



Finding Ourselves Again? The Worker's Educational Association and the Co-operative Movement



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This article reflects on the reviving linkages between the co-operative movement and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), and how distinctively 'co-operative' approaches to learning and organisation have shaped the history of the WEA. It then goes on to describe the current relationship, concluding with proposals for next steps.

Co-operative Origins

Education has been integral to the co-operative movement. Inspired by the Rochdale Pioneers in 1844 (credited as founding the first successful, and widely replicated, consumer co-operative), many subsequent co-operative societies maintained education funds to which around 2.5% of annual profits were committed.

Overseen by elected education committees, societies funded social and recreational activities, adult education classes and staff training courses covering not just the mechanics of shop-keeping or committee work, but also a broader syllabus based on the ideas of 'social science'. Crucially, they also opened halls and meeting rooms, not only for their own events, but also for those of like-minded organisations. The movement's national association, the Co-operative Union (now Co-operatives UK), had an equivalent Central Education Committee, which founded the Co-operative College.

It was in this context that the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), today the largest publicly funded voluntary sector provider of adult education in the UK, began in 1903. In many respects it was a child of the co-operative movement. Even its name was changed from The Association for Promoting the Higher Education of Working Men after an early intervention by the Women's Co-operative Guild (then the largest organisation of working-class women in the UK).

Founded under the inspiration of Albert Mansbridge, a co-operative educator and co-operative employee, the WEA drew together prominent co-operators and influential supporters from universities, the Church of England and trades unions, to offer working men and women an experience of higher education. Very quickly, it became much more than that as the WEA's democratic 'Broad Highway' of learning located the choice, pace and direction of education in the hands of adult students.

The first organisation to affiliate to the new WEA was the co-operative society at Co. Durham's Annfield Plain in 1903, and almost everywhere that the Association emerged, it was assisted by members of co-operative education committees, the use of co-operative halls for meetings (and grand teas!), the recruitment of tutors from among co-operative contacts, and by help from the Women's Co-operative Guild. Mansbridge reciprocated, writing frequently for the movement's weekly newspaper, *Co-operative News*, and in particular articulating the case for a co-operative college. When the Co-operative College was eventually established in 1919, the WEA was listed as a constituent of its governing body.

Changing Times

British economic, social and cultural changes after 1950 posed major challenges for co-operatives and the WEA. Both movements displayed uncertainty of purpose as altering consumer tastes, stronger competition, and wider choices in leisure adversely affected their perceived relevance. Simultaneously, their traditional forms of member involvement - often rooted in the culture of a previous age - began to decline through the 1970s and 1980s.

For the WEA, government funding made possible a stronger intervention in neighbourhoods of social and economic stress from the 1970s. While this process stimulated an enduring expertise in widening participation in adult learning, and even brought the WEA back to a tighter

focus on 'education for social change' (an idea articulated by the creative co-operative educator, Joseph Reeves, in the 1930s), it took place largely outside of the Association's traditional membership structures and was led by professional tutor-organisers.

Similarly, at least in the most visible retail sector of the co-operative movement, the benefits of re-inventing a distinctively 'co-operative' trading offer (beginning with the Co-operative Bank's

ground-breaking ethical policy in 1992) have ironically been accompanied by amalgamations and consolidation amongst co-operative societies, leading to reduced opportunities for participation in decision-making about the business.

Building on the Past and Looking to the Future

During the opening years of the twenty-first century, the co-operative movement and the WEA sought, separately, to re-discover the relevance of member participation and this sparked renewed attention to their overlapping histories. Within an environment much more amenable to 'co-operative' ideas than the individualism of the 1980s and 1990s, a piece of WEA research (WEA, 2010a), made possible by the Co-operative Fund, explored the barriers and options facing membership renewal and had the unexpected by-product of acting as the catalyst to forge the first-ever WEA and Co-operative National Partnership Agreement in June 2010.

Launched at the House of Commons by John Hayes, MP, Minister for Lifelong Learning and Skills, a member of both the WEA and his local co-operative society, the agreement committed the Co-operative Group (the largest co-operative enterprise in the UK), the Co-operative College and the WEA to define joint work over six spheres of mutual interest and expertise:

- International development.
- Research.
- Campaigning.
- Exploring joint heritage.
- Growing capacity through the development of increasing memberships, including trustee development.
- Supporting the Co-operative College in the development of Co-operative Trust schools.

This has led to a programme of conferences on historical and membership development topics, environmental interventions and social issues such as equality, in the North East of England with further examples in Yorkshire and the North West arranged by the WEA and the Co-operative Group's membership teams. Productive links between the WEA, the Co-operative Group and Midlands Co-operative Society are being forged in the East and West Midlands, and the WEA's Southern Region has worked towards setting up WEA voluntary members' branches among the memberships of co-operative schools, enriching those schools' community presence.

The Co-operative College and the WEA have designed 'template' projects on 'Community Co-operative Alliances', applying co-operative values to wider learning for local governance roles, and the 'Big Co-operative Society' that utilises adult education techniques to stimulate co-operation between co-operatives as well as opening up discussion on co-operatives and the future of public services.

The WEA and the College are also working together on aligning the National Co-operative Archive and the Rochdale Pioneers museum with the wider community, and the first day of the WEA's biennial national conference held at Nottingham in October 2011 was programmed in partnership with the College.

Membership Development, Education and Campaigns

Revitalising membership, a principal locus for educational development, has been a priority for both movements. WEA individual membership was a moribund figure of 18,000 about five years ago, but under a new membership scheme and powered by effort from staff, members and tutors, the total membership is now over 40,000 and rising. Interestingly, this growth represents a statement of solidarity with the aims of the Association (membership offers no material rewards), and although participation is growing from a low base, WEA members are now more inclined to support campaigns and vote in newly introduced direct elections for national governance officers.

At the same time, the Co-operative Group and other retail societies' memberships have been revitalised, driven by a re-introduction of dividend payments and by modern communications technology. With more than a quarter of a million members voting in elections, and vast numbers taking part in ethical policies consultations organised by the financial and food businesses, it is clear that an overt commitment to co-operative values and principles, combined with the co-operative's high profile and profit-sharing system, is attracting attention.

How to organise six million co-operative members and embed an informed set of connections has

become a very live issue. The challenge to business stability posed by elections in which outcomes are determined by members whose contact with Co-operative Group governance is fairly slight, and the Group's aspiration to take membership up to 20 million by 2020, points to a need for fresh thinking.

Surely, at least part of the answer to achieving meaningful member participation - activity that is worthwhile to members, adds substance to elections and involvement, and which extends the reach of the two movements – can be achieved by 'pooling' WEA and co-operative practices?

Co-operatives have found that public and member education and campaigning on issues from Fairtrade to reversing the decline of the honey bee, can mobilise members. The WEA has also re-learned that inserting a 'social purpose' edge to its adult education is a popular dimension in group work conducted over several sessions. Additionally, a national Learning for Community Involvement project has given tutors and members new tools, nudging WEA groups in more activist directions. Developing campaigning could be a relevant meeting point (WEA, 2011).

Working with Co-operative Schools

Co-operative schools offer additional avenues for deploying adult learning in ways that encourage education for social change. As an entirely new co-operative movement, schools will have to build an understanding of co-operative values quite rapidly, not only to demonstrate the impact of the co-operative alternative, but to consolidate a community membership base as one of their guarantees of long term survival. WEA philosophy and voluntary membership is almost tailor-made to match the schools' democratic principles and assist in delivering 'community school' completeness.

A WEA voluntary members' branch established in a co-operative school would function almost as a 'co-op within the co-op'. For the WEA, the gains could be immense. Involving parents in learning at the same venues as their children has far-reaching educational benefits. And by integrating part of WEA provision and organisation with values-led schools, an aspiration of converting the Association's own 'incorporated' governance structure into a co-operative model - becoming 'the largest adult education co-operative in the world' - could move a step closer. All of this would have been meat and drink to the Mansbridge WEA in its pioneering days.

Study Circles as a Co-operative Pedagogy

One fascinating opportunity presented by the Partnership Agreement is the space it creates for energising pedagogy. Despite the democratic structures of organisation and curriculum development that were always a feature of WEA and co-operative education, modes of educational delivery in the past were often characterised by the relatively 'inactive' format of lectures followed by questions and discussion.

It is likely that the WEA and co-operators always made more use of the interaction between lecturers and students, but the extent to which conventional methods facilitated learner-led teaching and learning is open to debate. But both movements have intermittently shared an approach to learning co-operatively in their practice of organising study circles.

A not uncommon stage, prior to forming co-operative societies in the mid-nineteenth century, was for a group of workers to read and discuss co-operative tracts or a chapter from the co-operative pioneer George Jacob Holyoake's book *Self-Help by the People: the History of the Rochdale Pioneers* (Holyoake, 1857). In this way, they grasped how to open and run a co-operative store.

It was an approach drawn from the radical fringes of the mechanics' institutes and mutual improvement societies in the North of England, and possibly from the former Owenite co-operative movement. Modern credit unions have taken the same route of beginning with a credit union study group before moving to formally incorporate.

In the twentieth century, study circles were used by labour, co-operative and other movements in North America and Sweden (where they continue to flourish and with Sweden's WEA currently claiming that 745,000 people a year take part). They were present in the WEA until the late 1930s. Partly through the WEA, they were introduced into army education during the Second World War, championed by, amongst other Army Bureau of Current Affairs officers, Robert Marshall, who became the long-serving Principal of the Co-operative College in 1946.

After being lost for decades, 'study circles' were re-discovered in the mid-1970s when the

Co-operative College used them as the basis for its annual National Consumer Project. Study packs and guidance notes were sent to consumer societies and the results of members' discussions, and surveys into topics including health and public transport were fed into a special national conference, with a report on the project's conclusions published to influence policy makers.

The WEA was slower to return to study circles, probably due to being wedded to a tutor-student format of adult learning, but in 2009-10 substantial success was achieved by volunteers (named Learning Revolutionaries after the 2009 Government White Paper, *The Learning Revolution*) trained to set up learning circles with WEA community partners (WEA, 2010b).

Study circles are arguably an epitome of genuine co-operative learning. They largely transfer the control of learning to the learners and they can efficiently inform the social action of organisations of many kinds (eg environmental campaigns, tenants' associations and, of course, groups looking at starting co-operatives). It is important to note from co-operative and international experience that learning circles tend to flourish if they can draw upon an infrastructure of support for materials, training of facilitators and, where necessary, networking with similar groups.

Looking to the Future

Training the Learning Revolutionaries has returned the WEA to mapping out a dynamic role for volunteers in leading education. There is also a discernible trend underway in the international Co-operative Movement. For instance, the Swedish Co-operative Union's present experiment with 'ambassadors' enables members to become advocates of Fair Trade or organic food following training to work in schools and stores (EuroCoop, 2011: 18).

An embryonic form of the concept of ambassadors can be found on Co-operative Group area committees where members take an active interest in local Fairtrade Partnerships and promote Fairtrade at shops or events. It may be but a short leap from ambassadors to learning circles, suggesting more imaginative and consistent steps in mobilising members beyond serving on elected committees. In any event, there is probably a piece of research waiting to be fashioned on learning circles and ambassadors via the partnership agreement.

Similarly, as the cost of traditional forms of higher education are perceived as being out of the reach of an increasing number of people, the opportunity to look again at local and co-operative modes of study amongst co-operative members and employees presents some exciting possibilities, whether this be amongst neighbours in a housing co-operative, colleagues in a local shop, or members of a community co-operative.

The Author

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