



Learning Together? The Co-operative Union, the Workers' Educational Association and the National Council of Labour Colleges 1918–1939

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At the heart of co-operative education was the will to create a Co-operative Commonwealth based on Robert Owen's New View of Society (Owen, 1966). This article will consider how the vision of a Co-operative Commonwealth was shared and reciprocated by the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC) and how the three organisations worked together to achieve their own educational programmes. By connecting with the WEA and the NCLC, the Co-operative Union had a valuable means of adapting the co-operative character to the new labour movement politics of the inter-war era. How well it succeeded in this is the subject of this article. Though it is well known that the Co-operative Union, the WEA and the NCLC all aimed to empower working class people through adult education, little has been written about how the three organisations interacted. This article explores the relationship and connections between the Co-operative Union, the WEA and the NCLC. It spotlights a sub-culture of adult workers' education between the Wars and identifies what values the educational organisations held in common, as well as where they diverged.¹

Introduction

The Co-operative Union stands out as a highly significant working class organisation that focused on commerce and education, with the dream of creating a Co-operative Commonwealth based on Robert Owen's ideas in *A New View of Society* (Owen, 1966). Yet little research has explored the nature of co-operative education, and its impact on co-operative members, particularly in tandem with other contemporary working class adult education organisations, principally the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC), both of which shared the aim of empowering the working class through education. This omission is a puzzling gap in the historiography of working class adult education and its significance to the labour movement. This article will analyse the connections between the co-operative movement, the WEA and the NCLC. Did these three organisations interact to disseminate education to their members and, if so, how? It will analyse the relationship between the Co-operative Union as a well-established nineteenth century working class adult education organisation and its twentieth century counterparts — the WEA and the NCLC. Three aspects of co-operative education and its relationship with the WEA and the NCLC will be explored. The first examines the philosophy of co-operative education. What type of education did the Co-operative Union support, and why? Who was it for, and to what end? What was the co-operative commonwealth? The second aspect evaluates the Co-operative Union's success in delivering its ideal of education. How was the co-operative commonwealth understood by educationalists in the co-operative movement? Is there any evidence that the majority of co-operative members even understood or supported the ideal of a co-operative commonwealth? The third aspect examines the working relationships that existed between the Co-operative Union, the WEA and the NCLC, all working class organisations with a common aim to empower the working class through programmes of education tailor-made for their demands of a better life. How did the Co-operative Union's educational ideal correspond with those of the WEA and NCLC? Did the Co-operative Union, the WEA and the NCLC "learn together" to any great extent?

These three aspects of co-operative education, analysed alongside WEA and NCLC education, help us understand the problems and complexities that inter-war working class educational

organisations faced when trying to disseminate their idealistic visions in order to alter cultural attitudes held by students.

Ideology of Co-operation and Co-operative Education

The essence of co-operative ideology and education is best encapsulated by Reverend Geoffrey A Ramsay's inaugural address to the 52nd Annual Co-operative Congress in 1920:

... We are for the first time assembled in Congress for what is officially declared to be "the establishment of a Co-operative Commonwealth". This clear definition of our purpose was proposed by the General Co-operative Survey Committee, and approved by the special Congress held at Blackpool ... you will be asked to alter the rules of the Co-operative Union in such a way that this definite statement shall stand first and foremost among the objects of our co-operative movement. It is the interpretation of our existence (Whitehead, 1920: 50).

Ramsay drew attention to the great expansion of the co-operative movement's trading interests and identified the need for "... greater strength and unity that can only come from the recognition of a common purpose" (Whitehead, 1920: 50). The main threat of such successful commercial expansion was that the ideals of co-operation would be overwhelmed by profitmaking and individualistic capitalism, something that Ramsay identified as a corruption of the co-operative ideal:

The necessity of thus declaring our purposes is made evident by the fact that there are to-day a great number of persons who are professing the co-operative ideal and adopting the principle of co-operation in order that they may thereby promote individualistic interests. There is a great deal of so-called co-operation which is inspired not by any moral purpose but by financial interest and expediency. The object of such co-operation is not the establishment of a co-operative commonwealth but the reconstruction of private capitalism (Whitehead, 1920: 50-51).

To avoid isolation and disunity, Ramsay advocated unity among 'co-operators' towards a common inspirational vision:

A great movement without a purpose and an ideal is like a body lacking mind and soul. As co-operators we dare not allow the material success of co-operative trade, of which we are justly proud ... to overshadow the deeper purpose of our movement. It must not be an end in itself but a means to a greater end. Ultimately it will make possible our greatest triumph ... (Whitehead, 1920: 50).

That greatest triumph for co-operation in Ramsay's view was "Trustification" — the means of creating wealth to create more wealth. Ramsay re-interpreted John Ruskin's famous declaration — "There is no wealth but life" — (Ruskin, 1997: 222) by proposing that trustification "may mean fewer rich men but they will be richer; it may mean fewer masters but they will have greater mastery" (Whitehead, 1920: 51). He goes on to propose an alternative to "the existing individualistic capitalistic system of society ... driving the world towards revolution" that being:

... the purpose and aim of our movement is the organisation of a co-operative commonwealth making possible the physical, mental and moral well being of the whole community ... (Whitehead, 1920: 51).

Ramsay delivered a scathing critique of capitalism and judged the zeitgeist of the time to be:

... everywhere men and women are demanding that some greater, nobler, worthier purpose shall be served by their expenditure of physical and mental energy. They are no longer content that their exertions shall create nothing but a super-rich class, and unless they are convinced of the fruits of their labour serve some greater purpose, the cry for 'more production' will fall on deaf ears ... (Whitehead, 1920: 53).

His enthusiasm and rationale for society to reject individualistic capitalism and embrace the idea of a co-operative commonwealth is evangelical, flavoured with the language of Christian Socialism. For example he declares that:

... The private ownership of land insults our intelligence, contradicts our conscience, and denies our faith in the beneficence and goodness of God. We simply cannot tolerate the continuance of

private property in those natural resources that are necessary to communal life. The organisation of a co-operative commonwealth will for ever be impossible if we allow the means of life to be owned and controlled by the privileged few ... (Whitehead, 1920: 53).

In the shadow of the First World War's devastation wrought upon European society, Ramsay made a case for co-operation being "necessary to the progress of true civilisation" and that "we hold that those political and industrial leaders who do not see this are blind and bankrupt" (Whitehead, 1920: 54). He supported co-operation by outlining the failures of capitalism:

We are being told that the new world must be constructed by private enterprise and unrestrained competition. These forces may construct a new world for capitalism, militarism, and war; they will never establish a new world for democracy, co-operation and peace ... (Whitehead, 1920: 54).

Ramsay defined co-operation as the antithesis of individualistic capitalism and competition. In his words:

... co-operation ... recognises that each individual member of society is but a part of a greater whole; that there is a fundamental relationship between man and man, nation and nation, and that the true measure of a man is not the individual, but humanity. Co operation thus declares the principle of "each for all and all for each". (Whitehead, 1920: 57).

Ramsay reiterated that the purpose of co-operation "... is to make wealth — the wealth of life, physical, mental, and spiritual — the common property of all" (Whitehead, 1920: 57). This statement encapsulates the philosophy and potential of a co-operative commonwealth. The question remained how to achieve such a society? Ramsay, in the latter part of his address, identified that it was education — supplied by co-operative societies on the ideology of co-operation — that was the answer although, he observed that the apathy demonstrated by the collective co-operative membership made the task of disseminating co-operative education difficult. To achieve a co-operative commonwealth, Ramsay proposed that the purpose of co-operative education policy was to "try to re-discover and re-value the individual co-operator" (Whitehead, 1920: 58). It is this specific aspect that is of interest to this study — the creation — through education — of individual co-operators who would keep faith with the ideal of a co-operative commonwealth. Ramsay expanded on his ideas about the tasks of co-operative educators:

Herein is a task for co-operative educators and teachers whose duty it is to form a co-operative character and to form an ideal of co-operative conduct. This task of re-discovering the individual co-operator must commission every district and educational association and every educational committee and guild with a greater inspiration of the necessity, the importance and value of their work ... (Whitehead, 1920: 58).

Ramsay discussed the need for education and knowledge as being essential to the development of the co-operative commonwealth and stated "the right to live is inseparable from the principle of equality of educational opportunity for every child". He emphasised that:

... a system which makes education the privilege of a few restricts the growth of knowledge, just as a system of private property in land limits the material well being of the people. Every step which opens wider the opportunity for all to gain knowledge is, therefore, a step towards the co-operative commonwealth ... (Whitehead, 1920: 60).

He also identified the establishment of the co-operative commonwealth as being synonymous with the political aims of the Labour Party and trade unions thus connecting the co-operative cause directly with the labour movement as a whole:

Our success in the future will be proportionate to our faith and our activity. The co-operative commonwealth is not something outside ourselves, ready-made and waiting for us to march into it; it is within ourselves, ... That is why our cry everywhere is and always must be: "Educate! Educate! Educate!" 'Education' must be our watchword, as not only within our movement but outside its borders the thoughts men moving towards the acceptance of a common ideal ... A co-operative commonwealth is the ultimate political objective of the Labour Party, and also the ultimate industrial objective of the trade unions ... (Whitehead, 1920: 61-62).

Unsurprisingly, given its flair and fire, Ramsay's address was received with "tremendous applause" and a standing ovation (Whitehead, 1920: 65). Several elements of co-operation as an ideology raised by his address are worth commenting on. The co-operative movement as a group of working class organisations is intriguing because it had twin ambitions – that of generating and spreading wealth to the majority on the basis of a collective ethical capitalist economic model and, at the same time, educating members to be socially conscious. In theory these ambitions could co-exist in harmony but to translate the principles of co-operation into practice all members had to subscribe to, and practise, the same ideology. Essentially the whole co-operative membership had to share a collective consciousness and develop co-operative character. In this respect the co-operative movement was similar to the Plebs League and the NCLC, organisations that also endeavoured to raise working class consciousness, although in their cases about Marxism.

The co-operative movement, like the Plebs League and the NCLC, recognised that for co-operation to really work, political power would have to be achieved by the co-operative movement – hence the creation of the Co-operative Party. Co-operative education was accepted by co-operative educationalists as the way in which to create the co-operative commonwealth. The central theme of co-operative education was to teach people the value of social capital and how they as individuals could make a significant difference in material, moral and spiritual terms to their fellow man through education, commerce and right living. However, co-operative societies sought to balance profit-making, on the one hand, with the co-operative ideal of eliminating all want and poverty through the generation and spreading of wealth, on the other. This thorny challenge to the co-operative education system is continually exposed in the annual reports of the Co-operative Union's Central Education Committee, and is explored below.

Co-operative Education — Organisation and Administration

Before exploring the flaws of the co-operative education system it is useful to summarise the organisation of the co-operative education administration. At an executive level the Central Education Committee was responsible for arranging and organising classes and summer schools, devising syllabuses and administering scholarships and grants. A statement submitted by the Central Education Committee to the Royal Commission on Oxford and Cambridge Universities in 1921 clarifies the workings of the co-operative education system:

The Co-operative Union is a federation of co-operative societies in the United Kingdom. These Societies, together have 4,000,000 members, drawn almost wholly from the artisan class; and most of them have a special education committee, and organise a variety of educational work, including classes, weekend schools, lectures, &c. They also make grant scholarships for purposes of higher education, and in various other ways assist educational work both locally and nationally. These societies allocate about £120,000 annually for educational purposes ... (Whitehead, 1921: 177).

The statement also clarified the type and purpose of co-operative education delivered to members:

The objects of co-operative education, as outlined in the programme issued by the Central Education Committee are stated as being "... primarily, the formation of co-operative character and opinion by teaching the history, principles and theory of the movement, with economics and industrial and constitutional history in as far as they have a bearing on co-operation; and secondarily, though not necessarily of less import, the training of men and women to take part in industrial and social reforms and civic life generally" ... (Whitehead, 1921: 177).

Nationwide, eight regional sectional education associations worked to organise quarterly conferences and weekend schools, as well as to encourage local societies to increase and expand their educational activities. Local education committees operated in conjunction with the management committees of local societies to devise and disseminate co-operative education to the members of individual co-operative societies.

Funding

Funds for the Central Education Committee were based on co-operative membership paid by co-operative societies to the Co-operative Union. The standard rate of Co-operative Union subscription was 2d for each member. No more than 20% of the total subscriptions paid to the Co-operative Union could be allocated to the Central Education Committee. In 1920 the expenditure of the Central Education Committee was £5,779. The work of the Central Education Committee was largely administrative and advisory. It had "... no control over the educational associations, the educational committees of the local societies, or the women's and men's guilds" (Whitehead, 1922: 201). Funds for the sectional associations came from the annual subscriptions of members of those associations. They received their funding from the profits made by their society. Funding could in rare cases be 5% of the profits, but was usually between a 0.5% and 2.5%. The Co-operative Union and Central Education Committee recommended that local educational associations fund themselves from grants based on the membership of a society. Grants made using this system came to about 5d to 3s (a significant difference) per member per year (Whitehead, 1922: 204). This system meant that there were wide variations in the funding of educational activities between individual societies depending on their wealth and membership.

Funding of Co-operative Education – Some Observations

This system gave the co-operative education administration access to significantly larger funds than the WEA or NCLC, giving it a distinct advantage. A possible allocation of up to 20% of the subscription rates paid to the Co-operative Union annually from over four million members (membership in 1922) for education purposes was no mean figure. In 1929 the Central Education Committee estimated that the British co-operative movement generated almost £200 million of capital of which £200,000 was allocated to educational activities (Whitehead, 1929: 403), a sum far higher than either the WEA or NCLC could dream of acquiring. The twinning of co-operative commercialism and co-operative education was in theory a very practical system, for it meant that the co-operative movement could fund its programme of education independently, without recourse to Local Education Authorities (LEAs) or charitable funding. The WEA and the NCLC were locked in a constant struggle to acquire and maintain funding for their education programmes, so the co-operative system of funding must have appealed to both organisations. Indeed the co-operative movement is likely to have been the best funded of all working class organisations, educational or otherwise.

Challenges to Co-operative Education

It is helpful now to get a better idea of what the Central Education Committee perceived as the problems and failures of co-operative education. One of the major themes that emerge in every Congress Report was the Central Education Committee's dismay at the poor participation of co-operative membership in education. The following quotations highlight the problems they perceived on this matter:

The committee feel compelled to express their profound regret that many societies do not even as yet, recognise how much of the real success of the movement depends on the promulgation of co-operative principles and ideals. No great movement has ever made real progress on its pocket interest. Fidelity to principle alone will bring lasting success. Every effort to teach true co-operation should be doubled ... (Whitehead, 1924: 56).

Long-time chairman (1902–1936) of the Central Educational Committee William Rae also lamented that co-operative education was not flourishing:

We continue to plant the seeds of education in the co-operative garden but the flowers have not grown, the garden is not full of educational bloom ... (Whitehead, 1924: 381).

Rae elucidated the differences between co-operative economy and traditional political economy. It is relevant to consider what he perceived to be the differences because therein lies the *raison d'être* of co-operative education:

The ordinary school of political economy is based on the idea of getting on, of getting money and becoming wealthy, but co-operative economics is based on fair play and brotherhood and consideration. Co-operative economics is thinking in terms of common interest, and differs desperately in fundamentals from the political economy with which the community has been doped for so long. ... Help your employees think, and there is no limit to co-operative development ... (Whitehead, 1924: 381-382).

In 1926 the Central Education Committee concluded their report with another appeal for members of the co-operatives to avail themselves of the education opportunities provided by their societies:

There are apprentices and salesmen by the thousand, students are counted in hundreds. ... There are hundreds of men and women who are devoting much time to the spread of co-operative trade; if we could enlist some of this endeavour in the cause of efficiency and co-operative ethics we should soon see a movement Reborn. ... Therefore the Central Education Committee make their most earnest appeal again and yet again ... (Whitehead, 1926: 66).

The tone of this quote betrays the weariness of the Central Education Committee regarding the membership's poor take-up of education. Disharmony between the educational executive and commercial wing of the co-operative movement are implied. Rae expressed disappointment at the lack of enthusiasm amongst the co-operative membership for co-operative education in economics as well as other subjects:

We have so far few students in economics. There is a great need for economic study in this country. Industrial questions would not be so acute and so terrible if we knew more about true economics, and yet we have to-day only about one hundred co-operative members studying economics. ... We are very sorry that your response to our appeal for greater enthusiasm and interest in our work has been so feeble. It is true that that the co-operative movement is big, but its soul is becoming smaller ... (Whitehead, 1926: 411).

Co-operative Education — Overlap and Duplication?

In the discussion following Rae's address, several points raised by delegates help explain why there was such poor take-up of co-operative education, in particular, that Local Education Authorities (LEA) were providing more education to people thus making co-operative education, such as it was, defunct and inefficient. As one delegate, a Mr F Langmead of Barnsley, argued:

... it is hardly fair that I, as a co-operator, should pay for educational facilities when as a tax payer and rate payer I have to pay for the facilities provided by the educational authorities ... I suggest that we should leave non-vocational and cultural subjects alone, and not spend £10,000 in attempting to duplicate the system of education already in existence under the auspices of the local educational authorities ... (Whitehead, 1926: 32).

Another delegate, a Mr W Hood, presented a counter-argument:

I take exception to the remarks that we are duplicating the educational work done by the State. The text books, for instance, provided by the State are wrong. They are not laid down by the class of people we represent. The economics taught at the universities are not the same as those taught by the Co-operative College. We can send our men to the universities but they do not get the kind of education we require ... (Whitehead, 1926: 32).

Such opposing views exemplify the differences in opinion between co-operative members about the value of education and of the general attitudes towards education provision by the co-operative movement and the state. They imply that some co-operators appreciated and valued co-operative education because it was shaped and designed exclusively for them, while others subscribed to co-operative education only for its technical and vocational value. It also

seems that some co-operators saw themselves as a class whose interests and culture were not represented by state education, while others disagreed. From the generally poor take-up of co-operative education amongst the adult membership, it is easy to infer that many in the movement simply drifted along with the co-operative current of trade and profit-making, without taking an active part in achieving the co-operative commonwealth.

Disconnections — Commerce and Education

At the 1931 Congress a Mr S V Miles drew attention to other flaws in the co-operative education system and administration. In particular, the lack of full-time educational secretaries was identified as a hindrance to the efficiency and efficacy of many educational associations:

The Central Education Committee is a kind of Cinderella. ... We should have more permanent educational secretaries in the movement, especially when you get so many big concerns with welfare and education officials. I am a member of a management committee, and no management committee in these days can afford to spend time on educational affairs. ... We need an educational crusade to rouse our members from the apathy that prevails. ... We shall never get the co-operative commonwealth until our six million members are not merely members, but co-operators in every sense of the word ... (Palmer, 1931: 429).

William Rae's reply was to agree with the call for more education committees and permanent educational secretaries but Rae also stated that he "did not see why every management committee should not also be an education committee" (Palmer, 1931: 430).

Rae's response reveals an interesting aspect of how co-operatives as businesses and a movement operated, in that the spheres of commerce and education were kept separate. Perhaps if more local, sectional and regional co-operative management committees had better linked their commercial and educational practices, the ideal of a co-operative commonwealth would have made more sense to the entire membership. The separation between co-operative commercial activity and co-operative education was damaging to a movement setting out to be a unified socially responsible form of ethical collective capitalism that encapsulated the co-operative commonwealth. An illustration of the division between co-operative management and educational committees is given in the 1934 report:

Education committees have at times been almost treated as if they were something apart and distinct from the society. It has even been suggested that the education committee could hire rooms from the society. This, of course, is as complete a misunderstanding of the position as if it was suggested that the committee of management could, on behalf of the society, let the society's rooms to themselves as a committee (Palmer, 1934: 27).

What emerges from the sources is that the idea of achieving the co-operative commonwealth as far as co-operative educationalists were concerned rested on the dissemination of co-operative education to the membership. Many systemic and structural problems inside and outside the co-operative education system have been outlined here to show how difficult it was to establish and develop the ideal of co-operation on a social, economic and political level.

Statistical Analysis (please refer to table 1 and 2 in the appendix)

To place co-operative education further in context it is useful to present a brief statistical analysis of the number of co-operative members – junior and adult – who participated in co-operative classes during the 1920s and 30s. As can be seen from Table 1 there was a steady rise in junior and adult student enrolment in classes. The junior classes were by far the most popular while the classes for adults in social subjects were the least, with a total of 345 classes and an enrolment of 6,789 students in 1939. By 1939 the Co-operative could boast a total of 69,535 students – junior, intermediate and adult. The 1939 British co-operative membership was around six million so the co-operative education system engaged only 1.15% of its total membership. Of that 1.15% only 0.11% of the adult membership took part in co-operative adult

education classes. This places the extent and take-up of co-operative education in perspective. As shown previously the Central Education Committee was well aware of the lack of interest and participation in the education it tried to provide. In comparison, the WEA and NCLC reached a far wider adult population than the co-operatives despite a considerable lack of resources. This situation is made all the more curious because the co-operative movement preceded the WEA and NCLC as a nineteenth and twentieth century working class adult education organisation and movement embedded in working class culture nationwide.

Table 2 displays the wide range of subjects taught by the co-operatives. A combination of technical, vocational and humanities education was covered by the curriculum. Most striking is the range of technical and commercial education available to employees. The co-operative movement appears to have exercised strength and expertise in this sphere, making it interesting and attractive to employees wishing to get ahead and build their material, as opposed to spiritual and moral, wealth. The co-operative movement was a forerunner in business education and this was one of its unique selling points as an educational organisation.

Summary of Co-operative Education

In summary the education disseminated by the co-operative movement was conceived and designed to educate members to be part of the co-operative commonwealth — an ideal society that functioned as an economic model of ethical socially responsible collective capitalism. However, the ideology of the co-operative education movement did not harmonise smoothly with the commercial interests of co-operative businesses. The low level of participation in education offered by co-operative societies to their adult members demonstrated a general lack of interest amongst the rank and file membership in the ideology of the co-operative commonwealth. In this regard, what is striking is how the co-operatives as a movement appeared to have had great difficulty distinguishing the movement as an alternative social, economic and political model that sought to improve the quality of life for the majority of working class people in Britain.

The co-operative way of life envisaged by pioneers such as Robert Owen lost its relevance in the twentieth century to be superseded by more fashionable and extremist political and economic models based on Marxist and Fascist ideologies. In the heady unsettled atmosphere of the 1920s and 1930s the modesty, humility and common sense of the co-operative ideal was perhaps perceived as mundane and unexciting. Though the co-operative movement placed great emphasis on the importance and significance of co-operative education to achieve a co-operative commonwealth, it failed to inspire a wide and diverse working class membership and therefore did little to truly change the political, social and economic landscape, despite being embedded as a working class structure and organisation nationwide.

Co-operative Union and Adult Education — Working with the WEA and NCLC

Despite efforts to attract more adult students to co-operative education, numbers remained low throughout the 1920s and 1930s as shown by analysis of the statistics in Table 1. The next sections will investigate the relationship between the WEA, the NCLC and the Co-operative Union to supply education to adult co-operative members.

Working with the WEA

The co-operative movement and the WEA enjoyed a convivial and complementary relationship. Albert Mansbridge, the founder of the WEA, in his early career was a clerk at the tea department of the Co-operative Wholesale Society. Key to Mansbridge's vision was an educational administration that consisted of joint committees of trade unionists, co-operators and university extensionists who would assist local education committees set up and deliver classes in the

humanities for working class people. In 1903 at a conference in Oxford to introduce the WEA, attended by co-operative societies, trade unions and universities, a resolution was taken:

... that the necessary higher education of the working classes will be best furthered by an associated effort on the part of the trade unions, co-operative societies and extension authorities ... (Official Report of the Joint Conference between Co-operators, Trade Unionists and University Extension Authorities, 1903: 5).

The founding resolution shows the consensus shared by the three major organisations – that joint working would be a more effective and powerful way of reaching a wider working class population of adult students. By accepting the WEA as an equal partner the Co-operative Union was partly outsourcing its adult education enterprise to what it considered to be a safe pair of hands. However the difference between the WEA and the Co-operative Union was that the WEA did not explicitly set out to educate working class people about co-operative ideology or how to achieve a co-operative commonwealth. WEA education was always firmly focused on making liberal classical higher education – as delivered by the university extension movement – accessible and available to those working class people who wanted it. The WEA did not reject such education on either political or ideological grounds whereas the NCLC did. Co-operatives, by recommending WEA classes to their members, also accepted the value of this type of higher education. Nor was the Co-operative Executive concerned that the WEA was partially funded by LEAs.

Connections with the WEA and NCLC

The like-mindedness that existed between Mansbridge's vision and that of the co-operative movement is typical of the historical connection between the two organisations. Co-operatives was always represented on WEA committees at a national and regional level and vice-versa. In 1925, A D Lindsay, the Master of Balliol College, Oxford and a longstanding leader of the WEA, addressed the Co-operative Educational Conference. He highlighted the on-going challenges that existed in the practice of joint working between the WEA and the co-operative movement:

... the two movements did not know enough of what each was doing, and each was in some ways wasting opportunities by overlapping. They want to stop that. It might be said the co-operative movement had its own educational organisation, its Co-operative College, and its numerous classes and lectures. What had the WEA to offer it? The answer was that there was much educational work which the co-operative movement did for itself and must do for itself, but that it must gain by coming into closer contact with the WEA, which was assisting more and more in the collective or co-operative thinking of the whole working-class movement ... (Whitehead, 1925: 334).

Lindsay supported the co-operative education ideal and was not suggesting that the WEA take over Co-operative education but that rather:

... it would make a great difference to the men and women thinking about the problems of co-operation if they had also taken part in a wider educational movement, taken their share in discussions not directly related to co-operation, and learned to know something about other social problems and other sides of life as they appeared to people who were not co-operators. They [co-operators] needed to have their special job, but to have a light shed on it from other sides ... (Whitehead, 1925: 334).

In response to Lindsay's address, Professor Hall, the Principal of the Co-operative College, called for delegates to support the:

... request of the Co-operative Union, which was asking societies to become affiliated to the WEA and was also asking the WEA to give co-operative societies local representation on the branch organisations of the WEA (Whitehead, 1925: 335).

Hall's rationale for the co-operative movement to have a closer relationship with the WEA was to promote the exercise of democracy and better-educated voting:

... The great need to-day was the education of the democracy. It was of little use the mass of the people possessing votes which enabled them to control their social affairs unless they had intelligence sufficient to use those votes wisely (Whitehead, 1925: 335).

In the same address, he also emphasised the true purpose of education that fitted perfectly with co-operative ideology:

Education was, however, concerned with much more than making the voters of the country intelligent in their political activities. It was concerned with bringing more into the daily life of the people, and co-operators could join with all persons whose desire it was to make the lives of people fuller, brighter, and better ... (Whitehead, 1925: 335).

But, Hall also emphasised the need for co-operators not to become complacent about co-operative education by affiliating to the WEA and paying a subscription. Instead co-operators needed to be vigilant and mindful about their special work in "... the application of co-operative principles in industry and social life ..." (Whitehead, 1925: 335). From these exchanges we can see that the WEA and the co-operative movement endeavoured to work together and to learn from each other in a highly constructive manner. It also shows the co-operative movement to be somewhat insular and that it needed to acknowledge the wider world of non co-operators who were interested in the same ideals of co-operation as themselves but from different perspectives.

A discussion followed the two addresses where the delegates voiced their views. A Bradford delegate specifically welcomed a closer working relationship between the WEA and the co-operative movement:

In Bradford the Co-operative society and the WEA had run similar classes; but by a co-ordination of effort that difficulty would be overcome (Whitehead, 1925: 336).

However, another delegate from Runcorn and Widnes declared that:

... they had ousted the WEA from Runcorn because they believed its teaching had the bias of middle-class education, and they wanted working-class education. They now secured their teaching from the National Labour College, and were better satisfied (Whitehead, 1925: 336).

This anti-WEA view is rare to come upon in the annual Co-operative Congress Reports but it occasionally emerges, indicating that a small minority of co-operators wished for the co-operative movement to be more radical. Lindsay responded to this criticism diplomatically saying that "... the National Labour College had a job of its own to do" and that often people did better when taught from a political perspective and those people would benefit most from the type of political education that the NCLC offered. However, he added that:

... they would not make the advance they needed to do in order to solve the problem with which they were faced, unless they got beyond that stage. Sooner or later they needed the education that was critical, and the way to cure bias was to get all the biases they could and rub them together ... (Whitehead, 1925: 336).

Tension can be detected in other exchanges about the NCLC and the co-operative movement. In the discussion of the 1937 education report a Mr J Hull (Swalwell) drew attention to the lack of reference to the NCLC:

I have been listening intently to the remarks that have been passed with reference to education but the speaker never made any reference to the National Council of Labour Colleges.

He criticised the WEA for being State funded and asked:

How are you to achieve unity and working-class ideas in the co-operative movement when you have a Government that is prepared to give state grants towards an educational movement to try to educate people not on the working class side, but in what is known as orthodox education to bring about capitalist democracy? ... It ought to be understood that the WEA never intends to give you the full facts and figures with reference to the class struggle. The National Council of Labour Colleges tutors are prepared to lecture for their bare travelling expenses, a basis upon which no WEA tutors are prepared to lecture (Palmer, 1937: 458).

During the 1939 Congress, another delegate, a Mr G Burgess of Stockport raised the issue of how the NCLC had been neglected by the co-operative movement:

In this country it is very unfortunate that there are two sections of adult educationists — the WEA and the NCLC ... The NCLC has been more or less ignored by the co-operative movement ... The National Council of Labour Colleges is the largest non-state aided education organisation in the world. It does not get one penny piece from any municipality or any state organisation, the funds coming from trade unions and the co-operative movement. The NCLC is on a class-conscious basis. I ask you to realise how very necessary it is to inculcate a class-conscious policy into the working classes. NCLC training would bring a man to think accurately and be a real co-operator ... (Palmer, 1939: 481).

A Mr H Willcock made another reference to the NCLC, again in relation to WEA funding. He like Mr Hull suggested that the co-operative movement should work with the NCLC because it rejected funding from the state:

... the Workers Educational Association, which is subsidised by the “National” Government, which is in direct conflict with the co-operative commonwealth. ... the National Council of Labour Colleges is not working in conjunction with the Educational Executive, and it is absolutely worked by trade unions, local societies, and local Labour Parties ... if our educational body desires to work in conjunction with any other educational body, it should work in conjunction with the National Council of Labour Colleges ... (Palmer, 1938: 536).

The Co-operative Union at no point in the reports discouraged Co-operators from availing themselves of education provided by the NCLC, instead the Co-operative Union took a non-interventionist approach and seemed to tolerate the NCLC.

The Co-operative Union and the WEA — Consensus in Education

It is helpful to get an idea of the WEA's contribution to the education of co-operative members. The co-operative movement officially recognised the WEA in 1932. The WEA gives the example of an inquiry carried out by the WEA Yorkshire (North) district that illustrates the extent to which members of co-operatives subscribed to WEA classes

Out of returns received from 102 classes with approximately 1,600 students it was found that more than 50% of the students were members of co-operative societies (Co-operative Educator, 1936: 22).

If we speculate that this was the case for most districts in England and Wales then the WEA catered for a significant proportion of co-operative members consolidating the working relationship between the WEA and the co-operative movement. By 1933 the co-operative movement and the WEA ratified agreements whereby co-operative societies paid the class fees of co-operative members attending WEA classes. They also agreed that there would be reciprocal affiliation between co-operative societies and WEA education committees at district and branch level. Also recommended was the formation of Standing Joint Committees to include co-operative movement and WEA representatives. The role of these committees was:

- 1) To organise joint educational schemes between the WEA and the District and Sectional Educational Association as well as local societies.
- 2) To organise joint weekend and one day schools between the WEA and the Co-operative Union.
- 3) To negotiate the use of WEA teachers.
- 4) To deal with literature.
- 5) To organise affiliations of Guilds to branches ... (Palmer, 1933: 79-81).

To further demonstrate the strong working relationship between the two organisations The Co-operative Educator published many articles about the success of the WEA. In 1934 the WEA's annual report was summarised in *The Co-operative Educator*:

The annual report of the WEA again records a steady increase in the number of classes and students. Since 1929-30 the number of grant earning classes has risen from 2,128 to 2,612, and the total number of students of all types from 48,101 to 58,545. (Co-operative Educator, 1934: 3)

Such statistics give a good indication of the size of the WEA as a national organisation and of its ability to attract adult students that far outstripped the co-operatives.

Co-operative Movement and the NCLC — Recognition and Tolerance

The co-operative movement also officially recognised the NCLC as a legitimate working class adult education provider for its membership at the 1932 Congress. A sub-committee of the Educational Executive concluded in a report that:

The Educational Executive has had under consideration the request from the National Council of Labour Colleges that it should recognise the Council and its work. ... After considering this evidence the Executive is of opinion that the NCLC is worthy of recognition by the co-operative movement ... (Palmer, 1933: 82).

This development was encouraging for the NCLC who lobbied consistently for recognition from trade unions and working class organisations such as co-operatives. However the WEA enjoyed more substantial support from co-operatives. The two appear to have had a much closer working relationship based on their historical connections as well as their consensus about the purpose of education. Major WEA personalities such as Dr J H B Masterman — the Bishop of Plymouth, A Zimmern and R H Tawney all gave keynote speeches at Co-operative Educational Conferences in 1929, 1930 and 1931 respectively. A search of the Annual Congress Reports between 1920 and 1939 shows that not once did a representative from the NCLC address the Co-operative Congress. This implies a lack of invitation by the Congress organisers to NCLC representatives to address the Congress. Nonetheless, the NCLC had some support from some members of the co-operative movement and in the view of the Educational Executive deserved explicit recognition for this. This situation corresponded to that of the Trade Union Congress (TUC). The TUC like the Co-operative Union recognised the WEA and the NCLC as legitimate providers of working class adult education and recommended both organisations to their membership, leaving it up to individual trade unions to choose which one to affiliate to. Indeed, some trade unions affiliated to both the WEA and the NCLC. The Co-operative Union Educational Executive operated in a similar way to the TUC in this regard, and recommended both the WEA and the NCLC as approved adult education voluntary organisations to co-operators. It was up to Individual co-operative societies as independent bodies to decide for themselves which organisation they wished to affiliate to.

Conclusion

The co-operative movement despite its historical significance and status as a working class movement with a vision of a co-operative commonwealth at its core, needed the WEA and NCLC to inspire adult co-operators. Possibly the commerciality of co-operative societies overshadowed their ability to focus on the educational aspect of the Movement. The disharmony between the commercial and educational wings of the co-operative movement made it a less efficient working class adult education organisation. It could not concentrate on all elements at once — profit-making, running businesses, and politics. This was the flaw within the co-operatives as a movement. The WEA and NCLC filled the gap in working class adult education provision that the Co-operative Union identified but could not address. The Co-operative Union, the WEA and the NCLC worked and learnt together to a greater or lesser extent to provide education as desired by adult Co-operators with the general aim of creating a co-operative commonwealth.

The Author

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Note

1. The author accepts that co-operative societies provided a very diverse and imaginative programme of cultural education that included drama and music as desired by its local membership. The author accepts that this type of education was of great value and significance to co-operators. However this article focuses only on comparable adult higher education in the humanities and social sciences delivered by co-operative societies, the WEA and the NCLC.

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Appendix

Table 1. Co-operative Education — National Statistics (1918–1939)

(Palmer, 1939: 75)

* War Years ** Incomplete

Year	No of Junior and intermediate classes	No of junior and intermediate students enrolled in intermediate classes	No of adult classes in social subjects	No of adult students enrolled	No of Technical Classes	No of students enrolled in technical classes	Total no classes	Total no students
1918-19	494	17,947	70	1,691	*56	*1,201	*620	*20,839
1923-24	463	16,551	75	1,869	313	4,235	851	22,655
1925-26	615	20,823	108	2,852	353	6,975	1,076	30,650
1926-27	567	21,523	109	2,659	412	8,695	1,088	32,877
1927-28	607	22,339	129	3,516	485	9,073	1,221	34,928
1928-29	790	30,884	156	4,412	555	11,026	1,501	46,322
1929-30	791	31,823	181	5,348	634	13,597	1,606	50,768
1930-31	892	29,530	218	5,972	772	16,126	1,882	51,628
1931-32	856	29,795	243	6,843	882	16,498	1,981	53,136
1932-33	987	33,645	228	5,826	813	16,145	2,028	55,616
1933-34	1,041	33,744	211	4,011	831	15,743	2,083	53,498
1934-35	867	28,681	298	7,606	846	16,172	2,011	52,459
1935-36	898	27,785	245	4,730	1,013	18,757	2,156	51,281
1936-37	922	26,718	299	6,039	1,227	22,939	2,448	55,686
1937-38	1,200	35,000	335	6,757	1,338	23,871	2,873	65,628
**1938-39	1,280	39,217	345	6,789	1,350	23,529	2,975	69,535

Table 2. Range of Subjects Taught by the Co-operative Union

(Palmer, 1939: 328-330)

Table 2 is modified from the original to display only the range of subjects taught. The original table gives the statistical returns of classes.

Section	Subject
I. Co-operation	History and Principles of Co-operation, Junior Grade History and Principles of Co-operation, Intermediate Grade History and Principles of Co-operation, Senior Grade Honours Diploma Course Economics of Co-operation, Part I and II Co-operation and Social Problems Co-operation in Denmark Co-operation in Agriculture International Co-operation Adult Co-operation Consumers Co-operation
II. History	Industrial History Economic and Industrial History of the 19th Century Constitutional History Reform Movements of the 19th Century
III. Economics	General Economics Special Course for Secretaries and Managers Money, Prices, and Banking History of the Principles of Taxation Public Finance Economic and Social Problems The Organisation of Industry and Commerce Economics of Business Organisation The Welfare of the Group Social Economics
IV. Citizenship	Citizenship Local Government Central Government Political Theory
V. Sociology and Ethics	Sociology Modern Social Institutions and Association
VI. Education	History and Organisation of Co-operative Education Training Courses for Educational Secretaries Psychology
VII. Propaganda and Public Speaking	Public Speaking
IX. Pioneer Courses in Social Subjects	Citizenship Economics
X. Technical Subjects (1)	Junior Employees' Preparatory Course English Arithmetic Business Methods Advanced Business Methods Employees' Introductory Course Arithmetic (Advanced) Geography Book Keeping

<p>X. Technical Subjects (2)</p>	<p>Managerial Courses</p> <p>Part I</p> <p>Apprentices' Course</p> <p>Part II</p> <p>Salesmen's Course</p> <p>Part III</p> <p>Branch Managers' and Assistant Departmental Managers' Course General and Branch Organisation Law Relating to Commodities Organisation of Commodities Markets Co-operative Law and Administration</p> <p>Part IV</p> <p>Departmental Managers' Course Departmental Organisation Business Statistics and Statistical Methods Commercial Law</p> <p>Part V</p> <p>General Managers' Course Management, Organisation and Administration Co-operative Statistics Law Relating to Trade and Industry Ticket Writing Window Display Co-operative Book-keeping Co-operative Accountancy</p> <p>Co-operative Secretaryship — Intermediate Course — Secretarial Practice Co-operative Accounts Commercial Law Co-operative Law and Administration</p> <p>Final Course — Office Organisation and Administration Advanced Co-operative Accounts Co-operative Finance Co-operative Statistics and Statistical Methods Advanced Commercial Law Course for Committee Members</p>
<p>XI. Pioneer Courses in Technical Subjects</p>	<p>Salesmanship</p>