

# Co-operative Education — A Perspective from a Woodcraft Folk Volunteer

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This short article is a personal reflection by a Woodcraft Folk leader and volunteer about the meaning of co-operative education. It is suggested that engagement with wider notions of co-operation should be a more common aim in both formal and informal education. Co-operative education should not be confined to the formalised and conscious learning environments of schools, universities and other institutions; co-operative living is based on values and principles and thus should be a philosophy embedded in all forms of learning.

The Woodcraft Folk strives to educate for social change. A hope is that the type of education it promotes is valued as highly and practiced as widely as that traditionally offered within the education establishment.

In the summer of 2013, I attended the International Association for the Study of Co-operation in Education (IASCE) conference, the theme of which was *The Transformative Power of Co-operation in Education*. I was there on behalf of the Woodcraft Folk, a co-operative youth organisation for which I am a volunteer. Interestingly, I found my perspective differed greatly from that of many of the other conference delegates; while I found the conference enlightening and engaging, the alternative perspective I brought led me to question how co-operative education is conceived amongst those who practise and preach it.

One observation I took from the conference was the emphasis on defining and understanding notions of 'co-operation' and 'transformation'. To me however, what an 'education' truly means is perhaps discussed too little. The motto of the Woodcraft Folk is "Education for Social Change"; this is pursued through the education of children and young people on issues surrounding social justice, for example, and also through living the co-operative values we embrace. In my opinion, this engagement with wider notions of co-operation should be a more common aim in education, both formal and informal.

Alongside this, I believe it is extremely important that co-operative education should not be confined to the formalised and conscious learning environments of schools, universities and other institutions; co-operative living is based on values and principles and thus should be a philosophy embedded in all forms of learning. The informal environment of the Woodcraft Folk is conducive to this and is demonstrated through much of our practice. Our co-operative approach when camping, of dividing chores into 'clan duties', is a prime example of this philosophy and aims to teach that, from a young age, children can engage in and understand how co-operation can work to benefit all. Our democratic processes also contribute towards this form of 'education in co-operation' through the use of consensus and discussion, where possible, and the emphasis on giving young people a voice in the organisation; for example, any delegate can vote at an Annual Gathering.

The Woodcraft Folk strives to educate for social change; this education is not undertaken through a formal programme, it is focused on creating the society we want to see and demonstrating that co-operation can work and has positive outcomes. Thus, in the Woodcraft Folk, co-operation is a way of living and functioning, not just a programme or a course of learning. In my opinion, it is this which makes it a vital organisation for the co-operative movement and one which should be drawn upon as a great example of co-operation in action and education.

The Woodcraft Folk can sometimes seem like a novelty within the co-operative movement owing to its distinctive interpretation of the co-operative values we share. I however, aspire

to a world where the approach of the Woodcraft Folk does not stand out as quite so unusual and where the type of education it promotes is valued as highly and practiced as widely as that traditionally offered within the education establishment. I hope that this can start within the co-operative education movement itself and the aspects which make the Woodcraft Folk brilliantly unique can be adapted for use in wider environments.

## **The Author**

Ellen Gibson is 19 years old and currently studies History at Oxford University. She has been a member of the Woodcraft Folk for six years and has volunteered leading groups and running events for three years.