

A Personal View of the Highs and Lows in Starting the British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies

Ian MacPherson

This short paper describes and analyses the origins, development and objectives of the British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies (BCICS). The Institute was established to make a contribution to the development of co-operative studies a research and teaching field, particularly at the University of Victoria and within British Columbia but elsewhere as well. The author analyses the position and status of co-operative studies within universities more generally and offers some reflections on how co-operative studies can be embedded both within academia and within the international co-operative community. He illustrates the potential for the development of theory and practice in co-operation, which, however, is often limited by a lack of resources.

The British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies (BCICS) began operations in January 2000. I primarily promoted its development and I was named its founding director. BCICS was made possible because of support from the co-operative sector in British Columbia and elsewhere, the government of British Columbia, and the University of Victoria.¹ It benefited greatly from advice and co-operation given by colleagues at the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at University of Saskatchewan.

The primary objective for the establishment of the Institute was to make a contribution to the development of Co-operative Studies as a research and teaching field, particularly at the University of Victoria and within British Columbia but elsewhere as well. After researching on, and writing about, co-operatives and the co-operative movement for some thirty years – and serving on numerous boards for about the same time – the author had become firmly convinced of the value and the need for developing the field as systematically as possible. Some of the reasons for thinking so are as follows.

1. I believed only a few universities in the world seriously examined the roles of the co-operative movement and, even in those few, the work being done tended to take place within small units seldom well integrated within their university's general teaching programmes. Rarely was the study of co-operatives widely distributed across the disciplines and programmes that should have been interested in the co-operative movement, given its history, scope, contemporary impact, and future possibilities.²

One could continue to overcome this situation through individuals (or even groups of individuals) working away in the traditional

academic structures, as many of us have done for decades. Indeed, much good work has been done that way but, all too often, such gains as have been made in a given university were eliminated when a faculty member retired, as has happened in at least six Canadian universities since the 1980s.

Alternatively, one could try to work with others to create a more stable base for Co-operative Studies, one that would stand on its own and, by the sheer force of its research accomplishments and theoretical base, command respect across the academy while contributing significantly to the effective development of co-operative organisations, old and new. To do so, it would be necessary to establish the field's primary foci and to identify its most pressing issues, chief characteristics, methodological needs, and special opportunities.

2. The pressing need to help scholars, especially younger scholars, interested in the field to do the kind of work they wanted to do while also establishing themselves in academic careers.

One of the greatest obstacles to the development of Co-operative Studies is that, with rare exceptions, researchers have had to 'make their careers' in traditional disciplines, where the study of co-operatives is rarely acknowledged as important. The result is that their co-operative interests often became secondary, and their search for engagement with the co-operative world became focussed outside the academy, on boards and meetings of co-operative organisations, usually a satisfactory, often a very rewarding, experience, but rarely a career-advancing activity.

Ultimately, the only way to help such

researchers, particularly when they find themselves in isolated situations within their own universities, is to create a network of fellow researchers whose activities would collectively approximate what is normally considered to be a field of study, perhaps a discipline. Only then will there be the support system, the specialised journals, joint research projects, strong evaluative systems, and established scholars to foster the development of careers in the field at enough universities to make a significant difference. Only then will the accumulated and new research needed for teaching about co-operatives across secondary and post-secondary curricula be created, recognised, and applied.

3. Co-operatives are ultimately about the creation and application of special knowledge in order to meet contemporary economic and social needs or they are not about much. Their claim to distinctiveness emerges from their values and principles. They should be judged by their economic performance but also by how well they apply those values and principles in their daily operations. Researchers and practitioners have created a lot of very useful information about, and some remarkable reflections on, the co-operative experience, though much more needs to be done. Much of that information and reflection, however, is unavailable – for researchers and teachers, for people within co-operatives, and for others in communities. The sad truth is that that, even in the ‘information age’, the co-operative community – and the researchers/educators concerned with it – engage only a minuscule fragment of the population, and, all too often, mostly the ‘already converted’.

One of BCICS’s objectives was to change this situation as quickly and as much as possible, hopefully in collaboration with many others within the international academy and the international movement. By using the emerging communications technology effectively and by co-operating with other academic groups and individuals, as well as the sector, this goal seemed, in 2000, to be entirely realistic and of immense value for everyone. It would also create a wide, deep, and growing literature that would demonstrate the legitimacy and possibilities of the field.

4. There is an ongoing and growing need for enhanced communications within the field of Co-operative Studies, not only for more information but also for increased connections among researchers, within co-operative networks, among young people interested in co-ops, and between researchers and practitioners. My hope in 2000 was that BCICS would be able to help establish a ‘virtual department’ across Canada and perhaps including some researchers in other countries as well. That would lead to a series of online courses in a wide range of disciplines and the offering of special accreditation in Co-operative Studies through a number of post-secondary institutions.
5. As in any good university library, the University of Victoria library has many holdings concerned with co-operatives. Because of how knowledge has been created in the western world since the Eighteenth century, however, these holdings are scattered throughout the library and much on co-operatives that could be available is not in our library, as it is not in most university and public libraries. Thus BCICS decided at the beginning to develop a special, if small library, with little duplication of existing holdings in the University library, for the use of researchers and people in the community.
6. BCICS recognised the importance of undertaking significant research on co-operatives in British Columbia. Like many other parts of the world, British Columbia has a substantial co-operatives movement, but it is largely ignored by the academy and many within it are really only knowledgeable about the co-operative or co-operatives to which they belong. In conjunction with the British Columbia Co-operative Association, BCICS has a special responsibility to provide information on the sector for people within the movement, researchers (especially students), the public service, and the general public. From its beginnings, BCICS has also recognised the need to develop strong relationships with people within communities, relationships based on mutual respect, shared research activities, open dialogue, and ongoing connections that outlast specific research activities. This is, we contend, an essential aspect of Co-operative Studies.

7. Since it is located within a university, BCICS recognised its special obligations to assist young people, especially students, with an interest in the co-operative movement, either for research or to meet their own economic and social needs.
8. When BCICS was started, the then provincial government had a special programme to help people start co-operatives. As a result, the numbers of new co-operatives each year rose to fifty. Since the end of the programme in 2001, the number of new co-operatives formed each year has decreased to about thirty, a still significant number. BCICS, therefore, has a special opportunity to assess effective practice in the formation and stabilisation of co-operatives within the province, one that potentially could be useful to people elsewhere as well.
9. Co-operative contributions to the creation of more peaceful societies form one of the least examined topics in the field of Co-operative Studies. A special interest of the founding director, it was early targeted as a topic in which BCICS should undertake some work.
10. One dimension of the dilemmas facing Co-operative Studies is how it should situate itself with regard to other fields of enquiry and teaching programmes. Another is how it should be situated in public discussions of social and economic issues. One does not reflect on these issues very long before realising that associating with like-minded organisations can help create a political force strong enough to be consistently heard. BCICS has been interested from the beginning in engaging in these dialogues with other kinds of like-minded organisations. It argues that co-operatives should not only be grouped together with other organisations within business categories –as important as that is –but they should also be seen in the context of their social purposes as well. If they are not, much of their distinctiveness is easily ignored and the possibilities of new forms of co-operative enterprise readily passed over – by the co-operative movement generally as well as by public policy makers.

Nearly seven years have passed since the formation of BCICS. How has it fared? What can be learned from its efforts on behalf of

Co-operative Studies? Evaluating the quality of what it has accomplished should not be attempted by one so closely tied to it as I have been. I can suggest the quantity, however, and I can provide reflections on some of the developments and ‘products’ that have pleased and others that have disappointed.

Our efforts to develop the field of Co-operative Studies led to a very successful international conference on Co-operative Studies. It attracted 180 people to a special meeting of the ICA International Co-operative Research Committee and the Canadian Association for the Study of Co-operation in Victoria in 2003. This summer we will publish a book drawing together some papers from it and some other papers on the field of Co-operative Studies.³ We hope it will spark an international discussion that will help establish the field better – for its participants as well as for others interested in its possibilities. The book will be one of the first in our own press, *The New Rochdale Press*, an initiative of which we are very proud but one which we hope someday will be owned by a number of Co-operative Studies specialists and organisations.

We have facilitated the development of four online courses on the development of co-operatives, which we intend to have fully operational shortly, and we have assisted instructors at our University interested in teaching about co-operatives.

Our most ambitious project has been the development of the Co-operative Learning Centre (CLC), an online multi-dimensional, multi-lingual resource base for a wide variety of resources in the field of Co-operative Studies. Developed by our Technology Coordinator, Robin Puga, it involves a sophisticated search capacity that would make possible the widespread and deep search for information and research on nearly one hundred key topics in the field. It utilises a collaborative management approach, which democratises the ownership and population of the resources: it is not a ‘BCICS’ project in the usual sense. Non-technical users can contribute resources, help translate content, and take a management role on the website through any web browser anywhere in the world. The project is developed on an Open Source software platform that allows for easy customisation for the specific needs of the co-operative community. Our development of this important resource has been limited by the funds we have so far secured, but we remain optimistic that such an

obviously valuable resource for researchers and practitioners alike will be fully developed.

Our interest in developing a 'virtual department' across the country has not met my hopes but there is clearly much improved communications across the vastness of Canada than ever before, because of the activities of the Canadian Association for Studies in Co-operation and the development of a few large multi-campus research projects. Hopefully, in time, a further outcome will be the development of courses in Co-operative Studies on more campuses so that students and the general public can more systematically learn about the movement, its history, current applications, and future possibilities. Perhaps, too, the coterie of scholars in the field in Canada will be able to address more directly ways they can better help new and younger colleagues establish themselves in careers within the Canadian academy.

Largely because of the efforts of Sol Kinnis, our librarian, we have been successful in markedly expanding resources about co-operatives within the University. BCICS has been the agency through which over 2,000 books on co-operatives and related subjects have been added to the central library. We have developed a library in the Institute with an equivalent number of volumes and over 100 feet of papers, most of them indexed and online. We have called our library the Suren Saxena Library after the distinguished Indian co-operator whose extensive papers we house. We are indebted to the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan for their generosity in helping us develop these resources and to several individuals for their contributions. Our ability to expand this resource is limited only by the physical space we have available.

Initially under the leadership of Kathleen Gabelmann and latterly of Joy Emmanuel, we have undertaken some extensive research within British Columbia, reflected in several occasional papers and conference presentations; we have published or are publishing three books on the subject.⁴ We have engaged in a number of community seminars on co-operatives and have worked with developers in the preparation of a manual for people starting co-operatives.⁵ We have developed *The Galleria*, an online general introduction to the variety of co-operative existing in British Columbia. We intend to expand this resource in the near future, as we believe it is being

well used as a teaching resource in the secondary and post-secondary education systems.

We have also developed a series of relationships with people in the Victoria area, though development work belongs more properly with the British Columbia Co-operative Association. One result of this work was the holding of a conference on Ethical Trade in October 2006. Organised by Sol Kinnis, our librarian, and Debbie Dergousoff, a graduate student at Simon Fraser University, it was very successful. We tried to emphasise the roles of co-operatives in ethical trade and we were particularly indebted to Francisco VanderHoff Boersma from Mexico and Jacqui Macdonald (now from Victoria) for their contributions in doing so. We will be organising a similar event in 2008.

All of this local and provincial work has led us to a project with co-operative developers and the Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation to help capture for others what developers have learned about starting co-operatives. The Co-operatives Secretariat in the federal government has funded this project through its Co-operatives Development Initiative. Led by Joy Emmanuel, it has generated (or is currently generating) two books⁶ and two videos (in both French and English) that give voice to their perspectives on what one should know when starting a co-operative.

We have been particularly proud of our efforts to foster youth interest in co-operatives. We employ as many young people as we can in our research and writing efforts and, so far, over eighty students have worked with us. Many of them have changed their research focus as a result of their experience at BCICS. In 2003, we organised the first annual *Building Co-operative Futures* conference at our university. It has since met in Alberta, Saskatchewan, the United Kingdom, and Ontario. It will return to British Columbia in 2008, where we will co-host the event with the British Columbia Co-operative Association. We published a book, *Youth Reinventing Co-operatives*, out of the first conference (with the assistance of the International Co-operative Alliance, the International Labour Organisation and the Canadian Co-operative Association).⁷ Robin Puga is working with a group of young co-operators to develop a second book, scheduled for completion this autumn (suggestions and submissions are welcome).

Robin, with Eryk Martin, a graduate student in history, co-hosts a programme on

Co-operative Studies over the community/campus radio station. Entitled *Each for All: the Co-operative Connection*, it has attracted a considerable following among students and co-operative enthusiasts locally and around the world (it is available on podcast on our website <http://bcics.uvic.ca/radio>). In addition to the radio episodes, a collection of compact discs featuring engaging interviews with people from the co-operative sector has been compiled as educational tools on a variety of Co-operative Studies topics.

Our interest in the theme of co-operatives and peace led to a special, number limited conference on the subject attracting about forty distinguished co-operators to Victoria in June 2006. The conference was co-sponsored with the International Co-operative Alliance, the International Labour Office, and the Canadian Co-operative Association. Papers from the conference (and a few others) will be available in July.⁸ A video on the subject and another book on the subject, written by Yehudah Paz and Ian MacPherson,⁹ will appear early in the autumn of 2007. We are planning further work on this subject next year and would welcome collaboration.

Our concern to broaden the relationships between co-operatives and like-minded organisations led us to apply successfully with the Canadian Community Economic Development Network to become the national 'hub' for the Canadian Social Economy Partnerships, a \$15,000,000, five-year research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. This is an unparalleled opportunity to promote the study and application of social economy organisations in Canada at municipal, provincial, and national levels, if the parties concerned will work together effectively to create the momentum necessary to arouse interest among the public and within governments. The 'hub', under the leadership of Annie McKittrick, the project officer, is hosting the first international CIRIEC conference devoted to research in the field in Victoria in October 2007 (<http://conference.se-es.ca>).

I believe that the Social Economy connection is very important to Co-operative Studies because it provides an entrée into a wider range of activities, a way to concretely emphasise the 'social' dimensions of co-operative enterprise (particularly important

because of a common over-emphasis on the business dimensions), a way to link with others in the academy, and a way to mobilise more influence within governments and in debates over public issues.

Such is the range of some of the projects we have undertaken in trying to live up to what was intended in 2000. There are a number of other projects, including books on the history of Canadian credit unions and the broad theme of 'co-operatives and work' that will also appear this year, plus a further six occasional papers and the co-ordination of publications from the Social Economy Partnerships. We hope, too, that this year the dream of the Co-operative Learning Centre will finally be fully realised.

In all of this I have learned a few things. First, the field has unending potential. Every day brings opportunities and possibilities; the only limit is resources, financial and spatial. Second, building the necessary coalitions is very hard work. Overcoming traditional academic competitive instincts is much more complex than one might expect. Reaching out to communities and to co-operative activists means overcoming mutual suspicions and exaggerated concerns over competing interests. Third, the support of senior administrators is absolutely essential, especially because it is not obvious where Co-operative Studies fits within the academy; without it, nothing is possible.

On a personal level, in the last seven years I have enjoyed many of the best experiences of my 'working' life, largely because of the enthusiasms of many of the people of with whom I have worked in our busy little office. Even more than in 2000, I am convinced of the value and importance of Co-operative Studies as a field of enquiry and as a way to contribute to the world around us.

Those years have also brought the greatest disappointments in my life, compounded by feelings of inadequacy for what I have not been able to accomplish and for my inability to reach out well enough. This, I think is not unusual in the world of Co-operative Studies, where one puts one's self 'on the line' in ways not common in the academy. The result is a journey with many high peaks and deep valleys and only a few level stretches. Despite the valleys, the trip is worth the effort.

Ian MacPherson is Director of the British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies

Notes

- 1 Financial support came from Credit Union Central of British Columbia, on behalf of the credit unions of British Columbia; The Co-operators Insurance Company, a national insurance company owned mostly by co-operatives and located in Guelph, Ontario; and Federated Co-operatives Limited, the regional wholesale for Western Canadian consumer co-operatives, located in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. That support continues today. The University of Victoria made it possible for Ian MacPherson to devote most of his time to the Institute from 2000 until his formal retirement in 2005 (he has volunteered his time subsequently and the University is currently searching for his replacement, with a likely appointment date of July 2008). The University has provided space, other support, and a financial contribution to assist with meeting the overhead costs of operating the office. The government of British Columbia provided crucial early support for the Institute for a number of projects designed by Institute staff to understand the nature and extent of the co-operative movement within the province.
- 2 Subsequent research at BCICS suggests that less than one per cent of students attending Canadian universities have the opportunity to study co-operatives seriously in courses devoted primarily to them. See Cheryl Lans, *University Teaching of Co-operative Business Management and Philosophy in Canadian Universities* (BCICS, 2005).
- 3 Ian MacPherson and Erin McLaughlin-Jenkins, *Structuring Diversities and a Complex Heritage: Essays in the Field of Co-operative Studies*. (New Rochdale Press, September, 2007)
- 4 Kevin Wilson, *Practical Dreamers: Communitarianism and Co-operatives on Malcolm Island* (BCICS, 2005); Joy Emmanuel, *A Passion for Possibilities: Co-operatives and Communities in British Columbia* (New Rochdale Press, June 2007); and Joy Emmanuel, Ian MacPherson, Eric Morse, and Ana Maria Peredo, *Adapting to Changing Times: Case Studies of Co-operatives in the New Economy of British Columbia* (New Rochdale Press, October 2007).
- 5 Sol Kinnis, Lyn Cayo, Kathleen Gabelmann, *Co-operatives by Design: Building Blocks for Co-operative Development* (BCICS, 2002).
- 6 Joy Emmanuel (ed), *Effective Practices in Starting Co-operatives: The Voice of Canadian Co-op Developers* (New Rochdale Press), available July 2007, and Joy Emmanuel (ed.), *Effective Practices in Starting Co-operatives; Developers on Development* (New Rochdale Press), available October 2007.
- 7 Julia Smith, Ian MacPherson, and Robin Puga, *Youth Reinventing Co-operatives; Young Perspectives on the International Co-operative Movement* (BCICS, 2005). Also available in Spanish through Prometeo Libros (www.prometeolibros.com).
- 8 Joy Emmanuel and Ian MacPherson (eds), *Co-operatives and the Pursuit of Peace* (The New Rochdale Press, July 2007).
- 9 Ian MacPherson and Yehudah Paz, *People-to-People: The Co-operative Movement and the Peace Process* (The New Rochdale Press, October, 2007).