

# Making Co-operators: Co-operative Education for the 21st Century

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“No one writing about co-operatives in general and co-operative education in particular starts with a blank sheet” (Shaw, 2009). Co-operatives and co-operative education have long, rich and complex histories.

The provision of many different forms of education, often free of charge, has been a feature of consumer co-operatives since their inception in the mid nineteenth century. This included a wide range of provision for the wide range of activities undertaken by co-operatives. There were formal education programmes for staff and members in vocational and mainstream academic subjects. Technical training was needed for staff to help the co-operative enterprise operate as effectively as possible. The elected members and directors needed education in their roles and responsibilities. For the wider membership, many societies provided libraries as well as a wide range of cultural and educational events such as drama and music groups, visiting speakers, film shows, etc. Underpinning all this was a widespread recognition that learning happened through the practice of co-operation itself and the everyday experience of participating in the democratic life of a co-operative society. This was one of the defining features of co-operative education.

A second was the making of co-operators. For many co-operative educators, education was not just about acquiring knowledge or technical skills but had the aim to ‘make co-operators’. This reflected a belief in the superiority of co-operation and of the need for developing individuals who would spread the message of co-operation and help build a wider movement. This was a broad and transformative vision for education rooted in the transformative role of the wider co-operative movement. From my perspective, ‘making co-operators’ still needs to remain a central aim for co-operative education. It is one that draws on three overlapping aims which seem to me to have characterised co-operative education in the UK since its early days: individual learning and development; making more effective co-operative organisations; and the broader aim of building a wider movement.

Through its long history, education for co-operatives has continued to be characterised by multiple meanings and overlapping, sometimes contradictory aims. As co-operative movements have changed and developed over time, and not always for the better, the educational needs of co-operatives have also evolved. The two have not always developed in tandem. The challenge for co-operative education providers, such as the UK Co-operative College and indeed its sister colleges throughout Africa and Asia, has been to reflect and adapt to a changing environment.

Today’s co-operative revival presents just such a challenge - meeting the changing educational needs of consumer co-operatives or of newer co-operatives in sectors such as agriculture, sport, energy and transport. What does education for twenty-first century co-operators look like? Future development needs to remain rooted in the values and history of the movement while not being limited by it. While co-operative education will continue to be characterised by multiple meanings and practices, I would argue that it is also time for renewal of debate and discussion about what constitutes the ‘essentials’ of co-operative education.

## The Author

Dr Linda Shaw is Vice Principal at the Co-operative College in Manchester responsible for research and international programmes, where she has worked since 2002. Linda manages a wide range of research programmes and co-supervises doctoral students in partnership with UK and African universities. Prior to joining the College, Linda worked at the University of Manchester and has also held posts with the International Labour Organisation in India and with the Open University in the UK. Linda has a doctorate in history and has published widely in both academic books and journals.

## Reference

Shaw, L (2009) *Making Connections, Education for Co-operatives*. Manchester: Co-operative College Paper 15.