused programmes, will enable us to gain a better picture of what co-operative learning looks and feels like for young people, as well as adult learners, and how can we ensure our co-operative learning approach is agile and adaptable enough to represent a full range of learners in different settings. As such, this research is not an end in itself, it is an open-ended and iterative process that will continue to influence both our current and future learning offer.

## **The Authors**

Stacey Salt joined the Co-operative College in June 2022 and is the Lead Education Practitioner. Her values-based approach and passion for social justice are what has led her to the College. Stacey is a keen writer and researcher with an interest in empathy and equity for everyone in education. Ali Longden joined the College in 2021 having spent over seven years at Northern College where she led the Higher Education and Teacher Education programme. As Principal, Ali leads the Learning Team and is responsible for the College's curriculum offer, and the quality of teaching and learning. Amanda Benson joined the College in 2016 and is the Curriculum Development Manager. She has significant international experience in the world of co-operatives, a strong commitment to adult and community learning, and extensive experience of offering pastoral support to students in all educational settings.

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