



Co-operating for Change: Learning Through Co-operative Approaches to Survive and Thrive in a Time of Change



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Co-operative values and principles are intrinsic to Lifeworlds Learning, both in what we do and how we do it. In 2010 our engagement with co-operation took on a new dimension when we were asked if we could support a number of regional networks threatened by the post-election cuts rippling through the English education sector. Our response was to establish a new regional community of practice, underpinned by co-operative values and principles. Known as MELA (a Sanskrit word meaning 'coming together') the new community was launched in December 2010 and has since grown almost fourfold, strengthening and broadening its membership. Whilst co-operation has been central to this achievement, the journey has been far from simple. This case study shares our experience in co-operating to support learning communities during a period of wholesale change. It shares the context of co-operation, the challenge and influence of the wider environment and the challenges and opportunities ahead in co-operating around a common cause.

Introduction

Lifeworlds Learning is a co-operative group of educational practitioners providing support to schools, teachers, community groups and other organisations based in the English Midlands. Alongside many of those we work with, the arrival of a new UK Coalition Government in May 2010 initiated a period of dramatic change for our work. Budget cuts associated with a national austerity package and the realignment of priorities reflecting the changing political colour at Westminster, led many of the networks we worked with to close or face dramatic downscaling. Even where they survived, their purpose or 'common cause' was sometimes thrown into question by a wider political momentum.

It was against this backdrop that Lifeworlds Learning came into being as a community interest company (CIC) with a stated interest to 'support learning communities in England'. This interest was immediately put to the test when we were asked by one threatened network of educational practitioners and teachers whether we could come to their assistance. And so began an experiment in co-operation that continues at the point of writing. This is the story of MELA - a living and evolving co-operative group of educationalists and learners.

The Birth of MELA

The seeds of MELA were sown when the East Midlands Network for Global Perspectives in Schools (EMNGPS) asked Lifeworlds to explore the feasibility of supporting their network - a loosely knit group of organisations supporting global learning in schools - in what had become an uncertain environment following the withdrawal of government funding. Several other networks facing similar predicaments soon followed in the wake of EMNGPS. At Lifeworlds we also faced very real restrictions as a relatively new company (with limited resources) and as an entity having to navigate the changes impacting many of the areas in which we worked. Our dilemma was to whom, how, and when we could offer support. After further discussions it was decided that we should aim to provide support to all of them and to extend this support to similar groups who we may not yet know of.

For this to work, co-operation was essential. If they came together around a common cause and embraced some shared principles then we believed these networks could not just survive, but potentially thrive. The challenge was to reframe the changes affecting these groups as a new opportunity. An opportunity to foster dialogue across previously distinct areas of work, to share practice and experience beyond established norms and to cultivate new partnerships and possibilities that were not yet known, and that may not have been possible under the funding

restrictions of earlier environments.

The co-operative values essential to making this work were not necessarily known or commonly understood by those we were bringing together, but the values underpinning their particular educational interest - citizenship, global learning, international linking, critical pedagogy, community cohesion, and education for sustainable development - were closely allied, or at least related to those of co-operation. This provided a solid basis and commonality around which previously disparate groups could be encouraged to come together as an informal co-operative group. This new community was born as MELA in December 2010.

Start, Stumble, Stop - Teething Issues

After the initial excitement of launching MELA had receded, it became evident that a challenge in its early days would be to sensitively convey the idea of 'business NOT as usual'. Some members saw the emergence of MELA as a transition whereas it was in fact more of a transformation. Several of the constituent networks had become accustomed to funded network managers and dedicated budgets for activity and events. With minimal budget and a broad constituency MELA simply could not match such expectations. The task of conveying this to a membership already reeling from cuts was by necessity delicate and often very personal. The mission was to encourage a more co-operative spirit of co-construction and shared responsibility. We needed members to tell us (and each other) what they were doing and where they needed help. MELA was not a source point but rather a conduit and facilitator for a collective depository of inspiration originating from multiple sources - its members. We needed to turn the model upside down!

A second challenge for MELA has been the varied ability or willingness of members to participate or contribute. Why do members who had actively and openly participated in former networks, appear to reject or refrain from involvement in MELA? This remains an ongoing challenge to our co-operation. It has led us to question whether some will only co-operate for tangible gain as opposed to the often intangible benefits associated with genuine co-operation. Had the activity of former networks been predicated on the budgets to pay for meetings and perhaps even fund members? In a post-funding environment what was their reason for co-operation? If there proved to be a genuine absence of will to co-operate then what was the purpose of MELA?

Although the complexity of funding and co-operation remains on our radar, we should not allow it to blur our vision. There were also those who immediately seized on the opportunity of MELA and the liberating nature of co-operation across boundaries (real or imagined). Their early 'buy-in' and their willingness to embrace and support change has over the initial ten months of MELA encouraged many others to become more active, finding solidarity in the shared challenge and motivation in the conviction of others. Many fund involvement from their own pockets and new modes of working are emerging such as more shared events enabling cost efficiencies for all involved. With learning and co-operation now our only agenda, new members have also come to MELA. What do we learn from this? That change is sometimes hard and always tiring. That it is perhaps easier to join something new than to watch something you are part of metamorphose. Cautious of over-analysing, given that co-operation takes time, it is nevertheless useful for us to ask how co-operative values can make MELA more inclusive, to old and new alike.

Co-operating for Change - Sounds Great in Principle But ...

There is barely a MELA member who has not been touched by redundancies, restructuring and redirection, predominantly at the mercy of external forces. This has been disorientating and uncomfortable for many and catastrophic for some. The challenge for MELA is how to encourage co-operation for change at a time when individual worlds may be falling apart.

MELA is not a solution for uncertain times, but it can provide an alternative 'glass half full' perspective. A simple reworking of the prefix 're' from the negative (as used above) to the positive is a case in point. MELA is about remembering what we have in common, recognising

how we can support each other, and rethinking what it is we do. MELA can't make changes for its members, but it can be a change. A change whereby its members find and build more sustainable models of working that are less reliant on shifting funds and political fashions and more dependent on shared experience and collective potential.

Although some have quickly engaged with this philosophy, others facing new and uncertain circumstances have shown more caution. The ideas, experience and contacts developed during years of funded security and once openly shared, have become more closely bound (at least in many minds) to one's very survival. Under such conditions can co-operation itself be perceived to undermine individual security? For MELA this dilemma is arguably magnified by the role of Lifeworlds Learning in supporting the community. Lifeworlds is a relative newcomer in the region and exists as a company in a charity dominated sector. Our model of working is unfamiliar and understandably leads some to be cautious, especially in a time of such insecurity. This caution can manifest as mistrust or suspicion. Why would Lifeworlds support MELA?

The answer is that we believe in co-operation now more than ever, but that we cannot expect quick returns on this belief. For Lifeworlds the returns may be particularly slow in their realisation, since in enabling this vision for others we must actively reduce our visibility within MELA. This is not easy when reduced capacity or motivation of members has left us bearing the brunt of efforts to make things happen. It has also meant a suspension of true equity within MELA as Lifeworlds has yet to benefit justly and fairly from its contributions to the community. We believe this will change as the sustainability of MELA becomes more evident and others step forward to play more pivotal roles. It has led us to realise that true co-operatives are built and not created and that they require time, resilience and in many cases a certain leap of faith.

Celebrating Progress ...

In June 2011 the MELA community came together for a Festival of Learning. The event was co-constructed and entirely run by, for and with its members. The focus on 'Transforming Education, Transforming Ourselves' was designed to recognise the difficult operating environment facing many members, whilst simultaneously encouraging members to think about how they may need to transform their own practice in order to successfully weather the storm. The festival was also a celebration of MELA coming together and was captured in the by line 'inspirational spaces for learning and change'.

The event proved extremely successful in 'being the change' - bringing people together in a physical space, and creating an environment for open discussion. The MELA community appeared 'real' for the first time and gained energy and a renewed purpose that had perhaps not been experienced to date.

... and Plotting the Future

The morning after the Festival, MELA members attended a strategic session to review the Festival and their experience of MELA. What should MELA look like in the future? What should it do and how should it be run? Should it exist at all? We felt it vital to provide a safe space for asking such open and critical questions - an important part of realising ownership on the part of the members. The result was a clear mandate for the continuation and growth of MELA and to make more explicit the co-operation behind MELA as a maturing community of practice.

Alongside the positive endorsement, the session provided a useful reminder that we are at the early stages of a shared journey and will continue to grapple with co-operation as a 'living contradiction' in the immediate future. This contradiction is manifested in various guises including:

- A view that MELA was not a single 'community of practice' with shared values and principles but an 'umbrella body of communities of practice', perhaps signifying insecurity in letting go of the past or a suspicion of engaging an uncertain future.
- A call for MELA to build greater dialogue between teachers and providers/practitioners and yet a reluctance to share data or access pathways that would enable MELA to communicate

more effectively and directly to teachers.

- A request for more 'face to face' opportunities and yet a clear (and relatively low) limit on how much people are willing to pay in membership fees to make things happen.
- The continued lack of submissions to MELA and/or the WIRE newsletter from the membership. The valued sharing of information and signposting to events, etc that is still being led by Lifeworlds Learning - a position that challenges the way MELA is perceived and threatens its sustainability.

Co-operation as a Living Contradiction?

Our experience of forming MELA as an informal co-operative for change has illustrated that we can sometimes experience co-operation as a living contradiction. Members can express a desire to work in more co-operative ways and yet in reality the practice and action that follows sometimes proves to be very contradictory. This is especially so during a period of change and uncertainty when people may harbour suspicion or mistrust of co-operative approaches or not see them as beneficial to their own, more immediate survival. MELA will need to work harder to share its co-operative values but our experience so far suggests that it is not something to be taught. Co-operation must be built, must be felt by those it touches and it requires a shift of mind, a stirring of conscience and an almost spiritual leap of faith. Bringing a diverse group of people together is not easy and will take time. We realise that co-operation, at least in the form of MELA will not be for everyone and we will lose some along the way. Our lived experience so far however, suggests that MELA is likely to gain many more members than it loses, and this is in no small part due to its underpinning co-operative values. We have much to learn, but there is little doubt that MELA has enabled many to find new and exciting ways to co-operate for change.

The Author

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