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# The Origins of Co-operative Education

**Gillian Lonergan**

The involvement of co-operators in education has its roots in the very beginnings of co-operation.

The earliest documented co-operative society in Britain was the Fenwick Weavers. Its life began as a friendly society in 1761 and a few years later it was decided that the best way for it to support its community was to buy food in bulk and distribute it amongst the members (O'Neill, 2008). There may have been earlier co-operative retailing, but no records survive. Alongside the provision of food, the Fenwick minutes relate the setting up of a library for its members, something followed by other co-operators up to, and in some cases beyond, the setting up of libraries by local authorities.

The man known as the 'Father of Co-operation', Robert Owen, was fascinated by education and ensured that facilities were available to all. His work at New Lanark included the first nursery education in Britain, open to children as soon as they could walk from their mothers' arms and an 'Institute for the Formation of Character' which provided education for the adults. Interestingly, he emphasised different ways of learning, not feeling that the young should be "annoyed with books", there were nature walks and practical learning (Owen, 1857, p. 140).

Owen's ideas on lifelong education were taken up by co-operative societies, some with facilities for children like the Salford co-operative school of the 1830s (Jones, 1836). Others with libraries, courses, and lectures for adults — and some with both.

When the Rochdale Pioneers rented their first premises at 31 Toad Lane in 1844, even before the shop was opened, the stock room was used for a Sunday night discussion group. It was very sparse at first, but as the shop grew, more stock was available to sit on. The subjects were wide ranging, a current pamphlet would be read and talked through or a member would raise a topic. When the Society rented the upper floors of the building, one floor was dedicated to an education room and library. With more space, lectures could be held and the Society invited university lecturers to come and speak to members, work that became known as the University Extension (Twigg, 1924, p. 18). The library, at first just a desk, later a well stocked library with satellite reading rooms above branches, did not just have books (Holyoake, 1907, p. 155). There was a range of scientific instruments that could be borrowed so members could do experiments at home including batteries, telescopes, and microscopes.

In the 1890s, the Pioneers were opening new branches and wanted to do something different with the upper rooms, so rather than meeting spaces or reading rooms, they set up chemistry laboratories. These had long benches, each having a water supply and five spaces with Bunsen burners, enabling 40 people at a time to carry out experiments (Co-operative News, 1890).

One of the most famous educational activities of the Rochdale Pioneers was their decision to devote 2.5% of profits to education and the long campaign to persuade the Registrar of Friendly Societies to allow it to be included in their rule book. Before the permission was granted, co-operative education often had to be funded by making grants to the members of education committees in return for services (Twigg, 1924, p. 14).

Across the UK, the education activities of co-operative societies extended, with most adopting the rule of 2.5% of profits. It was long felt that the Education Committee of a co-operative was a fitting training ground for those involved in the democratic structure of societies. It enabled members to learn about committee work, directing staff, and overseeing budgets, with a view to later being elected to the Managing Committee or Board. The work on education was always broad, including training for employees and a range of activities for members such as courses,

lectures, libraries, educational fellowships, youth groups, weekend schools, travel opportunities, publication of periodicals and pamphlets, and musical and social events (Twigg, 1924, pp. 40-43).

From the 1880s, the Co-operative Union supported the work of societies with education programmes, preparing the syllabus, suggesting qualified and experienced tutors who could run the courses locally to societies, publication of textbooks and organisation of exam centres. The first course offered was bookkeeping – a subject of equal importance to employees and to committee members. By the 1921-2 academic year, there were 891 classes on a range of subjects from co-operative history to shop window display and involving just over 26,000 students, 5,176 of them being successful in their exam (Twigg, 1924, p. 63).

By 1919 the co-operative movement, after decades of discussion, was ready to move education to a new level, with the formation of the Co-operative College. The Co-operative Congress resolution included:

... a Co-operative College is essential to the welfare and development of the co-operative movement  
... no worthier memorial of those co-operators who have served and fallen in the war could be established than an institution for the dissemination of the principles of co-operation and harmony in industrial and international relationships (Co-operative Union, 1919).

## The Author

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