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How to cite this article:

Noble, M. & Ross, C. (2020). Bundling co-operative education: Towards a theory of co-operative learning. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 53(3), 25-29

Bundling Co-operative Higher Education: Towards a Theory of Co-operative Learning

Malcom Noble and Cilla Ross

Whilst co-operative higher education (CHE) is an established international phenomenon which continues to gather momentum in the UK, it is under-theorised. In this paper we conceptualise CHE as a bundle of multiple, intersecting, and dynamic pedagogies and processes, centred on active learning, co-production, and trans-disciplinarity. The value of each of these is known in isolation but the total value becomes more powerful when bundled. We use the notion of a bundle to explore three themes: how we learn and make new knowledge(s), what we learn, and where we learn. Together, these make co-operative learning spaces extraordinary sites of emancipatory anti-capitalist learning. Despite the challenges co-production and co-creation present to theorising co-operative learning, we conclude that it is an urgent task if the radical potential of co-operative learning is to be realised.

The Co-operative University Project (CUP), led by the Co-operative College in Manchester, seeks to establish a federated co-operative university in the UK. Its ambition is to access degree awarding powers from the Office for Students so that students can secure tuition fee loans and obtain formal qualifications, from a number of co-operative partner institutions aiming to offer degree programmes through this federation. As the project unfolded, a set of co-operative higher education (CHE) principles (see figure one) was drawn up by the Co-operative University Working Group (CUWG) in 2019, in an effort to articulate the transformational aims of the project and our common values.

Figure 1: Principles of co-operative higher education developed by CUWG, 2019.

<p>Co-operative Higher Education aims to establish shared (and new) knowledge and understanding for people and the planet with an intention to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strengthen, enhance, and grow the co-operative sector.• Develop thoughtful understandings of co-operation.• Co-create educational and social practices based upon political and economic democracy.• Challenge injustice, inequality, and exploitation in all its forms.• Enhance wellbeing and foster the possibility for everyone to explore their full range of abilities.

The distinctive characteristics of what constitutes co-operative learning in terms of its methods, content, environment, and ontology have already been identified (see Noble & Ross 2019, p. 4). Whilst the CUWG had identified these principles, they do not encompass any detailed thinking on pedagogy, and indeed the notion of co-operative learning remains largely untheorised. One of the challenges to conceptualising co-operative learning is that it is, by its dialectical character, unstable. In this article we attempt to address this problem of conceptualisation by considering co-operative pedagogy as a combination of ideas and approaches which are brought and held together by dynamic, intersecting processes. The value of each of these is known in isolation but the total value becomes more powerful when bundled. Previously, we have illustrated papers on this topic with Manet's 1880 still life painting, "Une botte d'asperges" (<https://www.wallraf.museum/en/collections/19th-century>). Our theoretical bundle is about the twine rather than the asparagus spears. We consider this bundle both in its makeup and as dynamic processes in relation to three themes: how we learn and make new knowledge(s), what we learn, and where we learn.

Mapping co-operative values to critical pedagogy and to radical adult education practices quickly raises questions of democracy, intersectionality, interdisciplinarity, and multiple knowledge(s). Drawing on Ollis's (2012) work on activism, and holistic notions of co-operative learning and co-operatives as whole social institutions, we also began to think about

co-operatives as sites of embodied learning. We were able to consider and reflect upon some existing articulations of co-operative education more broadly. Shaw et al. (2016), for example, identified a 'sweet spot' for co-operation around pedagogies, institutions, and content. Additionally, Woodin's claim that learning and knowledge creation are embedded within both the making and practice of co-operatives has had a profound influence on our thinking (Woodin, 2015).

How We Learn

The word 'active' characterises all aspects of co-operative learning and knowledge-making: researching, listening, writing, and thinking. Key principles of active learning include students having agency in their learning and not being passive recipients (Bonwell & Eison, 1991); students learning by doing inside or outside of the classroom; and students being challenged through reflection and being responsive to dynamic contexts. Philosophically, active learning is social, supportive, collaborative, and co-operative. As co-operators, our learning is by doing; it is situated and deeply authentic, and as such, it elicits and develops not only students' capabilities, but also their values (Lave & Wenger, 1990).

Active learning promotes critical thinking and is endemic to the reflective practice necessary for making new knowledge(s). Critical thinking is a process which involves a broad range of skills, from identifying other people's positions, arguments, and conclusions, to evaluating alternative points of view and reflecting on positions rationally, bringing logic and insight to bear (Moon, 2007). Critical thinking also demands that we evaluate our own beliefs, actions and positions, for example our own biases. This in turn leads to self-responsibility, one of the co-operative values, through individual and collective self-awareness. This value is also promoted through reflection, which sits at the heart of a substantial body of pedagogical writing and is inimical to how we learn (Moon, 2004).

Co-production is fundamental to learning design and knowledge-making in our bundle. Its technical meaning in relation to the interplay between science and technology is "shorthand for the proposition that the ways in which we know and represent the world (both nature and society) are inseparable from the ways in which we choose to live in it" (Jasanoff, 2004, p. 2). We take this as breaking down barriers between professionals and amateurs, or in formal learning settings, between teachers and learners. Students are recognised and embraced as experts in their own learning, and are empowered to take charge of sessions, modules, (degree) programmes, and institutional design. In all of these contexts, co-operative students should lead their learning. This resonates with adult education thinking where lived experiences and prior learning of students in a classroom are seen by the teacher as valuable resources on which to draw, not least to accommodate the interests and questions of students. Blank space and unprogrammed time in syllabi are positive ways to approach this.

Co-operative classrooms, construed much more broadly than a seminar room, can model a space where knowledge is not competitive and individual, but rather collaborative, solidaristic, and shared. Hall and Winn (2017) use the notion of mass intellectuality as a mechanism to push against the hegemony of the capitalist university in favour of "a direct, cognitive and social force of production that exists as an increasingly diffuse form of intellectuality" (pp. 2-3), so opening the way for social ways of knowing. Knowledge in our bundle is understood in a dynamic way. A range of different processes is used to generate new knowledge, through participatory and collaborative learning. The collective ways in which we learn have profound implications for what we learn in co-operative contexts.

What We Learn

The social, collaborative approach modelled above points to an element of trans-disciplinarity. Just as the barriers between 'expert' and 'inexpert' are surmounted in the context of

co-production, so too should barriers *between* knowledge or disciplinary traditions in a collaborative environment. In this multi-disciplinary context, students are less likely to have internalised disciplinary norms, and will need explicit guidance. Disciplinary conventions ought to be stated explicitly in any case as good practice (Knights, 2005).

If co-operative learning is to be in any way anti-capitalist however, it must include different ways of seeing the world. In part, co-operative learning is anti-capitalist simply because it pushes on the horizon of the possible, against what Fisher (2009) called capitalist realism, floating the possibility of anything other than the capitalist mode of production and of a future which could contain anything other than more of the same. It is also anti-capitalist in that it includes perspectives which are amongst others, feminist, indigenous, anarchist, queer, and decolonial. Unworking capitalist hierarchies and the status quo are iterative processes rather than singular actions. For example, lessons might be drawn from queer pedagogies around refiguring classrooms as non-oppressive spaces (Rodriguez et al., 2016). In other words, what disrupts heteronormativity also challenges other parts of capitalist oppression. Student-led learning, fundamental to co-production and our bundle, which draws on lived experiences as a classroom resource, will enable students to make use of their diversity in designing curricula naturally. The typical adult education group of, say, a dozen students, offers levels of diversity and multiple perspectives which no individual teacher will be able to bring to the classroom.

Above all, the content of what we learn, whether it is *about* co-operatives or *how* we learn as co-operators, is framed by co-operative values and a commitment to social justice and equality. The content of co-operative learning is, in this sense, unapologetically political in that it has as one of its ambitions, transformation from capitalist society to a co-operative commonwealth.

Where We Learn

Perhaps the most distinctive element in the bundle is the idea that the co-operative is itself a site of pedagogy. In the education co-operative this is predicated, we argue, on a trio of roles. Firstly, students as members of higher education co-operatives must necessarily become co-operators; this means that students sitting in any classroom will formally and individually be, co-operators. Secondly, however, students must acquire the skills to do this effectively and for that, they need a distinctive bundle of pedagogies which will build their co-operative capabilities as well as their co-operative identities. Capitalist education both compulsory and post-compulsory will not equip students to relate to each other in non-competitive ways in the way that co-operation does and indeed requires. Thirdly, inverting the first point of students having to take a role in governance as co-operators and members, governance itself benefits from their equal, active participation in the co-operative as site of pedagogy.

We conceive of the classroom broadly, believing it to be about informal learning spaces in work, social, and private lives as much as in conventional teaching spaces. Wherever that learning takes place — and especially in co-operative domains — it is of great value. For example, Ruiz and Shaw (2019) and Ruiz and Macías (2018) explore this fruitfully in their reflection on the idea of the student housing co-operative as a place of learning, holding as much value as a traditional classroom.

In many cases, those teaching in higher education co-operatives are likely to have limited experience as co-operators and may well be on the same co-operative learning trajectory as students, therefore making for mutual experiences and new knowledge(s). The co-operative as site of pedagogy applies to administrators as well as teachers too: all learn richly simply by working and studying in a co-operative and aligning with the co-operative identity articulated in the globally agreed International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) statement (1995). The relationship all those working and learning in a higher education co-operative should have with their society should be characterised by a sense of belonging and collegiality. The move from a hierarchical space is challenging, but by modelling this with students in the classroom, we believe significant mutual learning which further enhances non-hierarchical relationships and practice will result.

Conclusion

Our bundle of pedagogies brings together a dynamic constellation of relationships to knowledge-making, to learning spaces, and to ways of learning. The individual elements are not unique and will be familiar to those teaching and learning in a wide range of contexts, especially adult education. However, the interplay between the different components we have mapped here is extremely powerful and lies at the heart of how people learn.

How we learn as co-operators, by creating new co-operative knowledge, learning how to be co-operators and how to enact co-operation, unlocks potential for significant social transformation and emancipation. In this article, we have attempted to conceptualise the dialectical learning processes which take place within a co-operative and amongst co-operators. As CHE continues to gather momentum in the UK, there is much work still to be done both to conceptualise and to develop practical pedagogies for classroom use and for broader application of co-operative learning.

The Authors

Malcolm Noble is an economic and social historian with broad interests in teaching and research. As a practitioner and researcher of Co-operative Higher Education, he is interested in both institutional formations and classroom pedagogies. In 2017, he helped found Leicester Vaughan College, where he works to develop degree programmes and is an active member of the project to establish a Co-operative University in the UK. He is co-editor, with Cilla Ross, of *Reclaiming the university for the public good: Experiments and futures in co-operative higher education* (2019, Palgrave Macmillan. See Book review, this *Journal*, Autumn 2019).

Cilla Ross is Principal of the Co-operative College, UK, and works in higher, community, and adult education. She has worked extensively across the UK and has led interdisciplinary blended learning and research initiatives internationally. Cilla is currently exploring a Co-operative University, a Union Co-op, and is associated with the Greater Manchester Co-operative Commission and has recently been appointed to an Honorary Professorship in Co-operative Education at the University of Nottingham, UK.

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Acknowledgements

The concept of the bundle is our work, and we take responsibility for it. We are grateful for suggestions and responses to these ideas made by participants at various conferences including Canadian Association for University and Continuing Education (CAUCE), Hamilton Ontario (May 2019); Co-operatives East Midlands Education Day (May 2019); and *The Way Ahead: linking new research on co-operatives and the social economy with new practical initiatives*, University of Central Lancashire, Preston (November 2019).