



# Teaching about Co-operatives in a UK University Business School



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This article is an autoethnographic account of a personal attempt to address issues of the lack of curriculum content about co-operatives and co-operative approaches to learning in a UK University Business School. It also reflects upon the reasons why the local consumer co-operative, a significant employer in the surrounding area, did not recruit students from the University. It offers insights for academics and co-operators seeking to influence their presence in future higher education policy curricula.

## My Motivation

For some years teaching in the Business School at the Coventry University as a co-operative activist - director of my local consumer co-operative and chair of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies - I had become increasingly frustrated. Why were there no co-operative modules in any of the curricula of the School? And why did my co-operative, a significant local employer, not recruit students from the University? I decided I had to change this situation.

There was a residual institutional memory of a co-operative element to the School's curriculum but no one could find evidence of it. My mission, then, would be to introduce some co-operative content.

## Relevance in the Workplace

Coventry University prides itself on having close relationships with local employers so my first step was to find out what local co-operative employers would want from a more 'co-operative' university curriculum. I exploited my role as Chair of the Regional Co-operative Council to begin a conversation with the members about their engagement with higher education (HE). Frankly, there was little to report, despite most CEOs and senior managers being graduates they saw little benefit in engaging with universities.

The most useful thoughts came from the CEO of the co-operative society where I am a Director. The Heart of England Co-operative is an independent consumer society; it has food, travel, funeral services and non-food stores employing a thousand people in the greater Coventry area. The question was why do we not recruit trainee managers or offer work experience to students from the University - when a significant number of students are employed in part-time shop-floor roles? The CEO's answers were enlightening but it was his parting comment that set me on my way. "It would be a help" he said, "if when we interview university students they know what a co-operative is!"

So my initial challenge was to get an introductory co-operative module into what is called the 'employability' stream. These modules aimed at equipping students for the world of work are more practical and skill-based than purely academic and would be a way of introducing students to co-operative enterprises and the possibility of working in the co-operative sector.

I asked the employability team if there was any interest; "Yes we would like something on co-operatives" they said, "Co-operatives are sexy! They are being talked about as a part of the Government's Big Society. Students are keen on the Co-operative Bank and John Lewis." The only snag was that each module had to be sponsored by an academic department.

I approached the head of economics suggesting a series of modules on the economics of co-operation for students in each of their three years. "What's the difference between a co-op and Tesco's", he asked? At first I thought he was joking but he did not appear to know that a co-operative has a different ownership model to a shareholder corporate entity. I explained that there are co-operative retailers, but co-operatives can be found in almost every sector of the economy on every continent. Eventually, as he realised there was something in this I realised that this would be a bigger educational exercise than I thought; I would be teaching the teachers

as well as the students! I set off to draft my proposals.

Then the employability team said “the University has an international agenda, could I make this international?”, “Why not?” I thought, I can use international co-operative examples. I redrafted my module to include the required learning outcomes, the teaching style and the materials and references to make it a global story. All was set to go.

## Developing a Co-operative Pedagogy

At the 2009 UK Society for Co-operative Studies Conference at Ruskin College I had breakfast with Alan Wilkins from Co-operative Learning and Development Associates (CLADA). “I’m introducing some new co-op modules”, I said. “You will have to incorporate co-operative learning techniques into the delivery” he said! I knew immediately he was right.

I went away and read Alan’s paper *Learning Co-operatively* (Wilkins, 2008). The thing that leapt out was the importance of experiential learning - as he writes “Co-operative learning is both active and collective, and is by implication experiential” (Wilkins, 2008). To understand co-operation, students had to receive a co-operative learning experience. If I was to teach co-operation I would have to do it co-operatively. Back to the drawing board ...!

My starting point had been to give students the chance to learn a specific body of knowledge and set of understandings. That is, that a co-operative is an enterprise based on a set of principles underpinned by values. I wanted them to know these values and principles and how to identify if an enterprise measured up to them.

Then I set about breaking the learning down into tasks, it was no longer a question of what did I want them to know, but what did I want us (the students and I) to do?

As an educator, this clear set of learning objectives begged the question as to how I would measure success? I wanted the students to capture some information, analyse it and present it back both in written and oral form. How could I make this a co-operative task or set of tasks?

In HE today, the most common learning experience has become known as ‘death by PowerPoint’. The traditional lecture has morphed into a corporate style ‘presentation’ with lecturers attempting to communicate vast quantities of facts to students using the display of often high quality diagrams and graphics. What has not changed is that for students this is largely a passive experience with little effort at engagement with the students or encouragement for them to engage with the material.

In contrast, as I set about incorporating team working and group activities into the learning processes, I realised I had to concentrate more on process, less on content. I stripped the knowledge I wanted them to know down to a core and expanded the time available to use this knowledge to explore and evaluate the types of enterprises we were studying.

## Institutional Challenges

Just as all this was coming together I was disappointed to get an email from the head of economics saying that after second thoughts he did not think my modules would fit into economics. Try management!

This process had already taken months by the time I got to the head of management there was no time to go through the academic approval process and change the curriculum for the following year! A lost year! But I did not give up.

I had some time to think. Co-operatives and management is a subject which raises all sorts of conceptual and practical challenges. After all, co-operation is not just about ownership but how a business is internally co-operative too. So now I was planning to take the students on a three year journey into managing in a co-operative setting.

Then the department of management came back, “could my first module be Co-ops and social enterprises?” This is a sore point with me I feel that there is enough in the co-operative sector for it to stand alone. So I said no. Instead I offered to create two first year modules; one social enterprises, one co-operatives. I was pleased when they agreed!

I quickly drafted a new module on social enterprises incorporating much of my new found co-operative pedagogy and set the modules off through the accreditation process.

## A Lack of 'Literature'

Close to approval, the next attempt to reject my co-operative module was over my reading list. It was 'a little out of date'. This was irritating because the point of the module was to compare contemporary co-operative enterprises with co-operative values and principles which are much more enduring.

A quick search through the literature threw up some new books to add to the references and my first co-operative module was passed. However, the general paucity of contemporary literature on co-operatives compared with mainstream business does present a challenge to anyone trying to get modules accredited. We do need more co-operative literature to be written and published.

## Delivery and Evaluation

This academic year 2010-11 saw the delivery of the first module, *Co-operative Enterprise in the Global Economy*. The modules on internationalisation worked well, enabling me to draw on some super material; for example You Tube allows access to some wacky TV adverts from Scandinavia - there are great examples of co-operatives everywhere.

I also discovered some excellent teaching resources from North America, especially the work of Barbara Millis who has written and edited numerous works. *Co-operative Learning for Higher Education Faculty* (Millis and Cottell, 1998) was particularly helpful. And there is some really good historical material from the Co-operative College here in the UK.

It was in one of Millis's books that I came across the best description of what I was trying to do, Philip Cottell says:

Co-operative education employs a structured form of small group problem solving that incorporates the use of heterogeneous teams, maintains individual accountability, promotes positive interdependence, instils group processing, and sharpens social leadership skills (Cottell, 2008: 12).

Students learned about the size and scope of the modern co-operative movement and worked co-operatively to look at how contemporary co-operatives measure up against co-operative principles. Some of the co-operatives students chose to investigate have been fascinating, from community owned football clubs, to Canadian Credit Unions, from the Co-operative Group to the Phone Co-op, and from the Mountain Equipment Co-operative to Divine Chocolate.

Initially some students expressed discomfort with the learning methodology, the group working, dividing up the learning process into tasks and having to share them out. Some also did not like having to present in front of others.

As I have said, I found a wealth of interesting US material on 'co-operative education'<sup>1</sup> although not that helpful as a guide to what actually to do in the classroom. The most useful practical thing I found was not for HE at all but for simply engaging with young people. I freely adapted activities from Shephard & Treseder's *Participation - Spice It Up!* (2002).

I learned quickly about relationships in modular courses. The only time this group of students met was in my class. So co-operative learning techniques are an excellent way of introducing them to each other and building a community in the classroom. I learned how rare it was for their teachers to spend any time listening to them.

## Apathy to Enthusiasm

Clearly when participation is voluntary not everyone stays the course but for those who did they gained an experience and even better, as far as the University authorities were concerned, excellent marks. The more engaged they are, the more likely they are to stay the course, fulfil its objectives and complete their coursework.

As a 'lecturer' I spent less time lecturing. Instead I became a resource, something they could call upon when they needed it. I did introduce new information but it was a relatively small part of the time overall. Most time was spent by students interrogating ideas and then explaining them.

It was interesting to see the students' attitudes change as they absorbed the ideas behind the seven co-operative principles - broadly passing from a position of, frankly, ignorance and apathy to one of a

large degree of enthusiasm.

Once they had grasped the principles the consensus was that co-operatives are a jolly good thing. I was surprised how strongly they placed concern for community as the most important of the seven principles.

## Reflections and Conclusions

A striking insight came a few weeks into the course when looking at the largest UK co-operative, the Co-operative Group. It dawned on some students that they had actually been in their shops. They were those with *The Co-operative* over the door. Their surprise was that *The Co-operative* was a co-operative! Clearly those of us in the movement who want co-operatives to be better understood have got some work to do.

It seems that we have a generation who are discovering co-operatives for the very first time, and with no preconceived ideas. A few know about co-operatives and see them as a jolly good thing but for the vast majority 'The Co-operative' is just another meaningless brand name. This presents us with the challenge as businesses, of filling that brand with meaning and making the special nature of a co-operative business plain for all to see.

Is using co-operative learning techniques to learn about co-operatives 'co-operative education'? Clearly the techniques can be used to learn about most things but they do add an extra dimension when trying to introduce the ideas of co-operatives.

This style of education is risky but as Edward Nuhfer says, "Being fully alive in our work means taking risks, being opportunistic, and looking perpetually for creative ways to teach topics" (Nuhfer, 2008: 192). This way of working is more exciting both for teachers and students.

As a new academic year dawns, I am looking forward to battling to educate administrators, lecturers and students alike. Struggling for more modules to introduce a new batch of undergraduates to the wonderful world of co-operation!

## The Author

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## References

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## Notes

- 1 As in the UK, the US has several different interpretations or meanings for 'co-operative education'. One is about companies 'co-operating' with colleges and universities to train their staff with a mixture of class room based and on the job teaching. An excellent example of educators teaching about co-operatives and co-operation is NASCO, the North American Students of Cooperation ([www.nasco.coop](http://www.nasco.coop)).