

# Learning Through Co-operation

**Owen Sedgewick-Jell**

As a play worker, youth worker, membership officer and charity trustee, co-operation and education have been twin themes running through my career. My professional experience bears out my personal conviction that learning through co-operation transforms education for young people (and adults) from the mere acquisition of facts to a complex process by which they can discover a great deal about themselves, their colleagues, relationships with others and with the wider world.

That so many share this conviction, and a growing number are ready to align under a banner of 'co-operative education', has never been more important than now, at a time when government (in England, at any rate) renews its insistence that the impact of formal education is best measured by a focus on attainment of targets and benchmarks.

The policy of successive Westminster governments has resulted in an abundance of legal and governance models for schools, and the co-operative movement has rightly responded by pursuing a co-operative model for these. However, the structure of the legal entity is less important - at least as far as learners are concerned - than the power of co-operative values to provide a moral framework for learning, and of co-operative methods to transform a school from a 'knowledge factory' into a dynamic learning community.

In 2003 I was part of the team visiting some of the schools hoping to gain the sponsorship of the Co-operative Group to become specialist business and enterprise colleges - the Group's first foray into direct partnership with schools. We found a highly developed understanding of co-operative values, and a wealth of ideas applying these to learning. Co-operative Trust schools, and then Academies, such as those sponsored by the Group in the hinterland of its Manchester HQ, have now joined these trailblazers to demonstrate the power of a co-operative ethos to create within the state system a values-driven - but faith-neutral - education for young people.

A co-operative approach to learning also flourishes in less formal situations. I was privileged to be invited by the Woodcraft Folk - the co-operative educational charity founded in 1925 - to be a part of CoCamp, which took place this summer. Over 2,500 young people and adults from the Woodcraft Folk and its international partners joined the 10 day event, celebrating the Folk's co-operative heritage by living and learning together. As we created a model of the world as we would like it to be, young people's hopes for a world at peace were made all the more poignant, as together we commemorated the lives of the young people murdered at the AUF youth camp in Norway only a few days earlier.

Throughout CoCamp, there was a recurring question - 'how does this help us in the real world?' We're missing the point if we create model communities for learning in isolation - what we learn must be taken forward, and applied to other settings, outside of our schools and workplaces. Learners and educators have a powerful toolkit for working together, achieving consensus and facilitating change, which we can use to help others find their own answers.

## The Author

Owen Sedgewick-Jell has worked for The Co-operative Group's membership department since 2003. His early experience of co-operative education was as a member of the Woodcraft Folk; he also served on the Folk's board of trustees between 1998 and 2001.

In his current role in The Co-operative Group's National Projects team, he works on a range of educational initiatives, including The Co-operative Academies programme, which provides a high-quality education based on co-operative values in three Academy schools in Manchester, Stoke and Leeds.