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How the Co-operative Movement can Change Further and Higher Education for the Better

Colin Waugh

Prior to the 'de-industrialisation' of the UK economy that began in the 1980s, teachers of Liberal and General Studies (L/GS) working with industrial-release students in technical colleges and polytechnics developed experimental approaches that encouraged students to discuss democratically, 'think outside the box' and work together to solve practical problems. An effect of de-industrialisation has been to replace such non-advanced technical education with other types of vocational courses in the successor institutions, and to replace L/GS with narrower forms of general education that have less in common with co-operative ideals. This has undermined the capacity of colleges to prepare students adequately for the contemporary labour market and work processes. A Co-operative University focused on conscientised capacity-building along the lines of that currently provided by the Co-operative College, and combining with this some aspects of the Utopia University model put forward by Mike Neary and Joss Winn, could build links with staff in FE colleges and universities who are committed to developing valid approaches and thereby help to improve significantly the quality of provision across these sectors.

I will be talking about "co-operative skills for the new world of work" and about how the proposed Co-operative University might relate to that. I'm involved in two initiatives that I feel are relevant to this: the Independent Working-Class Education Network and the Liberal and General Studies Project. However, I'm speaking here in a personal capacity.

I would like to say something first, then, about 'de-industrialisation'. By this, I mean, in brief, the offshoring of large areas of the UK economy to cheap labour under repressive regimes in other countries, that started in the 1980s. I consider that this has had two main effects that are relevant here. First, it has destroyed many of the large blocks of unionised industrial workers that once existed in the UK, thereby cutting the ground from under the unions which had previously constituted the main form of working-class collective self-organisation. Secondly, it has destroyed time-served apprenticeships, and with them much of the access that working-class people had to technical education. And, more broadly, it has polarised the workforce — and hence the working class — between, on the one hand, a layer of service-sector para-professionals, and, on the other, a large group of casualised, mainly service sector, 'precarious' workers.

'De-industrialisation' has also stripped much of further education of its traditional purpose: non-advanced technical education. At the same time, however, it has produced a large post-compulsory vocational education 'sector', both within those universities that were formerly polytechnics and in higher education provision franchised from these universities to further education (FE) colleges. As I have indicated, this 'sector' is largely focused on the vocational preparation of para-professionals in service employment fields.

I will say something now about Liberal and General Studies (L/GS) as it existed in pre-1980s FE. This was a non-technical lesson attached to vocational courses for industrial-release apprentices and equivalent workers across most of FE between the early 1950s and about 1990. It typically occupied one hour in their day, and was taught by arts or social science graduates. Vocational exam boards required principals to certify that students had done it, but did not lay down content or require students to pass exams in it. This situation pushed L/GS teachers into developing innovative teaching and learning strategies. For example, they aimed to help students to discuss democratically, to think holistically and 'outside the box', to work together to solve practical problems, and — above all — to question their own commonsense assumptions. When they adopted such aims those teachers unavoidably challenged the

dominant mode of technical instruction via dictated notes, as frequently applied by technical lecturers in the rest of the students' college day. L/GS was in effect, then, a large scale, relatively long-lasting experiment in co-operative education within vocational (which was then mostly technical) FE.

As indicated, de-industrialisation abolished old-style technical education courses in FE, and with them it abolished also the L/GS element included in them. It replaced these courses with service sector vocational courses, and, L/GS lessons with narrower forms of basic skills 'training' such as Key Skills and Functional Skills that were loosely attached to these new courses as 'free-standing' add-ons. More recently, however, we have seen techniques derived from L/GS (for example, small group working) imposed as an orthodoxy within present-day further and higher education (FHE) courses, without the rationale that hitherto underlay these techniques being understood by those involved. The effect of this has been to allow a "guess what I'm thinking" approach to teaching to carry on more strongly than ever, behind a show of progressive methods. This situation is linked also to the use of so-called "information and learning technology" (ILT) to deskill teachers. A key result of these developments is that the educational potential which vocational courses in FHE colleges still possess is not being realised. Hence it is becoming more and more difficult for these institutions to help people develop the capacities that they need in the present-day labour market and the labour process itself.

I will now put forward a view about the kind of approach that I think we can adopt in these circumstances.

There was an occasion in 1864 when Karl Marx talked about the struggle of workers for a ten hour day, and in the process he referred to a "great contest" that in his view stood behind this. On one side of this contest, he maintained, was "the blind rule of the supply and demand laws which form the political economy of the middle class" (meaning the capitalists), while on the other side there stood, in potential, "social production controlled by social foresight, which forms the political economy of the working class" (Marx, 1864). For such 'foresight' to be 'social' clearly requires that there take place a process of radical, from-below democratisation, and sixteen years earlier Marx and Engels had already said how they thought this could be achieved, when they wrote in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Marx & Engels, 1848): "The proletarian movement is the independent movement of the immense majority in the interests of the immense majority". I feel that these statements are even more valid now than they were in the mid nineteenth century. With the foregoing points in mind, then, let us look now at ideas about a Co-operative University.

This is likely to involve a combination of two approaches or models: first, courses as currently provided by the Co-operative College; and second, models for an imagined Co-operative University, for example as set out by Mike Neary and Joss Winn, who are at the University of Lincoln. I will refer to this latter as the "Utopia University" model (a term they themselves use).

As far as I know, the existing Co-operative College model is essentially about offering bespoke training and/or support to people already involved in — or thinking of starting — co-operatives, and/or to staff in other organisations that are attracted to aspects of a co-operative way of doing things. This training is focused mainly on the development of organising capacities — for example how to chair a meeting, how to make a speech and the like.

A key aspect of this is the *Working Together* report (Conaty et al., 2018) and associated developments that are to do with supporting the unionisation of precarious workers. To me this is a crucial initiative that should be central to the 'mission' of the proposed Co-operative University. *Working Together* lists co-operatives that already exist amongst such workers (for example amongst taxi-drivers and delivery workers). It implies that such co-operatives are — or can become — an alternative form of union branch, and as well as or instead of this could compete against existing mainstream providers.

I feel that if this model gains ground it will come under pressure from several interest groups. These include employers, some mainstream union officials, some left groups in unions, and

some workers who may themselves take on entrepreneurial values. I further believe that it will be able to withstand these pressures only if the capacities being taught are (in Paulo Freire's term) conscientised — that is, if the development of 'skills' goes hand in hand with the development of a valid worldview. As an example, let us assume that we're training people to chair decision-making meetings. Obviously, they can and should be encouraged to hold in their mind a set of algorithms that they can use to deal with standard situations. However, the question then arises: what happens when they have to cope with non-standard dilemmas, and especially when they have to do so under pressure? Experience suggests that they will be able to do this only if they are familiar with *and are committed to* the democratic principles that underlie formal procedures. Or again, as a second example, let's assume that we are training people to make effective speeches. Obviously they can be taught rhetorical techniques. But it seems certain that as well as this they would need to acquire a concrete understanding of differences between, on the one hand, manipulation, demagoguery, and the like, and, on the other, the honest communication of a case. Both these examples imply that there would need to be a dialogic process of mutual education through which workers would develop a sense of working-class history, an understanding of socialist economics, and a capacity for independent thought.

The Utopia University model puts forward a vision of a university which would be in many respects decisively better than actually existing institutions. However, a Co-operative University based on this model would be likely to come under pressure as follows. First, mainstream institutions would copy surface features of its ideas and practices, and staff in those institutions would be pressed (for example by funding mechanisms such as the Teaching Excellence Framework, the Student Satisfaction Survey, and the Office for Students) to display these approaches, the primary aim being to provide cover for a continued deterioration of mainstream teaching and learning. At same time, funding mechanisms are likely to push the Co-operative University itself towards conforming with mainstream approaches. Two ways of trying to counter this would then probably become available. One option would be for it to become a niche provider for the well-off, thereby playing a role analogous to that played at one time by Summerhill in the school sector. The other option would be for its backers and staff to build alliances with oppositional groups within the mainstream system, for example with lecturers trying to teach valid history against the grain of dominant curricula, or with staff responsible for continuing professional development who are trying to organise on behalf of valid teaching and learning methods. In other words, the aim here would be to bring about sustained co-operation between the Co-operative University and workers in mainstream institutions who understand the value of approaches like those pioneered in L/GS and co-operative education. The Co-operative University might be able promote this by offering to provide post-compulsory tutor education and training based on co-operative principles to existing and intending FHE tutors.

In conclusion, I believe that the Co-operative University is a crucial project that the Independent Working-Class Education Network and the L/GS Project should actively support.

The Author

Colin Waugh was a lecturer in further education from 1969 to 2013. In 1980 with others he founded the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) General Studies (later General Education) Section and he was the national secretary of this from then until the early 1990s. Since 1988 he has edited the publication *General Educator*, now *Post-16 Educator*, and in 2009 he wrote its occasional publication *Plebs: The Lost Legacy of Independent Working-Class Education*, from which a group of people have developed the Independent Working-Class Education Network.

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