

Guest Editorial

Transforming Education Through Co-operation – A Force for Change Maureen Breeze

The publication of this special edition of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* is a seminal moment for many of us who have been involved in the sphere of co-operation in education in the broadest senses in the UK, over a number of years.

Purpose

The seed of the idea grew from discussions with Alan Wilkins of Co-operative Learning & Development Associates (CLADA), Richard Bickle of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies (UKSCS) and myself and our desire to bring more legitimacy and exposure to the wealth of known practice mainly centred on work directly or indirectly associated with the co-operative movement. However, we knew that there were other unconnected interpretations and meanings linked to the use of the words *co-operative* and *co-operation* when applied to *learning* and *education*, supporting a wide range of related activity. Through my own research and active involvement with the International Association for the Study of Co-operation in Education (IASCE), I knew of the enormous amount of practice and research in the international arena, mainly focused on *co-operative learning* as a pedagogy. We had a collective concern about this disconnection and decided that creating this special edition would help bring about a convergence of understanding.

I had pursued a personal journey clarifying definitions for almost two decades through my roles in the consumer co-operative movement, as an educator in both formal and informal settings and in my roles in IASCE as well as in studying for a master's degree on the topic. In each new context, my assumptions were challenged and a freshly revised definition emerged. It became apparent that for me, it was an unattainable task. I now prefer to think of co-operative learning as experiential and being defined by a set of features underpinned by co-operative values. Values are culturally referenced and the values framework that has grounded me is that articulated by the International Co-operative Alliance in its 1995 *Statement on the Co-operative Identity*. Although set in the context of enterprise, I find the suite of six organisational values (self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity) and the four ethical values (honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others), can be interpreted readily from an educational perspective. They provide a language to explore my motives and actions and scaffold my reflection.

Process

In formulating a plan to move us on, the first challenging step was to identify a diverse group of academics and educationalists, some known to us but others were found through contacting published authors and following up leads. All were persuaded to make a trip to Birmingham to spend a day together during Co-operatives Fortnight in 2010, in order to evolve understandings and develop a dynamic and more all-embracing definition of *co-operative learning*. Planned with the expert facilitation of CLADA and with support from the UKSCS, the event revealed how unconnected the parallel approaches were and a greater dissonance between participants emerged than anticipated. One notable difference was between those with and those without a background in, or understanding of the co-operative movement. It was an illuminating event, which confirmed the need to enable a broader discourse and support connectivity. It also provided the endorsement to pursue the vision for this special edition of the *Journal*.

The process of forming the special edition was important; we wanted to model a co-operative approach and to establish a co-operative community of practice comprising the main contributors, as a whole group as well as in thematic groups. It took several months of concerted effort to identify and engage contributors from a breadth of backgrounds. These were invited to meet each other at a further day-long seminar to explore and share their understandings and

contexts. Together, now as a group, we continued our relationships through the development and writing process through the use of a virtual learning environment, by telephone or Skype and where feasible, face-to-face. It was the intention that by working together in a creative, generative and emergent way, contributors would develop ideas, critique each other's work, provide mutual support, learn from each other and ultimately shape the *Journal* and its contents. It was intended that working in this way would cause all involved to think and reflect more deeply on theory and practice, strategy and futures, and themselves.

Style

Not only did we hope to create a compendium of stories alongside views of practice and theory, but to provide a shared space for those new to writing as well as more experienced authors. It was important to hear the voice of practitioners and provide support mechanisms to enable this where needed. This special edition captures a range of styles and approaches from autoethnography to case studies, reflective pieces and those based on empirical research. It presents an array of perspectives from formal and informal learning and from early years to higher education. As well as capturing the breadth it was our intention to portray depth and reflect new theoretical perspectives. The placing of the analytical pieces by Alan Wilkins and Nigel Rayment at the front of the *Journal* is intentional, as they both present original interpretive frameworks which will hopefully stimulate further debate.

One of the ways that we have sought to develop understandings across the breadth of meanings is through a series of reflective pieces from practitioners. They explain the personal interpretations of co-operation in education set in the context of each author's work or experience, together with reflections on the personal motivations, values and interests that influence their perspectives.

Content

The first three articles set a context. What then follows are accounts embracing co-operation in education that fall into three themes: practice, pedagogy, and application.

The third contextual account is an illuminating piece by Lynda Baloché as guest international contributor, who provides a counterpoint to our UK interpretations. She tells us that work in the field of co-operative learning is supported by an extraordinarily rich and diverse research base, widespread success stories of large scale, small scale, and individual applications, and considerable critique and analysis of implementation shortcomings and disappointments. She concludes that it is the rich history and depth of research literature that has propelled forward the use of co-operation in education in general, and co-operative learning in particular, away from the margins and into the mainstream in many parts of the world. Regrettably, this has scarcely influenced policy makers and educators in the UK.

You will note that in Lynda's article she uses the words 'cooperative' and 'cooperation' without the hyphen, as they would usually be seen in this *Journal*. In most international settings when describing the pedagogy this is the case, as with some academics in the UK. It raises an interesting distinction, perhaps rooted in the tradition from which the practice is derived? Those approaching 'co-operative learning' and 'co-operation' in education from the perspective of the co-operative movement, and where practice is explicitly shaped by its commonly held values system, use a hyphen.

The current emerging opportunities presented by the formation of co-operative schools in the UK to mainstream approaches, are substantial. Articles by Julie Thorpe, Sarah Jones and Lee Taylor provide reflective insights and both Lee and Sarah talk of the transformative power of co-operative whole school approaches rooted in a strong commitment to co-operative values.

For practitioners in early years and school settings Bette Chambers and Wendy Jolliffe offer some valuable pointers towards effective implementation while the thought provoking self-reflective piece by Andy Packer illuminates how his personal values and moral purpose are reflected in his leadership style, impacting not only on his own school but on schools in his local area. In contrast to these, Nigel Todd presents us with a historical development

perspective of the relationship of the Workers' Educational Association and the co-operative movement in providing education in informal settings for adults.

The influence of the shared set of values on the practice of a large number of the contributing authors becomes apparent as you read articles in this *Journal*. Authors' shared passions, commitment and embodiment of the co-operative values are strongly expressed and these provide broad operational guidelines for practice. An exploration and discovery of their meaning in an educational context is seen in a number of articles including that of Bill Sadler.

Co-operation as a 'living contradiction' comes out clearly in Rob Bowden's reflective case study of the organisation MELA which is attempting to provide a mechanism for a co-operative way of working between member educational organisations who want to work in that way but sometimes find they have competing agendas and interests.

Issues in higher education, introducing curriculum content about co-operatives through co-operative ways of working are highlighted in the candid account of Nick Matthews' personal efforts and in Diarmuid McDonnell's case study of the Master's of Management in Co-operatives and Credit Unions delivered internationally through e-learning from St Mary's University in Nova Scotia. Both authors in different ways give insightful food for thought for programme managers in university business schools.

Reflection and challenge

The intention of the *Journal* is to provide a platform from which to investigate and develop understandings of the breadth of meanings and representations variously described as co-operation in education as well as bringing some coherence to the multiple approaches. It provides a single point of reference and networking for the diverse group of researchers and practitioners working in this field. It also exposes the core readership of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* from the UK consumer co-operative sector to an inspiring range of ideas about the wider purpose and relevance of co-operation as applied in an educational context, as well as attracting a wider body of academics and practitioners to the *Journal's* readership. As a project almost two years in process, has the finished *Journal* achieved what we hoped? The greatest test will be where it goes from here. I invite you to immerse yourself in the diverse range of articles, to start discussions and discourses and to grasp the challenge of taking the debates and actions further. Be inspired by Lee Taylor; be motivated by Wendy Jolliffe; be challenged by Nigel Rayment; be enthused by Andy Packer. The 27 accounts provide ample evidence of the multiple dimensions of practice in the UK. **By finding a way to bring these all together and harnessing the combined energy, knowledge, experience and practice, we could truly embrace the potential of transforming education through co-operation and become a force for change.**

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The Guest Editor

Maureen Breeze is the Local Collaborative Partnership Co-ordinator for Wiltshire Council, Co-President of the IASCE and CLADA associate. Formerly a teacher, she has held various roles in both formal, informal and prison education, including a national education role within the consumer co-operative movement. Passionate about community engagement and sustainability, she is frequently involved in her local community and was a founder and chair of her local community co-operative. Her particular interests in both co-operation in education and co-operative learning span over two decades and have formed the focus of her work as a practitioner, advocate, and postgraduate master's student; she is planning to pursue this work further in her forthcoming doctoral studies. She has attended and presented at national and international conferences on her work in this area.