

Personal Reflection: Learning Co-operatively Through Networks

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It is some years now since I made the gradual move from activist/practitioner in and with co-operatives, mutuals, self-help and mutual aid organisations and non-profits to being an academic. As a lone individual in a mainstream management or business school (and many of us are), or as part of a small group of academics (as with Cardiff Institute for Co-operative Studies), what has been a vital part of my continued learning and development and my contribution and participation as a researcher involved with co-operatives and nonprofits has always been links to communities of like-minded academics and practitioners working co-operatively and collaboratively to increase knowledge and communication about co-operative principles and ways of working. So, you can probably imagine my delight when, on my first day at a well-respected business school on Canada's Atlantic coast, I was met with posters announcing 'co-operative education' and 'co-op programs'. Unfortunately this delight was short-lived as I realised that in North American terminology this equated to what in the UK we would refer to as work experience and work placements. Disappointment was compensated by the knowledge that I was living in a province with a long association with the co-operative movement: the Antigonish movement - blending community and rural development, adult education and learning, and employment in the context of local communities. It was home also to part of a Canadian-wide network of practitioners, students, academics and researchers that made up the Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network (SESARN, funded by the equivalent of the ERSC from 2005-2011).

SESARN brought together, physically and virtually, practitioners from different parts of the co-operative movement and researchers from a range of higher education institutions across Canada and across academic disciplines. With hubs in each province the network has provided a focus for debate, promotion of ideas, research and information exchange and has promoted co-operation and collaboration between individuals who, because of their academic disciplines (and institutional pressures) may well not have worked together within the confines of their own institutions or purely academic networks. For me, this emphasises the possibilities for learning to emerge out of social interaction - the informal (yet co-ordinated) and experiential aspects of learning through networks of engaged communities of practitioners and embedded in communities (of practice, interest, place-based communities) rather than merely in institutions.

It is necessary to develop resources within universities (accredited courses, master's programmes, research opportunities - a difficult thing to do in these financially challenged times). However, for individual researchers like me based in institutions without a dedicated focus on co-operatives, co-operative communities of learning like SESARN are a life-line.

The Author

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