

The Future of Co-operative Education

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Several years of debate and discussion recently culminated in the adoption of the revised Co-operative Principles at the ICA Congress in Manchester. It appeared at the same time to mark a growing confidence and resurgence of interest in the core values and principles of co-operation, which can only give rise to greater optimism for the future of co-operative education. This article seeks to chart some of the reasons for the changes that have led to such optimism and explores the implications in terms of the programmes that have been traditionally run by Societies, the ways in which they are likely to change, and the support structures and services for co-operative education that the Co-operative College and others will need to provide.

The changing environment

Sven Ake Böök's seminal work "Co-operative Values in a Changing World" did much to define the core problems facing the Movement as a result of the vast social, cultural, and political changes that had impacted on the world's Co-operative Movement since the principles were last revised in 1966. Book reflected on the way that short-term reactions to change had often resulted in profound long-term difficulties for Co-operative Societies. Book was particularly sharp in focusing on how Societies had responded to growing competitive pressures by creating larger Societies through mergers. He further reflected on how this process had alienated traditional member loyalty and made the task of involving members even more difficult.

The major effect, in the context of democracy, is to widen the gap between members and management; to remove decision-making from the local base which has long been considered the foundation of democratic control.

Böök continued

the emasculation of democracy can and does manifest itself diverse ways: in members apathy, low attendance at meetings, weakening of traditional co-operative loyalty, inability to attract young people, difficulties in recruiting staff, loss of the sense of belonging and of exerting influence, encroaching bureaucracy, and rigidity, even sometimes in a blurring of the end purpose of co-operation, namely, to serve the interest of the members (Co-operative Values in a Changing World - Sven Ake Böök)

Böök's documentation, although written for the ICA and the worldwide Movement, appears as if written exclusively on the problems facing the UK Co-operative Movement. Here, the process of reduction in the number of Societies to meet economic pressures, had certainly resulted in compromising the core co-operative purpose of serving the needs of the members.

This "blurring" of the end purpose of co-operation can, with the benefit of hindsight, be accurately tracked. The loss of dividend and with it the removal of the distinctive advantages of membership caused a collapse in the rate of member recruitment. As Societies promoted the culture of "we need customers - not members", the specific role and purpose of co-operative education equally became difficult to define. Increasingly, the co-operative education function became low-key public relations rather than its traditional role in developing new generations of co-operative members capable of providing active leadership for the Movement. The educational programmes of Societies frequently bore little relationship to the ICA principle on education which stated: -

All Co-operative Societies should make a provision for the education of their members, officers, and employees and of the general public in the principles and techniques of co-operation, both economic and democratic.

That equally should hardly surprise us. Just remind yourself of how opportunities for democratic involvement in the Movement in terms of places on committees disappeared along with the hundreds of Boards of Directors and Education Committees that

ceased to exist as Societies merged with others.

That same period, from the 70s onwards, produced a second debilitating effect alongside the process of weakening of the traditional co-operative content of many Societies' educational programmes. As Societies become larger, the degree of independence became much stronger.

Sadly, however, these mergers have not always worked to the broader advantage of the Co-operative Ideal. Quite the contrary in fact. As small Societies have become larger and, therefore, more powerful, this in turn has made them more independent-minded and, sad to say, in many cases less willing to co-operate with each other. (CWS Ltd South East London Branch Committee Members' Meeting Saturday 8 April 1995. Mr H Todner, Congress President 1994 and former Chairman - Co-operative Union Ltd).

The role of central providers of services, in particular the Co-operative College, became increasingly questioned, not just in terms of its role as a supplier of management and staff training but also in terms of services for member education. In many larger Societies, the culture "if it doesn't happen here, it doesn't happen anywhere" was far easier to identify than the application of the principle of co-operation between co-operatives!

Perhaps it is hardly surprising that this same period saw the deterioration in standards of governance in some Societies, leading to the scandals of the early 90s, and the subsequent responses to those scandals. It can be argued that those failings in corporate governance were a direct result of the policies some Societies introduced that had reduced to virtual ineffectiveness the traditional links with and loyalties of their membership. If Societies failed to cultivate and develop membership over a protracted period, then effective control of the Society could quickly slip into the hands of small cliques with the obvious dangers if such groups were also blinkered and uncritical of the performance of the Society.

Whilst it is perhaps ironic, it is surely not surprising to co-operators that it was largely those Societies that seemed anxious to deny their specific and unique features as co-operatives that

created the need for the Movement to review its standards of governance - and in particular to recommend steps that would rebuild effective accountability of Societies to the owners of the business - the members.

Rebuilding Co-operatives as Co-operatives

The core thrust of the Corporate Governance Report is summed up in this simple statement: -

we must emphasise that we consider that active and involved membership that has available to it open and fair information is an absolutely essential ingredient of good co-operative governance. (Corporate Governance Working Group Report - Co-operative Union Ltd 1994)

Whilst the Co-operative Union's Working Party was reviewing governance, more and more Societies were realising that a business strategy that focused purely on the needs of the business as a retailer was unlikely to bring long term success. The Co-operative Bank was demonstrating that prominent promotion of ethics, values and principles could not only produce good commercial results but were a prerequisite to defining a clear market niche in which the Movement could operate successfully and profitably.

Change continued within major co-operative retailers. The CWS was one of the first to embark on a strategy of rejuvenating its membership base combined with promoting itself in terms of "responsible retailing". Major independent Societies sought to reintroduce member benefit schemes, and in 1994 CRS introduced its "You Make the Difference" member recruitment strategy. The common denominator in all of these is the clear recognition of the need for co-operatives to assert their distinctive features as co-operatives, and to re-establish their membership base.

The implications for Co-operative education

The combination of these changes has meant that co-operative educationalists, so often in the 70s and 80s the last defender of the Movement's distinctive values and features, have been

required to reappraise their work and functions. Central to this review are the needs of Societies for education that will assist in strengthening membership and the Societies' democratic base. For many years, these functions had been largely ignored in Societies. Recent changes in the Movement's culture have left many Societies' Education and Member Relations Committees and Officers ill equipped for the new challenges.

Co-operative Education and Member Relations Committees have traditionally provided a diverse range of educational, social, and recreational events in line with the old model rules which stated that: -

in setting aside, to an education fund, such amount if any as an ordinary meeting may determine for the purpose of promoting education, culture, or recreation" (1986 (10th Edition) of Model Rules of the Co-operative Union Ltd)

The problem of this rule was that it gave little direction, simply legitimising virtually any activity that took place. It is hardly surprising that at a time when Societies were not promoting membership and co-operative values, many Societies' educational provision embraced an ever-widening range of sponsorship of community, social and cultural activities, many of which bore little relationship to developing member involvement.

Too often, though, such sponsorship arrangements have continued more because Committees fear adverse publicity if sponsorship ceases rather than because of an assessment of the effectiveness of groups' contribution to the Society and its educational work.

A prime need in the coming period will be to extend education and training programmes for Co-operative Education and Member Relations Committees that assist Committees to:

- identify priorities in terms of Member Education
- identify strategies for the allocation of financial resources to support those priorities
- negotiate their way out of historic commitments that no longer fulfil today's needs or priorities.

The background paper to the ICA's Revised Principles stated:-

Co-operative Education is not just about the distribution of information by co-operatives to their members, though it certainly includes that. It is essentially about the exchange of understandings: that co-operatives show members why the co-operative approach is a better way. (Review of International Co-operation Vol 8 No 3. 1995)

That gives a clear indication of the importance of promoting member training programmes, a point emphasised in the revised Principle which states: -

Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so that they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public, particularly young people, and opinion leaders - about the nature and benefits of co-operation. (Revised Principles - ICA Congress Manchester September 1995)

From this, and the preceding description it seems likely that a core element of co-operative education in the coming years will comprise work to promote co-operation, its values, ideals, principles and structures to members and potential members. The revised principle is also a useful guide in that it links two vital priorities: educating today's members and educating tomorrow's members.

Educating today's members

Clearly a major priority for co-operative education in the coming period is to develop programmes to equip members to exercise effective control in Societies. The Corporate Governance Code of Best Practice recommendations on Director training are increasingly being taken up by Co-operative Societies, not just in terms of the programmes provided at the Co-operative College, but by more flexible approaches, including in-house provision, and regional seminars. The next stage is to work with Societies

in promoting a more all-embracing member training culture that provides opportunities for potential active members, the Committee members, and Directors of the future, to be identified and supported through training programmes that enable them to play an effective role in the democratic life of their Society. This should include a clear framework of progression, from training provision for new members delivered by Societies at a local level, to strategies that identify activists, and support them through training delivered in partnership with major providers such as the Co-operative College.

Such training will enable members to move from a better understanding of their own Society, and the opportunities for participation, to understanding how their own Society fits within the wider Consumer Co-operative Movement and its representative structures. The next stage will be for them to explore how their own Society fits into the UK Consumer Co-operative Movement and the application of Co-operative ideals and principles to other sectors of the UK Co-operative Movement. This in turn will be followed by an examination of the UK Movement's links with the wider international Co-operative Movement.

Member training programmes must involve opportunities for co-operators to meet with and exchange ideas with co-operators not just from other Societies, but other sectors and other nations. Here the creation of dynamic learning environments for co-operators within programmes at the College offer major opportunities. In addition to developing programmes for today's members, co-operative education must give attention to the need to help develop tomorrow's co-operative leaders.

Educating tomorrow's members

Member Relations Committees and Officers can be proud of their pioneering work from the late 1980s in developing strategies to teach co-operative values and ideals, as well as forms of co-operative enterprise through the formal education system. The response to individualistic ethics promoted in the Thatcher years received a ready response from teachers, and there is growing confidence in the quality and volume of this work. Co-operative education in the future needs to consolidate this work and to

provide a framework of support for teachers and educationalists. This will involve providing: -

- resources for teachers, educationalists and Societies wishing to promote co-operation in schools and, in particular, materials that actively promote co-operative values and ideals.
- opportunities for personal development at a local and national level that will give teachers the confidence in experiential learning techniques and opportunities to learn from best practice.
- accredited qualifications to teachers including the introduction of a Diploma in Co-operative Learning so that the skills, knowledge and understanding gained by teachers can receive recognised qualifications.

In addition to work with the education system, greater attention will need to be paid to the development of younger co-operators, those young employees, young activists in their late teens and early twenties involved in organisations such as the Co-operative Party, the Woodcraft Folk, and in the other co-operative sectors. The success of the recent ICA Youth Seminar illustrated the need for opportunities for young co-operators to meet and create their own networks. The potential for such networks, and the attraction of co-operative values to young co-operators is illustrated by this extract -from their contribution to the ICA Principles Debate: -

In order to motivate more young people to join co-operatives it is necessary to make these more relevant to the needs and interests of young people.

We propose to create an international network of young co-operators that will support the education and involvement of young people in co-operatives through communication and sharing of ideas.

We believe that through education and global communication young people can become more than co-

operators of the future, they can be proud to be co-operators of the present.

The future of co-operative education will pose sharp challenges to both committees and officers. It will also demand a greater clarity of purpose to meet the changing needs of Societies that now are adopting core business strategies based on the promotion of co-operative principles, values, and ethics. The core role of co-operative education in developing co-operators is clearer now than at any time in recent years. The role is clear. The need is clear. The support frameworks are largely in place. It is now up to Co-operative Education/Member Relations Committees and Officers to respond to the new environment with the vision and confidence of the pioneers of co-operative education.

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