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Containing Spaces for Learning through Experience: A Psycho-social Approach to Co-operation

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This paper investigates one of the fundamental differences between a co-operative undertaking and a capitalist business: democratic participatory governance as opposed to hierarchical leadership. The latter often comes across as a 'norm' to be taken for granted. As such, co-operation is translated into the language of 'team work' and 'staff consultation', the domains of a successful capitalist company. Participation in co-operative governance, however, is more profound than this and requires an enhanced understanding of the somatic and affective qualities behind democratic decision-making. The paper suggests that a new language might be used to describe this difference, perhaps collective governance should be regarded as a virtue that can be recognised as working beyond values, even co-operative values. A further question arises: if indeed co-operative participatory governance is about relationships among equals, how can this be taught and/or learnt beyond the hard lessons of life experience? What can educational establishments do to teach people how to participate and govern by participating? The paper suggests that possible avenues of exploration in search of an answer to these questions might lie in a psycho-social approach that is able to encourage group learning from experience.

Introduction

A principal feature of the co-operative organisation is that of leadership, governance, and decision-making being more evenly distributed than in a typical business designed along more or less hierarchical lines. As opposed to top-down decision-making, a co-operative business will work towards participation in governance and adhere to principles of democracy, to a greater or lesser extent. In the 'greater extent' of this range of possibilities, it may be that even the concept of leadership, which is such a prevalent theme in contemporary organisational studies, is anathema to co-operation, as identified by a member of the Unicorn Grocery workers' co-operative in Manchester – "There was a view that the concept of leadership did not fit with a worker-co-operative model based on democratic decision-making" (Neary et al., 2018, p. 9). The idea that leadership can be flattened and evenly distributed is almost a contradiction in terms. Many would consider leadership as needing the figure of a leader, in other words an

individual of status or expert knowledge or charisma beyond the perceived natural abilities of the followers. The fact that Neary et al. attempted an analysis of ‘co-operative leadership’ may well have been a futile or pyrrhic pursuit which does, however, demonstrate how taken-for-granted many such words, definitions, and concepts have become.

There are different ways of interpreting democratic governance which are not necessarily about leadership. At the time of writing, sociocracy is a popular choice, where agreement is reached through careful listening to all views and where someone with a dissenting opinion will consent to a motion as long as it is not completely opposed to a deeply held negative contrary view (Christian, 2016). In this system, the dissenting voice can nevertheless be a voice of consent and carried within the consenting whole. Sociocracy can be an effective form of governance and has been linked to transformative learning (Owen & Buck, 2020). There are some standard alternatives to this, with many co-operatives working on a consensus-only position, while others will work to a majority vote. However, any governance through democracy is not an easy option. It is easier and quicker to have a traditional leader/manager take decisions, following a brief and sometimes desultory ‘consultation’ with staff. Consultation has been identified by Neary et al. (2018), following Bernstein (2012), as the weakest management pretence at democracy in the workplace:

> Focusing on control, an organisation with minimal democracy in the workplace will operate on the basis of “consultation”, through techniques such as an impersonal suggestion box scheme or workers given “prior notice” of management’s decisions so that they can voice their views and perhaps stimulate reconsideration. (Neary et al., 2018, p. 3)

As opposed to consultation, this article understands authentic and practical democracy at work to be the essential element of co-operation and one that requires exploration and understanding if it is to be taught and learnt.

It is sometimes pointed out in the literature on co-operative education that there will often be an emphasis on the education of knowledge, such as training in the skills needed to develop a co-operative business (Crome & O’Connor, 2019), as opposed to any serious discussion of pedagogy and the learning experience as process, even in hugely successful co-operative environments, such as Mondragon (Wright & Manley, 2021). While experience is occasionally valued — “you learn what’s best for you and the co-op being with other co-operators … being with each other and learning from each other” (interview cited in Ross, 2019, p. 87) — it might be described as emanating from actual work experience in a co-operative, or through some kind of personal experience. For example, Crome and O’Connor point to Robert Owen’s learning from experience as being like a “discovery that owed much to his natural constitution, and the framing of his character during his formative years by a series of significant events” (2019, p. 8). However, if learning from experience is indeed important for co-operative learning, then these two avenues based on working life and personal experience fall to chance and circumstance. In the case of the personal life experiences of an individual, it also brings up the uncomfortable thought that people without some kind of special life experience might not be able to become co-operators. In this scenario of experiences, there is no role for any formal learning establishment — not work, not personal — and then there is no choice but to revert to the teaching (or training) of practical skills as knowledge. Indeed, perhaps this is more about training than education. It is as if the most important aspect of learning to co-operate, which is about learning to better relate with others in a complex form of self-governance and leadership, cannot be formally taught or learnt. It just ‘is’, through work or some personal chance, or, sadly, ‘is not’. Contrary to this assertion, this article discusses why experiential learning is important to co-operation and investigates the possibility of incorporating experience in the teaching and learning process.

Dewey’s Learning from Experience

By ‘learning from experience’, I am not referring to Dewey’s theory of experience, although this is a valuable stepping stone towards what he could rightly claim, in the first half of the twentieth

century, to have been synonymous with “progressive” or “new” education (Dewey, 1938/1963, p. 90). Dewey’s theories tend towards empirical experiments related to experiential learning: ‘trying’, testing, doing, and a process of trial and error modified through conscious reflection. As he argues: “Experience as trying involves change, but change is meaningless transition unless it is consciously connected with the return wave of consequences which flow from it” (Dewey, 1916/2001, p. 145). In his call for a “philosophy of experience” (Dewey, 1938/1963, p. 91), Dewey was concerned with highlighting the learning of the body and senses in contrast to the “traditional” learning of the mind.

Where Dewey’s thinking coincides with a concern for co-operative education is in his concept of democracy, which approximates to co-operative governance, and its interpretation in terms of the levelling out of injustices associated with class and race:

> A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer to his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (Dewey, 1916/2001, p. 91)

Certainly, Dewey, as a pioneer in the philosophy of education, was in favour of active learning as opposed to the ‘mystical’ or chance of experience in life as described in the next section. However, he did not have the advantage of the psychoanalytically informed perspective which this article investigates through the lens of a psycho-social approach to co-operative education.

The Mystical ‘Is-ness’ of Learning to Co-operate

Just as Robert Owen claimed that his own learning towards positions of increased equity and democracy in the workplace were somehow a mysterious part of himself, so Arizmendiarrieta — the Catholic priest who founded the Mondragon co-operatives — and the system in Mondragon assumed that working co-operatively was in large part derived from the mysticism or mystery of the Catholic faith as social action. In other words, social action was the personal duty of each and every person as part of their faith (Manley, 2023b). Although Arizmendiarrieta created an educational centre in Mondragon that operated for many years before the first co-operative was established, this education was aimed principally at the acquisition of practical skills for work. Aside from technical knowledge, learning how to relate, associate, and co-operate would largely be achieved through social action wrought on the basis of belief in God. In the case of Mondragon, faith, social action, and the fabric of society were very closely knit in the first place, producing a ‘culture’ of co-operation as a natural way of being, so mysteriously natural that learning about it would hardly cross the mind.

This is why, even today, education as understood in the university in Mondragon is focused on engineering and business skills. As Alex Bird reminds us, “it’s important to remember Mondragon was founded by and is still run by engineers. Not only is Mondragon based on industrial production, but the engineer’s mind-set runs throughout everything they do” (Bird, 2012, p. 4). This way of understanding engineering is also a contrast to what cannot be learned, that is to say what is and should be second nature to a Mondragon society that performs and supports a mutuality that is taken as given. In this environment, the ability to relate to and work with others simply exists by and for itself, even though this has caused problems recently as younger co-operators challenge the co-operative system due to a gradual eroding of the influence of Catholicism among the descendants of the original founders of Mondragon (Manley, 2023b).

In attempting to do justice to this necessary co-operative ability to relate with one another, Crome and O’Connor (2019) have recourse to a series of more or less abstract definitions of the source of this ability, identified as a set of ‘virtues’, as a ‘way of life’, and/or a ‘moral’ issue. Yet, this takes us no closer to understanding how such things can be learnt or taught.

Breaking the Mould: Co-operative Governance as Participatory Democracy

Although it is obvious that the 'mould' that shapes the way societies, communities, and businesses in the UK are governed is a capitalist one, perhaps it is not so clear how this profoundly affects the way people are encouraged to participate with, and relate to, each other. Without going into details that are beyond the scope of this article, it is clear that a free-market, hands-off economic system encourages competition, winners, and losers. It follows that the majority of social actors in a country like the UK are moulded into forms of competitive relationships where all manner of human existence is viewed through this lens. As Crome and O'Connor indicate, this lens is apt to distort 'good' virtues into their antithesis:

> For under this mode of capitalism, what is utile and profitable for employers are not fixed skills but 'virtues' such as resilience and adaptability. As such, capitalism is now colonizing the virtue of co-operation, offering its own version of the traditional virtues: what once was resilience is now flexibility, adaptiveness and grit, what was once co-operation is now competition and efficiency. (Crome & O'Connor, 2019, p. 14)

This is not a problem that has gone unnoticed in academic literature. This is why authors such Bruno Latour have evoked Actor-Network Theory, so that the relationships between social actors can be reconsidered and restructured from individualistic forms of hierarchies to networks of relationships (Latour, 2005). The disturbance of capitalism to co-operative ways of working has also been challenged by the emergence of relational theory, where the neoliberal emphasis on individual *things* or *objects* is diminished in favour of a reconfiguration of how social systems should work according to processes of relationships and concepts of the commons (Bollier et al., 2017). This is in conflict with the way that these attitudes are presented in a society that chimes with Thatcherisms such as "no such thing as society" and there being "no alternative" to neoliberalism (The Guardian, 2013). However, it was not always so. A range of alternatives that honoured the social and relational was, for many decades, in opposition to these mantras. Unfortunately, these alternatives were often deemed to be only possible within the accepted system as it was, rather than as a national alternative to either individualism or state socialism. As early as 1914, W. H. Watkins was able to talk about an alternative existing within the status quo in a way that could be used to describe the Mondragon ecosystem of today:

> We are … building up a State within a State, a State in which … people are arranging the business of life on harmonious and co-operative lines, rather than on the competitive and discordant lines we find in the competitive world. (cited in Woodin 2019, p. 25)

In terms of attitudes, relationships, participation, and governance, this means moving away from giving/receiving orders and master-slave relationships, and towards participation and dialogue. The word association is sometimes evoked to indicate this difference. According to Ross, association and associational thinking is a fundamental aspect of the nature of a co-operative and must be reflected in co-operative education (Ross, 2019).

As opposed to building a system of association within a system of competition (a state within a state), Hirst (1994) expounds upon the history of associationalism and its connections with a democracy that go beyond mere representation. Although associationalism is not about co-operatives, its function requires co-operation and this, in turn, is dependent on communication. For Hirst (1994), communication is akin to democracy, where society consists of voluntarily created associations that co-operate together to govern in federal and pluralist configurations, as opposed to the centralised sovereign state. Closely allied to communication is dialogue. In a crude capitalist system (and clearly not all of capitalism functions exactly in this way), dialogue is of very minor importance, since decision-making comes from 'the top' and is ordered downwards from leader to follower. However, in any co-operative system, from small worker-owned co-operatives to a large co-operative ecosystems, dialogue — and when combined with communication and decision-making, democracy — is of the very essence of what it means to live and work in society. Dialogue and co-operative governance in a systemic

sense, are in opposition to ‘followership’ and leadership within a capitalist paradigm. However, dialogue is a difficult art compared to being a follower or giver of orders.

What is Dialogue Beyond ‘Talking’?

In a chapter on the democracy of the emotions, Paul Hoggett provides an in-depth analysis of the nature of authentic dialogue and how dialogue interweaves with an understanding of emotions and democracy. Citing Habermas, Hoggett defines communicative action as dialogue towards mutual understanding; but it is how to define ‘understanding’ that is the key to the kind of dialogue that stimulates co-operation and democracy. The kind of understanding that concerns relational work in groups (such as a co-operative) is “affective, somatic” and a “cognitive process” (Hoggett, 2009, p. 152). Hoggett’s contribution to this idea of dialogue comes from a psycho-social perspective that is vital to knowing what the challenges are for co-operative governance interpreted as participatory democracy. Above all, dialogue is process, which resonates with the concepts put forward by theories of relationality. It may lead to outcome, but outcome is not absolutely necessary or a prerequisite for dialogue. What Hoggett means by ‘affective’ and ‘somatic’ is that dialogue must consider and take into account dynamics which are unconscious and not necessarily exclusively residing in the mind as conscious thought. Just as valid as such thought are feelings and affect.

By ‘affect’, this article understands the whole range of embodied feelings and emotions that are possible in an individual and in a collection of individuals forming a social body (Manley, 2018). It is precisely these affective aspects of human communication that are eliminated from ‘normal’ meetings and what is ‘normal’ in a workplace meeting is also undemocratic, because it only takes into account views and opinions that are exposed in a sophisticated and cognitive manner, where one person is showcased as being cleverer and/or more knowledgeable than the other. Such a person is often defined as the manager or leader, and in such a setting, good or strong leadership is confused with this kind of positionality: the pre-eminence of a few who display skills or charisma that render the decision-making of such individuals virtually unchallengeable. Needless to say, the skills or charisma of these individuals are not always achieved by merit alone! This gives an advantage to the privileged and elite among the group, very often white, male, and privately educated. Hierarchies are established, even where they do not formally exist, as evidenced in the class system. These hierarchies will correspond to positions of social and economic power, and the voices of the less fortunate or disadvantaged will be silenced. Such structures of thinking and power — familiar to all — need to be challenged at all times, even if the rootedness of power dynamics can never be wholly defeated, as has been starkly argued and demonstrated by Michel Foucault (1973/2000).

The nature of power and control as investigated by Foucault still holds true today, since the fundamental capitalist structures and systems that he described remain in place. From Foucault, it can be understood that it is the capitalist system itself that is inherently the mould for the forming of simple hierarchical structures of leadership, where orders are meted out and decisions are made; where punishment and reward are the means to achievement. For Foucault, Watkins’ idea of the possibility of a co-operative state within a capitalist system, is impossible, because the capitalist system imposes itself on the whole. This is why educational establishments, according to Foucault, are based on the same systems and ways of leading and following as prisons and hospitals. Among the multiple systems of power at play in the system, including economic, political, juridical, and epistemological power, juridical power is especially allocated to education:

> The school system is based on a kind of juridical power as well. One is constantly punishing and rewarding, evaluating and classifying, saying who’s the best, who’s not so good … Why must one punish and reward in order to teach something to someone? (Foucault,1973/2000, p. 83)

This understanding of the relevance and, so to speak, the power of power within the prevalent socio-economic system of western nations should act as a warning about the magnitude of the

task facing co-operative education and allies in social pedagogy. There are attempts to merge social pedagogical approaches to co-operative education, and to break out of the restrictions of education within the capitalist paradigm. An example is the recently formed Preston Co-operative Education Centre (https://prestoncoopeducationcentre.org), but these initiatives are still in the bud and are prone being confronted by the obstacles of the system (Charfe & Manley, 2021). If one is to accept a Foucauldian approach to the rootedness of systems of power and control in institutions, including educational establishments, it would seem that the task ahead is, if not impossible, certainly extremely challenging.

Power Dynamics

If educational establishments are systemically trapped in the framework of a system that encourages control and surveillance to serve the system's need to feed the struggle for power, which is necessarily exercised by those who occupy positions of perceived and acknowledged superiority over others, how can teachers and students teach and learn about co-operative values, participatory democracy, and alternative forms of leadership? There is evidence that co-operative values and democratic governance can still be achieved as a system within a system as Watkins suggested and in the contemporary example of Mondragon. Even there, however, the tensions between systems are constant and there is disagreement as to whether the co-operative system in Mondragon can survive co-operatively within a capitalist context (Manley, 2023a).

The extent to which this point of view might be agreed or disagreed with is to some extent academic. Even if the Foucauldian view is true, educators and co-operators cannot simply wait for systemic change. The best that can be hoped for is to boost awareness, especially the understanding that co-operative values are indicative of processes and repeating cycles that require continuous work. They are never definitively achieved but always 'being' achieved, or, to use Deleuzian language, co-operative values are always in processes of 'becoming' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). If we consider these values as stated by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) — "Cooperatives are based on the values of **self-help**, **self-responsibility**, **democracy**, **equality**, **equity**, and **solidarity**. In the tradition of their founders, cooperative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others" (ICA, n.d.) - it soon becomes clear that such values are never completely achievable. For example, 'democracy' as is meant in the ICA statement of values is not achieved through the implementation of an absolutely best democratic design, since such a design does not exist. The plethora of democratic systems around the world attests to this, with arguably the British electoral system as one of the least democratic in the world, where 'first-past-the-post' nullifies millions of votes.

The kind of democracy that aligns itself to co-operative values is one where participation is the key to governance. Successful democracy in this sense depends on what is sometimes called 'emotional intelligence' (Goleman, 1995) and includes qualities such as the ability to listen, empathise, respect, tolerate, and a sense of justice, among other abilities. None of these qualities are definitively achievable: it is always possible to learn better, empathise more deeply, widen respect, increase tolerance, and continue developing a sense of justice. In other words, such qualities which are essential to participatory democracy are always work in progress. The co-operator is always 'becoming democratic'. This is part of the problem, if 'problem' it is. Continuously learning to improve qualities associated to co-operative values is hard work. In fact, it is sometimes claimed that some workers might prefer a job where orders are given, the job is done, and then the fruits of the labour in the form of wages can be enjoyed. For a co-operator, however, this is an unsatisfactory conclusion and incompatible with working in a co-operative.

Sadly, despite the existence of co-operative values, power dynamics which are necessary for a capitalist company — since the fight for power is no less than the ultimate demonstration of competition in action — are often in evidence in co-operatives, even if less obviously so.

Merely changing the structure of work, such as replacing the leader figure with group consensus decision-making, is not enough to challenge the power dynamics that emerge in any group situation. Rather than techniques and team-building skills, a co-operative education should be able to offer an opportunity for experiential learning because it is only through experiencing affective dynamics and reflecting upon them that people can truly learn about fostering the kinds of relationships that enable co-operative governance. True, this could be learned 'on the hoof' in real life situations or it could form part of some kind of personal enlightenment, but there is no guarantee of results, since everything depends on the circumstances of the dynamics triggered by any particular group in question. These are unpredictable and will differ from group to group.

It is interesting therefore, to note Hoggett's (2009) use of the word 'virtue' to describe a democratic process that is non-instrumental. It is not so much the rules and design of a system, or a meeting within that system, that are going to make the necessary difference. Rather, it is the way or process of participation, a relational process, that can create authenticity in dialogue and therefore democracy in governance. This is true of any size of any governing group taking any decision, from a small co-operative to a national political debate. According to Hoggett:

> If they are to be effective, democratic virtues must be inscribed in a group … nonparanoid, nonsalvationist, and nondependent … [which] requires much more concern for and interest in the process of organizing democracy than has existed in the past; it has instead been approached in a largely instrumental way. (Hoggett, 2009, p. 150)

Participatory democracy thus understood is governed through intelligent compassion which leads to solidarity, a keystone of the Labour movement and central, too, to co-operative governance (Hoggett, 2009). The challenge for co-operative education is how to teach these virtues, virtues rather than values. How do we learn not to be paranoid, not to depend on some great leader to save us from our problems? How do we learn to be compassionate and to generate a quality of relationships that are easily and naturally given to solidarity among people on groups? How can one learn to be 'virtuous'?

Building Relationships: From Mysticism to a Psychodynamic Understanding of Complexity

It was Wilfred Bion in his period of study of group psychodynamics, who pointed out the value of learning from the experience of being in a group and yet, at the same time, the great discomfort and hatred of this learning experience (Bion, 2000). Bion demonstrated that learning from experience is hated because it forces people to face up to new and unwanted thoughts and feelings, many of which would never have emerged in a strongly managed group or team process. In a sense, therefore, a tightly managed team meeting chaired by a strong and authoritative leader, which allows no space for members' experiences, may give the superficial appearance of being well-organised and purposeful, while beneath the surface different members of that team or group will be harbouring unspoken feelings, criticisms, and objections that are not allowed to emerge. What Bion did to demonstrate this was organise groups for the purpose of learning about group dynamics, but at the same time he stripped away his own leadership authority. As the expert and the group convenor, members of the group naturally felt that Bion would lead the group in the traditional manner, however Bion describes the process as follows:

> … I [Bion] am the most obvious person, by virtue of my position, in whom to vest a right to establish rules of procedure. I take advantage of this position to establish no rules of procedure and to put forward no agenda. (Bion, 2000, p. 77)

As a result of this, feelings, thoughts, and ideas that otherwise are liable to remain repressed are given free rein and make themselves manifest in different ways. These different manifestations of group dynamics were identified by Bion as 'Basic Assumptions' (*ba*), of which he highlighted three in particular (later authors have identified others (see Bion Talamo et al.,1998)). The dynamic of fight or flight from a task, where team members fight over

issues and/or disconnect from the problems, was one (*baF*); an over dependence on a leader figure, ‘yes’ people, was another (*baD*); and joining in pairs to provide a sensation of working with another, close ally but which actually avoids and ignores the overall group task, was the third (*baP*). What all these Basic Assumptions have in common is a weak engagement with the primary task of the group, the reason for a meeting to occur. A realisation of this by the members of a group (here, it can be imagined that this group is a meeting of co-operative members) might lead to a reconsideration of what it means to participate in common dialogue and to promote the virtue of democratic participation.

What is being avoided by the leader or manager who tightly controls a meeting is true participation by all present; in other words, there is an avoidance of dialogue and democracy. Ironically, at first it may seem to people in the meeting that all is well, because the chair of the meeting avoids conflict and the meeting appears to be disciplined and orderly. This might be the result of what are commonly identified as ‘leadership skills’. In the long run, however, this leadership style is toxic, for relationships and can only be kept in check by a very energetic and largely intolerant leader in a position of undisputed authority or power. These are the Trumps and Musks of our world and they are clearly representative of a capitalist system that is the antithesis of any form of co-operation. A way must be found, therefore, to encourage participation in experiential learning that can foster enriching relationships despite the inconvenience of doing so and the hatred of such learning that accompanies it.

What Can be Done? The Roles of Compassion and Virtue

A new language and practice is needed for people who truly want to govern democratically and co-operatively. Doing so would be an innovation for many. I have already suggested that it might be interesting to use the word ‘virtue’ instead of ‘value’, and that there is no single magic ‘fix’ for encouraging equal and equitable relationships around the table. I am going to further suggest that a companion word to virtue could be ‘compassion’. According to Spännäri et al. (2023), compassion can boost innovation. This follows the thoughts of the current article, since innovation is best encouraged through compassionate co-operation that engenders open dialogue and brings together disparate thoughts and ideas. Such thoughts and ideas are only shared in a situation of compassionate relationship between people, even if those people are not naturally allies in work and life. This is an indication of the potential in co-operative governance.

To develop this kind of co-operative and compassionate dialogue, Bion suggests that co-operation can only occur when a person’s “ability to co-operate is dependent on a kind of give and take that is achieved with great difficulty compared with the swift emotional response that comes of acquiescence in the emotions of the basic group” (Bion, 2000, p. 90). The difficulty referred to is the same as the reason for the hatred of experiencing other people’s feelings that may be in opposition or conflict with one’s own. The learning process has to include, therefore, getting used to listening compassionately to such thoughts and feelings without judgement and attempting to understand both the sources and the potential of contrary thoughts and opinions. In order to do this, people who want to relate to others and embrace their differences in democratic dialogue have to feel that their oppositional thoughts and feelings are ‘contained’ by others and in turn be able to contain others’ thoughts and feelings that might come their way. The effect of containing is to avoid a ‘swift emotional response’ that would indicate an inability to listen, therefore a lack of respect and tolerance for difference. The containing action engenders such virtues and leads to apt conditions for democratic participation. This psychoanalytic concept of container and contained is a well-known psychoanalytical theory first expressed by Wilfred Bion (2000). Since it is inevitable that emotions and tensions and oppositions and conflicts will arise in a group situation where expression is freely permitted, an individual in a group must be capable of receiving such anomalies from other individuals and ‘contain’ these without judgement, blame, or adverse reaction, until there has been time to process these objects internally. Having done so, these

thought objects can be redirected to the group in a digested fashion that is acceptable to the originator of the thought or feeling and to the person who performed the act of containment. In this way, a sense of equitable and just democratic participation can be engendered and compassionate innovation becomes a possibility. The alternative, as described above, is to impose authority, power, and discipline on the proceedings, resulting in foreclosure and a reductionism in what is or might be possible.

Learning to Feel from Experience

An important skill in learning to co-operate through virtue, as described above, resides in experiencing emotional truths as potentially different from spoken, cognitive truths. The reason experience in education is important, as opposed to listening to the lesson or lecture, is because it has been shown, even though rarely used as a practical skill, that people feel as much as they think, or rather that thinking is the same as feeling. Convention and good behaviour in group meetings may seem to dictate that emotions should be held in check by the superlative function of the thinking mind as expressed verbally in language. This favours the educationally elite and those for whom speaking is easy. Such reliance on the spoken word, and its supposed logic and rationality, places people with other skills, thoughts, and feelings at a disadvantage and unable to fully participate in decision-making. In other words, such a system is likely to be opposed to democratic participation. The reason for this scenario is the mistaken opinion that rational thinking and its expression in language is the most objective path to the truth. Damasio has proved this to be false (Damasio, 2000). Damasio suggests that non-verbal, image-based narratives are aspects of thinking that more closely relate to the emotions and that these are as important as thoughts, which are cut off from emotion. The non-verbal and the emotional are natural processes of thought that should be considered in relational exchanges:

> The brain inherently represents the structures and states of an organism, and in the course of regulating the organism as it is mandated to do, the brain naturally weaves wordless stories about what happens to an organism immersed in an environment. (Damasio, 2000, p. 189)

From this, it follows that learning from experience, as opposed to cognitive, language-centred learning, is fundamental to democratic and co-operative participation, because non-verbal emotional thoughts are abstract and difficult to express verbally. Co-operators are interested in being involved with others in a non-hierarchical fashion, where orders are not cognitively pre-thought and given. The flattening out of relationships in a group opens out the need for understanding all the various and complex nuances of thinking that are bound to be occurring and that are demanding to be heard or felt, not necessarily spoken, or perhaps not necessarily eloquently spoken. Attention to difference can only be achieved through the virtues of tolerance, empathy, and respect. Attention to difference goes a long way to defining democratic participation and co-operative governance.

Creating Dialogue Learning Groups: Bohmian Dialogue

Learning from experience is more about processes of emotional and non-verbal knowledge than learning about content, a thing, or object. In an educational setting, learning from experience is not about any kind of traditional teaching and learning: no desks and chairs, no whiteboard, no knowledgeable expert imparting lectures, no punishments and rewards, no books, and no writing. When learning from the experience of being in a group with others, there is no leader, no agenda, and no right or wrong. In theory, at least, in this way people can be released from the educational system that Foucault (1973/2000) identified as existing in a trapped framework of power struggles and unquestionable one-way dictums. Freedom replaces the prison. Education therefore should include serious quality spaces for experiential reflection, spaces for democratic and co-operative dialogue, where people can learn about how to relate to each other regardless of the subject matter.

A good start would be to understand the workings of 'Bohmian dialogue', as explained by David Bohm in his book *On Dialogue* (1996) which radicalises learning by stating that dialogue groups should have no leader and no subject matter:

> In the dialogue group we are not going to decide what to do about anything. This is crucial. Otherwise we are not free. We must have an empty space where we are not obliged to do anything, nor to come to any conclusions, nor to say anything or not say anything. It's open and free. (Bohm, 1996, p. 19)

Importantly, Bohm attaches value to 'inner necessity' (rather than exterior objectives) and links this to freedom and creativity in ways that resonate with the connections between compassion and innovation previously described: "Therefore, freedom makes possible *a creative perception of new orders of necessity*. If you can't do that, you're not really free." (Bohm, 1996, p. 27, original italics).

Such freedom emerges from listening to "everybody's opinions, to suspend them, and to see what all that means. If we can see what all of our opinions mean, then we are *sharing a common content*" (Bohm 1996, p. 30, original italics), something that Bohm calls "participatory consciousness". My interpretation of this for the purposes of the current article is that participatory consciousness is the virtue of participatory democracy and therefore fundamental to co-operative governance and learning about co-operative relationships. Therefore, although this takes time and can often be uncomfortable because of people's innate hatred of learning from experience, it is worth the effort if we are serious about learning to relate to each other co-operatively.

Concluding Thoughts and Feelings

Co-operative people in co-operative work cannot succumb to the easier solution to governance provided by the capitalist paradigm, which is to forego the continuous becoming of relational learning and replace it with leaders and followers. Co-operative education has to find ways of promoting participation, democracy, and co-operation as going beyond definable and objective values and into the territory of the abstract, unknown, and yet vitally important relational ties that connect participation into a framework for democracy and governance. What is required is a deep dive into the virtues of participatory democracy and an embrace of the emotional complexity of the qualities of inter-relationships at work. Once established in the workplace, qualities of the relational are bound to spread into community and from there to society. Values do not remain in the workplace at the end of the day.

Acceptance of competition and power as a social norm should be anathema to a co-operative group. Learning how to do otherwise, however, must chiefly be an experiential effort on the behalf of all the members of a co-operative group, both at work and in education. It might be done with a facilitator or consultant and time needs to be invested in the process. Experience is an essential learning method where the relational and the conceptualisation of becomings as process is a fundamental pillar of the innovation in group work that is required for such a paradigm shift. The irony of this article is that it attempts a worded, conceptual, and objectified explanation of what is claimed as better expressed through the experiential. As such, this article can only be a weak substitute for active learning in a group. The theory depends on somatic understanding, and relationships, feelings, and affect, all to be experienced as feeling thought, the "feeling of what happens" (Damasio, 2000). Co-operation and co-operative education have to be felt — not just thought — to be learnt and understood. From this place, if we follow Bohm's reasoning, the discoveries of Bion's group experiences, and Hoggett's perspectives on emotions and democracy, creativity, and innovation will emerge, phoenix-like from the ashes of dry objectivity, but without slipping into a world of mysticism and superstition. It is possible to learn from experience. It is a path worth taking.

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