

... And Philosophy for All! A Multi-Stakeholder Co-operative's Quest to Disseminate the Practice of "Communities of Inquiry"

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In this paper, we draw on a unique case study to describe what happens around the "moment of birth" of a multi-stakeholder co-operative (MSC). This type of co-operative is a social innovation introduced in 1997 in the province of Québec, Canada, where it is known as a "solidarity co-operative". We narrate the story — mostly in their own words — of six graduate students in philosophy who set up a solidarity co-operative that promotes the practice of philosophy and of "communities of inquiry" in schools, nursing homes, community centres and other public spaces. We move beyond the traditional dichotomy between economic and democratic justifications as driving elements at the origin of co-operatives. While some authors stress the importance of an economic justification, following which the co-operative is essentially seen as a defensive endeavour triggered by a particular market failure, others stress the importance of a democratic justification, which includes the need to create a workplace that reflects shared values. Our extreme case study shows a complex and paradoxical combination of both types of justifications. There is indeed, at the "moment of birth", a co-construction of the enterprise and the service it provides. Our aim is to improve our understanding of MSCs as social innovations and to provide insights into why and how MSCs are created.

Many scholars have tried to capture what happens around the "moment of birth" (Hunt, 1992) of a co-operative (Gherardi & Masiero, 1987; Hadley & Goldsmith, 1995; Fillion, 1997), spanning from its inspiration to its inception. This first phase of the co-operative life cycle spans from the moment individuals realise they should join forces to meet their social, cultural and economic needs up until the constitution of the co-operative and its early development, including a specification of the nature of the products/services that the co-operative will offer. Inspiration refers both to the recognition of the objective stimuli or justifications (Cook & Burrell, 2009) to start a co-operative and the act of deciding that it is going to be the chosen format. Inception refers to the various steps that lead to the formal creation of the co-operative, including the process of constructing the constitution and specifying the nature of their products/services. Some scholars describe the birth of a co-operative as a unique social (Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004) or pioneering experiment (Malo & Vézina, 2004) set up in a generally indifferent or adversarial environment.

Two types of justifications to start a co-operative have been described in the literature: economic and democratic. Cook and Burrell (2009) stress economic justification as a primary driving element at the origin of collaborative efforts to create a co-operative. From this perspective, the co-operative is essentially a defensive endeavour triggered by a particular market failure. Hunt (1992) stresses the democratic justification, which is the need to create a workplace that reflects shared democratic values. Several individuals decide to join together within an unconventional framework based on egalitarian ideals and democratic decision-making. For instance, some co-operatives began as breakaway groups wanting to be quite different from the one they were leaving. The choice of a democratic style of management is, for some firms, substantially influenced by the experiences of their founding members (Hunt, 1992).

In this paper, we focus on the relative contribution of economic and democratic justifications in the emergence — the "moment of birth" — of new multi-stakeholder co-operatives (MSC). In general, MSCs are made of a minimum of two different stakeholder types of members who share a common interest in the success of an enterprise. Various individuals (eg consumers, producers, workers) as well as organisations (eg non-profits, co-operatives, businesses, or municipalities) can become designated members in the co-operative's bylaws (Leviton-Reid & Fairbairn, 2011). This type of co-operative was introduced in the province of Québec,

Canada, in 1997, where it is known as a “solidarity co-operative”. A solidarity co-operative is a multi-shareholder form of co-operative consisting of at least two categories of members from among the following: worker members (individual workers of the co-operative), user members (persons or legal entities that are users of the services provided by the co-operative) and supporting members (any other person or legal entity that has an economic, social, or cultural interest in the pursuit of the objects of the co-operative).

Solidarity co-operatives are a unique social innovation in North America that clearly meets the needs of stakeholders involved in social and economic community development. Yet no knowledge is currently available for factors explaining their high survival rate (MDEIE, 2008), sound financial situation (MFE, 2012) and positive social and economic impact (Comeau, 2009; Girard, 2010) in the communities and sectors of activity where they are active (Comeau, 2009). This type of co-operative has gained in popularity since its introduction in 1997 and its numbers have more than doubled across Québec since 2005. Indeed, solidarity co-operatives now account for 20% of all co-operatives listed (MFE, 2012). Their increase in number has come at the expense of worker co-operatives because their flexibility allows input from a greater number of distinct stakeholders within the community (MFE, 2012; Girard, 2010).

Because MSCs are a relatively new type of co-operative, scholarship on the topic is not substantial (Leviten-Reid and Fairbain, 2011). This paper provides a deeper insight into the moment of birth of MSCs, as it moves beyond the traditional dichotomy between economic and democratic justifications. Indeed, our unique case study — which combines participant observation and interviews with members of a very young solidarity co-operative dedicated to the promotion of “communities of inquiry” in schools, nursing homes, community centres and other public places — shows a complex and paradoxical combination of both justifications. There is indeed, at the “moment of birth,” a co-construction of the enterprise and the service it provides. First, this young MSC is juggling with how to best make use of its various types of members. Second, the product/service it offers are clearly a co-construction between its members and other stakeholders (Demoustier and Malo, 2012). With this paper, our aim is twofold: 1) improving our understanding of MSCs as an ongoing social innovation, and 2) providing insights into why and how MSCs are created, with an attention to entrepreneurial issues and product/service creation.

The Fascinating Story of Antidoxe

Antidoxe, officially founded in Québec City in August 2012, is a solidarity co-operative that specialises in philosophical facilitation. The premises for its establishment go back two years, when graduate students at the Faculty of Philosophy at Université Laval were juggling with the idea of grouping together to develop a framework to better regulate the practice of philosophical facilitation. The creation of the co-operative was rooted primarily in the need for founding members to work in their field of study — philosophy — and improve their employment prospects. Antidoxe team members wanted to establish and provide guidelines for the profession of philosophical facilitator in order to offer their fellow students an alternative to traditional careers in teaching and research.

Because Antidoxe is a solidarity co-operative, its different types of members have different roles and needs. Worker members oversee the smooth functioning and development of the co-operative. They pool their talent and resources to make Antidoxe a tool to promote and professionalise their services. User members draw upon the structure and services of Antidoxe to deploy professional and personal projects related to philosophical facilitation. Supporting members nurture the co-operative, providing a network of contacts and supporters.

The worker members at Antidoxe are Université Laval students, for the most part completing Master’s and PhD programmes under the direction of Associate Professor Michel Sasseville, a specialist in philosophy for children (P4C) and communities of inquiry (CIs). At the time of its foundation, the co-operative had six worker members: an internal coordinator (Julie),

an external coordinator (Nadia), a finance manager (Myriam), a human resources manager (Agathe), a communications manager (Marie-Ève) and a research and development director (Éric).

As philosophers, Antidoxe worker members subscribe to the values of freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, rigour, curiosity and intellectual creativity. As co-operators, they adhere to the values of democracy, collaboration and autonomy. As a solidarity co-operative, Antidoxe advocates a set of values to guide its practices that are perfectly aligned with fundamental values of CIs such as democracy and equity. Moreover, the MSC model reflects the dual mission of Antidoxe, namely pooling the members' human, material and financial resources, and offering services to the community. Antidoxe is ever open to dialogue, receptive to its members, and rooted in its community.

The origins of Antidoxe

In 2010, Michel Sasseville at Laval's Faculty of Philosophy received numerous requests from professors and teachers seeking to implement a community of inquiry (CI) in their courses and classrooms. Overwhelmed by the demand, he forwarded the requests to Myriam, one of his teaching assistants. The requests continued to pour in and the student realised it would be possible to earn a living through these contracts:

I recognised that it was worth the effort to contemplate a more structured approach to this job and seek out others who might also be interested in a career as a philosophical facilitator (Myriam).

In the fall of 2011, with the project taking shape in her mind, Myriam met Julie Tremblay, also a Master of Philosophy student looking for an alternative to professions traditionally earmarked for philosophy graduates:

I had lots of ideas and tons of projects that are off the beaten track after one graduates from university. I could visualise the projects in my mind, but I felt very much alone to foment them and all alone in wanting to venture off the beaten track. Finding out that I was not alone in wanting to explore new paths was a revelation (Julie).

stated Julie. Myriam agreed: "When I met Julie she said: 'This is what I want to do in life, and I want to start now'. Then the pace picked up", added Myriam.

Together, the students drew up a list of tasks to establish a business that would allow them to make a living of their passion. Four students — Marie-Ève, Éric, Agathe and Nadia — working under the supervision of Professor Sasseville joined the duo and hastened the completion of the project:

We implemented the most concrete steps of business start-up. We convened a focus group with people already involved in the field or who were very familiar with the CI approach (Marie-Ève).

Myriam, a teaching assistant for many years, took advantage of her vast network of contacts to meet teachers and parents interested in the CI approach or in becoming involved in it: "For the most part, the network expanded around Université Laval, mainly because it was the only university in Québec to offer a complete training programme in philosophy for children". The members of this network participated in the focus group in November 2011 to gather information on the needs and expectations of future user members and supporting members of the fledgling business. According to Marie-Ève, the focus group was the "Beta version of a market study".

Spreading the practice of philosophy

The six founding members based their research on the method of Matthew Lipman, the theorist behind philosophy for children (P4C) and principal developer of CIs in the 1960s. Sasseville, who studied under Lipman, oriented them to Lipman's method. A teacher himself, Lipman was driven to encourage the theoretical and practical appropriation by youths of logical thinking. With the help of colleague Ann Margaret Sharp, the educator developed a body of literature for philosophical facilitators consisting of appropriate reading material for each age group

and accompanying guidelines for teachers (Lipman, 1988). Thanks to the philosophical ideas presented in the materials, the method allows individuals to develop critical thinking, the underpinning of freedom of thought much like Paulo Freire's adult-oriented liberation philosophy/pedagogy (Costello & Morehouse, 2012). According to Marie-Ève, this is a practical approach to philosophy whose purpose is to "help develop logical thinking, the ability to debate issues, and organise ideas and statements".

A variety of practices emerged from P4C not solely directed at youths. One of them is the CI, a stimulating meeting place where people of all ages and all backgrounds can get together and ask philosophical questions of interest or meaning to them (Lipman, 2003). The Antidoxe founders described CIs as follows:

We gather around a problem to solve together, setting aside the classic dynamics of confrontation. The philosophical facilitator is here to assist and smooth the process. The goal of CIs is not to determine who is right, but to find answers together; it is an approach to dialogue and problem solving that allows participants to develop social skills (Marie-Ève).

Although Lipman's approach and teaching material are intended first and foremost for children, Antidoxe members wanted to reach out to a broader audience. Agathe expressed the need:

We all have research projects on the side that tend to turn to and develop this method because it concerns human beings and can be adapted to the school and children but is, above all, adapted to mankind. The method develops stirrings of affection, sociability and critical thinking by all individuals. The aim is to transcend the confines of the classroom and apply the method to a given public each time.

When asked about the reasons for her involvement in Antidoxe, Agathe answered: "The love of philosophy and, above all, the love of spreading this love." The establishment of the profession of philosophical facilitator through Antidoxe gives meaning to what she and her colleagues loved and allowed them to experience it in their daily way of life. Marie-Ève highlighted the fact that Antidoxe offers the opportunity to "more closely link theoretical philosophy to practice".

Therefore it was the desire to move toward others that motivated the facilitators to group together.

Its founders see Antidoxe as a project to popularise philosophy. Marie-Ève explained:

I draw a parallel with the world of elite sports where great athletes earn a living practising their sport, say tennis. This doesn't mean that children shouldn't take tennis lessons. Although a child may not become an elite player, the child will develop skills, physical strength, and sportsmanship. As the child plays tennis perhaps poorly or awkwardly at first, he will develop certain skills. We are banking on the same approach to philosophy. Just because Kant or Hegel wrote books for the elite does not mean that the ordinary citizen has nothing to gain through the practice of philosophy.

The six worker members believe deeply in CI advantages that are intellectual, affective and social, and they want to share them with as many people as possible. Respect for others, the ability to listen and autonomy are aptitudes that the founders of Antidoxe wish to promote among participants in CIs. The many levels of society targeted, from school settings to residences for seniors and even businesses are proof of the founding members' strong desire to make philosophy more accessible.

In the opinion of Marie-Ève, the aptitudes developed in CIs "may not only influence the person as a student, but also as a citizen and can really have an impact on society". This is what motivated her involvement:

Education is my very own political commitment; I am not involved in partisan politics, but I say to myself that it is through education that I will work to ultimately improve politics.

The members' idealism is in line with Lipman, who sought to disseminate concrete tools to encourage the practices of reflection, listening and expression required for better dialogue for social progress (Lipman, 2003).

Crafting their own career

The group was aware that the people interested in practising CI might commit to different levels of involvement, but they wanted to reach and join with as much people as possible. So in the spring of 2012, they decided on the form of their business: a solidarity co-operative, which has worker members, user members and supporting members. The solidarity co-operative formula is consistent with their values and the benefits they seek to spread in their role of philosophical facilitators.

Agathe summarised the community spirit behind the Antidoxe approach:

The fact of being a solidarity co-operative allows us to stay, become firmly rooted in our community, and integrate as many people as possible into our project, also directed at disseminating philosophy for children.

Marie-Ève echoed her colleague's comment:

It was the type of relationship we were seeking; to find other people who do the same things that we do and how we can join forces without treading on each other's toes.

Antidoxe:

tries to establish ties with others involved in philosophical facilitation to establish dialogue and divide market shares rather than appropriate others' market shares.

The ideals of democracy and equity are inherent in the very structure of a solidarity co-operative as well in the definition of CIs:

CI is an approach to discussion where participants from different backgrounds and levels of involvement are not opponents or competitors, but co-researchers collaborating together to find answers to questions of interest to them. There is almost a perfect fit between CI and the co-operative formula (Myriam).

The worker members are collaborators just like the participants in a CI. Entrepreneurial decisions are taken collectively. Marie-Ève explains:

Ours is not a hierarchal structure where one must bow to authority. We are all equal and autonomous, and enriched rather than acquiescent.

The match between the co-operative formula and their philosophy is such that the group also used CIs tools during their weekly working meetings on the management of the co-operative. For example, if there was a disagreement that seems to stem from different interpretations of a term by those present, a member would request a definition to ensure that everyone was discussing the same subject.

Although the values of co-operation and philosophical values are closely entwined, the choice of the solidarity co-operative formula was also linked to Myriam's experience with the co-operative movement. She is the deputy director of the Students' Café Co-op at Université Laval and a member of several boards and committees since 2006. Her experience confirmed the relevancy of the co-operative model:

It is an entrepreneurial model that I find strong, productive, interesting and socially viable. It is quite clear to me that if I were to go into business I would choose the co-operative environment.

A conviction now shared by her colleagues.

Tempering the daunting aura of philosophy

The six philosophers were fully aware of the unappealing image that people associate with their discipline. Although the primary purpose of the co-operative — disseminating the practice of philosophy in a variety of settings — was quite clear, the manner of presenting the goal was much less so:

There was a lot of questioning. Should the notion of philosophy be included directly in our name,

mission, branding and way of presenting ourselves? Because philosophy is a big word that scares people, some people would be repelled by it from the onset (Myriam).

Public perception was important, because the general population was the target clientele.

Although the group surmised that branding Antidoxe with the seal of philosophy might cause a neophyte clientele to flee, it also anticipated reluctance on the part of the university: "There is a myth that philosophy is only for eminent scholars who read a dozen 500-page books every day!" Myriam alluded to a university environment that sometimes cultivates this crusty image as "a form of elitist science" and "culmination of a long process".

One of the recurring themes of the approach advocated by the Antidoxe founders was the resolve to make philosophy accessible to everyone. The six entrepreneurs were in close contact with "*normal people*" who wished to practise philosophy, but Myriam noted:

the small push in the right direction was lacking so that philosophy might be implemented in schools, or that people might philosophise in settings in the public sphere outside the university environment.

The many hours invested to bring this business project to fruition and put it to purposeful use led to the issue of remuneration, of "selling" philosophy. Marie-Ève anticipated the criticism:

There are people who will have a disparaging view of what we do, because we want to sell philosophy; we want to ask for money for knowledge, but this does not make us sophists. We live in a world where rent must be paid and we view our services in this light ... this is the best approach that we have found to being philosophers in today's world.

For Julie,

There are things that are fundamental in life to which no price should be attached. From an ethical standpoint, it is an uncomfortable situation

she acknowledged before addressing the need to earn a living and do something you like.

Agathe stated that passion and remuneration can be reconciled quite legitimately:

We are determined to do something with our lives that we like without having to work on the side. We have something of value and we are aware of the fact. ... We feel no remorse acknowledging that we enjoy doing what we do and that yes, it is possible to make money while enjoying oneself.

Myriam stressed that the project to democratise philosophy largely exceeds personal gain after noting the need to professionalise resources in philosophical facilitation.

Issues related to business identity and the perceptions of other parties were the subject of much discussion while drafting the mission statement to specify Antidoxe's values and goals. Although some stressed putting it down on paper to complete the business plan and related applications for subsidies, everyone agreed on the usefulness of clarifying and stating their goals for present and future decisions. The mission, explained Julie, is "the point where you go when you are lost. It is about being able to refocus and return to the source". Marie-Ève explained:

It is the underpinning, the personality of Antidoxe, its reason for being, its reason for existing. It has practical value, namely keeping us on track and imparting coherence to the project.

Myriam acknowledged the importance of a clear mission when contract offers may multiply and not necessarily correspond to the co-operative's niche market. She viewed the mission as a compass for direction in case of doubt.

On the co-operative's website, the mission statement reads:

to promote the development of free, critical and independent thought through the dissemination and implementation of CIs as an educational means.

The worker members wondered if the term “educational” should appear and whether the mission would be viewed as negative or patronising. “We worried that some people might not like being told ‘we’re going to educate you,’” indicated Myriam. Julie raised the ideological connotation of the word:

Education rhymes with school, but the term can also be viewed from the perspective of learning throughout an entire lifetime. The human being progresses constantly. There is this broader definition.

One of the assumptions at Antidoxe is that human beings are constantly evolving. Myriam thought that this manner of perceiving education might disturb some people:

Philosophy for everyone is our niche. We believe that anyone can become a philosopher although not everyone shares our view. But we fully embrace this point of view.

Establishing guidelines for the profession of philosophical facilitator

Others’ perception of their work and the vocabulary to employ with a potential clientele were pivotal points of the approach advocated by the six entrepreneurs. They were even more important to a primary objective to establish guidelines for the profession of philosophical facilitator. The founders felt that their work was crucial to a relatively young practice:

The profession did not exist yet, it was not a line of work, and it was not something that was recognised or for which guidelines existed. At the time, anyone could state ‘I am a philosophical facilitator’ or then again, say nothing because it referred to nothing (Julie).

If a framework were to exist, the profession of philosophical facilitator might become “another avenue to explore for those studying philosophy”.

The co-operative was tasked with determining the attributes and training criteria required for philosophical facilitators. “The goal,” indicated Marie-Ève,

was to establish some form of authority in the field or develop documentation on the practice to preclude the possibility of just anyone feeling the urge to take part in group discussions from claiming to be a philosophical facilitator. We wanted to show that the profession of facilitator requires a specific skill set.

Defining the profession was fundamental to facilitators being able to present themselves to others — for example, through their business cards — and the serious nature of their work. In short, it consisted in establishing the rules of the art. Myriam spoke of the example to be set:

It is a question that is philosophical, pedagogical, and entrepreneurial at the same time because branding is very important. We become the ambassadors of our business and the quality of our performance will have an impact on the business and all the other people involved in it.

Myriam felt that the description of a good philosophical facilitator was pertinent to both potential additional worker members and to user members:

If someone is going to sign a contract in the name of Antidoxe, we want criteria to ensure that this person represents us properly, presents our project properly, and offers quality service.

However, Myriam also highlighted the difficulty of establishing quality criteria when different styles of facilitation may be equally valid because different people will judge them differently. Qualities essential for a philosophical facilitator led to many discussions before consensus:

Ultimately, the facilitator’s chart became the foundation of our employment contract, which in turn led to the development of something both practical and technical in nature.

Determining the internal organisation and clarifying the role of worker members

During the first six months of 2012,

we developed our concept, worked on our mission and values, and decided where we wanted to go. These questions were core aspects of our project and a matter of great concern to us (Myriam).

During the concept phase, members of the group worked without assigning specific responsibilities to each, explained Agathe:

We could take on such and such a task, but not in the capacity of a given role within the co-operative. It was while preparing the first general meeting that we realised that we were going to run out of steam if everyone did whatever they felt like doing. We required a more clear-cut structure.

Although existential discussions continued, the business moved toward a more concrete phase in its development in June 2012. To ensure greater efficiency, the members decided to divide the workload:

First we made a list of the roles that might be assigned. Then each person indicated what he felt he could do best or what he wanted to do most. We attempted to make reasonable comparisons to ascribe respective roles to each knowing that the idea was appreciated for its polyvalence and not merely for its specific nature (Agathe).

What I mean is that we were all responsible for each position, but people could mingle in the sub-committees so that everyone might have the opportunity to view things from every angle. However, there was a reference person nonetheless.

Julie confirmed that the group wanted a division of tasks where collaboration would be maintained:

We weren't all that experienced and each was involved in the learning process so I think people felt secure in the knowledge that we'll help each other, we'll do things together, and there will be co-operation.

As the internal coordinator, she also emphasised that members be flexible, at ease and concerned with different aspects of managing so that, if a member had to be absent, another person had to have the expertise to compensate and allow the business to continue operating normally.

In June 2012, the co-operative project formerly built only on ideas became more concrete and structured: six worker members shared the responsibilities of finance, communications, human resources, internal coordination and research and development. Myriam stressed role distribution in the business project:

It was a key moment when we realised that there were as many roles as there were people and that each person held a role that suited her or him. All of a sudden, our to-do-list was shortened. This is when things really switched into high gear! We now had a real business!

Partly because they were shared, the steps to be taken appeared more achievable.

Julie readily admits how difficult the process of arriving at a suitable organisational structure was:

With six of us, everything took time. And with six philosophers, it can become very drawn out and hard to gather six people together for a meeting to discuss issues with important repercussions in the future, especially when we don't see eye to eye. Before we are certain that we rally around the same idea — not just that we understand the idea but we agree with it and have the same will — there is a great deal of discussion. The moment things become clear, it is time for concrete action to emerge and steps to be taken. Let's just say that we took our time preparing our groundwork properly.

Integrating a variety of user members

Once the worker members had finished cementing an organisational structure with which they were comfortable, they sought to define the relations they wanted to establish with the Antidoxe "family" of user members and supporting members. Since the members already recruited were close associates, terms of collaboration were vague at best. Aware of this problem, the founders decided to clarify the requirements and define the bonds prior to any further recruitment.

Myriam explained how the group created a category of user members:

The more we thought about what we wanted to do with this business, the more we realised the need for us, worker members, to create our own jobs in our field. Additionally, there were people who wanted to practise, establish and acquire experience, or act in the capacity of facilitators for CIs on a daily basis without necessarily making a career of it.

While philosophical facilitation is central to the lives of worker members, they noted that it is secondary for teachers and social services workers who might want to integrate philosophical facilitation into their work without committing themselves to the same extent as worker members:

We chose the solidarity co-operative model because we felt that it was the model best suited to combining these two needs: the need of people seeking to devote themselves to disseminating this method of educating and those who wanted to practise it without necessarily making it a career objective.

This choice reflected intentions of co-operation and mutual aid. Indeed, the Antidoxe's six founders wanted to obtain educational material and tools that would be shared:

Obtaining everything is quite costly and individually, it would have been prohibitive. However, if we pooled our resources, we could mount a library with all the books needed and lend them to each other (Myriam).

On this issue, Myriam indicated that the first need was to have a centralised location to project a professional image and pool resources. The worker members aspired to providing other stakeholders with things that their own businesses would require in order to professionalise their services.

Antidoxe's approach to work corresponds to the old adage of strength in unity:

From an entrepreneurial standpoint, the idea was to make user members allies, not competitors, and to see how we could help them while they help us (Myriam).

The group thought about information sharing and contacts. In other words, the more people gravitating around Antidoxe, the greater the opportunities to meet stakeholders likely to use the co-operative's services. In return, the co-operative would provide beginners in philosophical facilitation with coaching services, workshops and educational material. The co-operative would also offer a structure of professionals who could step in and replace a user member who is sick, for example.

In addition to the exchange of services, relations between the worker members and user members resembled those of a support group:

The goal was to have a network of people who do the same thing we do and experience the same problems we face. We wanted to offer support and ongoing training in the field to people who wanted to become involved (Myriam).

On the basis of this pooling of resources and support, the group sought to clarify their exchanges with other philosophical facilitators.

Julie admitted that the place reserved for user members at Antidoxe remained to be defined.

User members

do not all have the same needs. We had to determine how this should be managed for it to be fair for everyone.

Although reflection on the guidelines underlying the relations was underway, Myriam distinguished two kinds of user members: producer members, ie self-employed individuals who do the same kind of work as the worker members at Antidoxe, but without any involvement in the management of the business. They might, for example, use the co-operative's secretarial services. User members, on the other hand, might be people who use CIs within their

profession in addition to philosophical facilitation. These individuals might be inclined to use CI tools such as data banks and educational material. The founders set the qualifying share for user members at \$200 and gave them one seat in the Board of Directors.

In the opinion of Marie-Ève, it was the concept of mutual support that guided the founders:

It was a delicate situation because these people might eventually become competitors and we had to determine how a relationship established with them might be mutually advantageous. If Antidoxe alone were to use people who have the skill sets that Antidoxe needs, things wouldn't work out. The people would be short-changed. On the other hand, if we were to give away our services and obtain nothing in return, the situation would hinder us as a business. Therefore, it was important to find the best possible balance.

The worker members insisted on good communication to establish relations with user members already in their entourage or joining as new collaborators.

If user members were to join Antidoxe, they would be integrated into the co-operative and represent the co-operative brand in the public arena. Maintaining a good reputation was crucial to the founders of Antidoxe. Julie envisioned the problem of controlling the corporate image when a third party uses it:

How do we ensure that what they offer is of the quality we are seeking to associate with Antidoxe if we want to professionalise this job? How do we encourage them? Lend them our name? Because what we wanted was to rally together. But at the same time, we didn't want to accept just about anything either.

Welcoming supporting members and extending the philosophical network

The determination to rally a community of interest around Antidoxe was also expressed through the recruitment of supporting members. These are people familiar with CIs or the ins and outs of co-operative management. The philosophers referred to Antidoxe as their baby and had no hesitation referring to supporting members as their family, according to Myriam:

These are people who believe in our project, find it interesting, attach importance to its existence, and support us. These are people who really want it to work. We can count on them to disseminate our activities and the services we offer. They keep an ear tuned to provide us with tips on possible contracts.

The level of involvement of supporting members is not computed in terms of hours. Rather, the group expects the members to be on the lookout for opportunities for Antidoxe and provide help from time to time. Myriam indicated that supporting members inspired and motivated the founders:

The basic idea was finding people who could lend us a hand once in a while and when they could, and at the same time offer moral support and the impression that people are backing us and want us to succeed. That's priceless.

Given the limited need for funding at Antidoxe, the founders set the qualifying share at \$50:

We had no start-up costs, no material, and no physical premises for the co-operative, but these were unnecessary in the beginning. We preferred a lower fee to encourage more people to become involved and committed to the business because it was also slated to become a network of contacts and a support network.

In return, supporting members would have two votes on the Board.

Although the founders had yet to do business with unscrupulous individuals, they were aware that the situation might occur. Myriam summarised the group's opinion:

The advantage of the solidarity co-operative is being able to seek support within the community. The support is very real, but tempered by the fact that you must deal with individuals who have decision-making power in a business that you are founding. We thought long and hard about this.

Yes we believe in the democratic ideal, but democracy has its strengths and weaknesses at the same time. One of the weaknesses is the principle that everyone has the same decision-making clout.

Myriam was able to reassure the group in their choice of business model when she indicated that the Board of Directors must accept each new member in a co-operative. And then there is the philosophy of one member = one vote, an additional damper to any attempt to deflect the goals set by the founders. "One person alone would find it difficult to wreck the entire business." And because the worker members have four out of seven seats on the Board, they could, as a last recourse, dismiss the wrongdoer, although they had a clear preference for preventing rather than resolving such situations.

Marie-Ève indicated that knowledge of the co-operative might constitute a selection criterion:

The selection criteria would include choosing people who understand what we are seeking to do and how a co-operative works. We should also make sure that people joined the project for the right reasons and that they understood the nature of the project so we don't find ourselves with members having goals at odds with ours.

In addition to user and supporting members, other people were involved in the co-operative or worked in the philosophy milieu. As Antidoxe moved forward, its founders would become more interested in developing ties with these different stakeholders as they professionalised philosophical facilitation. At first glance, the mission appeared innovative in a young field requiring structure in order to achieve recognition. However, the more the group advanced, the more it discovered initiatives that resembled theirs, said Marie-Ève:

Increasingly, we were discovering that other people had launched similar projects. And this is now part of what we are trying to do right now: find a way to establish a network with others who share our goals. We do not claim to have invented the profession, but we had not heard of others around us involved in a similar endeavour. So, one of our goals was to group together people who do the same thing. And we are now realising that there are many more than we thought.

Since the philosophers wanted to enlist people and groups that also promote and popularise CIs, their attention was directed more particularly at an initiative based on the Lipman method and its intrinsic values. For instance, the group cemented ties with the Association québécoise de philosophie pour enfants (Québec Association of Philosophy for Children) that Marie-Ève viewed as a "partner, an ally" that might allow Antidoxe to host conventions and present conferences.

The general assembly to organise Antidoxe

The August 17, 2012, general assembly to organise Antidoxe was prepared several months in advance with the help of the provincial support organisation Coopérative de développement régional (Regional Development Co-operative). Myriam summarised the agenda:

Essentially, the purpose of the general assembly to organise Antidoxe was to adopt by-laws and nominate the Board of Directors.

The search for consensus as the basis for CIs elicited reactions and disagreements before unanimous agreement:

The decisions made by the members of the founding committee, who became officially worker members after the assembly, were accepted by all members attending the general assembly. Although there were questions, we were able to explain the reasons that led to the choices at issue.

The individuals who attended the assembly were, for the most part, stakeholders well informed of the Antidoxe project. Myriam reminisced:

Our CI adviser presided over the general assembly to organise Antidoxe and there was also a goodly contingent of supporting members in attendance, people who had followed us closely from the focus

group onward and who were part of our extended family. It was heartening in a way, because all the people present had skills of interest to us. It showed that this project had aroused enthusiasm among people not necessarily close to us, so this was very encouraging.

The general assembly “launched Antidoxe” reminisced Marie-Ève. “It was then that Antidoxe began to exist officially.” Her speech for the event contained several analogies to birth of their baby and stressed the role played by all the stakeholders:

In my speech, I referred to our CI adviser as the midwife who accompanied us throughout the process to ensure that Antidoxe had all its parts when it entered the world. So it was a celebration, the birth of a project carried inside of us that entered the world at that precise moment. We were delivering it to its family too, because I have always maintained that our supporting members are like family members. They may not have been present during all the stages of the development of Antidoxe, but they will help raise the co-operative, provide it with resources and allow it to grow. So it was a family celebration!

When asked to define the role Professor Michel Sasseville played, the philosophers instinctively answered “father”.

Defining the wage policy

In the wake of the assembly, the worker members turned their attention to a wage policy. Their thought process had to consider the specific reality of co-operatives. According to Myriam,

One of the strengths of a solidarity co-operative is that as worker members, we are employees of the business and want to be treated properly by it. But at the same time, we own the business. If we want our business to continue to exist we have to consider its monetary capabilities and financial reality. We have to alternate between two hats and reconcile them as best we can.

In November 2012, Myriam acknowledged the difficulty of establishing a wage policy:

It was complicated because most of the tasks carried out were not generating income. Many of our coordination duties within the business and many other things were done on a volunteer basis, for example facilitation at philosophy cafés. Salaries were the most important expense for our business insofar as there were no purchases, office space rentals, or anything whatsoever. If we had been paid for all the hours we worked, expenses would have largely exceeded revenue and nothing would have worked.

Marie-Ève defined the wage policy as she and her colleagues saw it in November 2012:

In terms of salary, ours were very close to minimum wage because we knew that a business in the start-up phase does not roll in money so we agreed to compromise.

Julie explained the motivation underlying the compromise:

We said to ourselves that if we wanted to survive, wages would have to be reduced to the strict minimum during the canvassing period. We had to give ourselves an incubation period.

There was constant mixing and matching between the founders’ desires and reality. So they determined a wage policy in the longer term.

We worked with what we had at the moment in terms of income, but prepared ourselves for the future nonetheless. We said that when the money would start to come in, we would be able to pay for such and such a thing (Julie).

Determining services offered and target clientele

In the fall of 2012, the six worker members got to work to determine exactly what services to offer. Antidoxe was already involved in some contracts, but intensive canvassing efforts would not begin until they clarified the nature of the services they would offer. They described them in entrepreneurial terms, indicating their nature and advantages for each clientele. The co-operative’s primary service was philosophical facilitation coupled with coaching for

facilitators. The co-operative's worker members also had educational and promotional tools, which they viewed more as products to share with their user members. Finally, services included the development of new tools adapted to the needs of clients. Among other things, the members foresaw working with publishing houses seeking to develop manuals for ethics and religious culture courses.

In view of services to many types of clientele from schools and extracurricular programmes to seniors and businesses, founders sought to develop a language adapted to each clientele, somewhat complicating the preparation of sales pitches:

Although we were doing exactly the same thing with children and seniors — sitting in a circle and reflecting together — presentations were completely different depending on the client: a parent, teacher, an adult in it for himself, a senior citizen, or a nursing home director (Myriam).

She insisted on arousing interest in potential clients, structuring presentations to introduce, explain and sell services. Marie-Ève provided arguments to attract a school clientele or entrepreneurial customers:

At a school, I would refer to the Ministry of Education programme and show how Antidoxe could offer activities consistent with departmental objectives such as integration, achieving autonomy, and acquiring practical knowledge. I didn't use the same approach with a business. There I discussed productivity and better teamwork coordination. I presented the same thing from a different angle so it was easily understood and more appealing to my target audience.

The members learned to better present and showcase their services. By the end of November they began preparing their canvassing approach:

We had reached the stage where we needed to memorise short speeches just to be able to explain what we do in less time than it takes an elevator to travel one floor (Myriam).

They tested their sales pitches on “people we knew and our contacts, making every effort to remain humble and open to criticism”. Julie added that presenting their services in their best light was a long-term experiment:

I get the impression that in the next year or two our speeches will be put to the test and readjusted a great deal.

Determining the main advantages of CIs on the basis of the characteristics of each clientele was useful in helping the philosophers with oral and written presentations. “One of the main difficulties encountered was the originality of our product”, indicated Marie-Ève. Like her colleagues, she appreciated the effort required to familiarise the public with CIs. The first step consisted of giving visibility to the practice of philosophy to ultimately sell the services:

We knew that trying practical philosophy as we were offering it would lead to its adoption, but people had to try it first, because it was relatively unknown.

To generate interest in their services, Antidoxe organised activities in public venues, hosting philosophy cafés in Québec City and Lévis. For Myriam, these were “free samples” to allow “people outside the Antidoxe network to try the CI experience”.

Nevertheless, the founders noted that philosophy cafés as one-time events fell short of their aspirations. For Myriam,

Philosophy cafés alone are neither a means to attain our professional goals in terms of establishing a trade and being paid for what we do, nor a means to achieve our business goal of allowing more people to draw benefits from participating in CIs.

They do not develop skills inherent in the practice of CIs. “Intellectual rigour, critical thinking, and the logical quality of reasoning” are, on the contrary, developed through regular practice. Julie further indicated that openness towards others is a skill better developed within a group that remains stable. When the same people have exchanges over a period of several weeks,

they learn to “accept the ideas of others and consider them as valid”. Conversely, during a one-time event, participants generally invest more in what they have to say than what others have to say.

Now that we exist ...

More than two months after the general assembly, the members focused on preparing their business plan, the task supervised by Julie, as the internal coordinator. The members agreed that theirs was a non-conventional approach — launching a business without a business plan — a choice very much a reflection of who they are. Myriam explained that, in their opinion, the development of a business plan was often a precursor to obtaining loans or grants:

In this particular case, there was no need in the start-up phase. Requests and contracts were already starting to pour in and we were impatient to become business contracts rather than contracts with this or that individual that we then pooled.

However, the foundation of the co-operative was a factor which, according to Julie, motivated the group to further invest in Antidoxe:

It may not seem objective, but there is something really motivating about saying ‘yes, we exist.’ It provided the added impetus to address the business plan phase and was the crowning jewel of myriad efforts deployed during several months of reflection.

Myriam acquiesced, highlighting the group’s desire to explore practice rather than theory only:

We knew that the business plan would require a lot of thought and we preferred putting our model to the test as we were preparing it. However, to do this, we had to exist.

The worker members have high hopes for Antidoxe. In five years, they expect to have a full-fledged headquarter in Québec City and develop a suitable network of user members and supporting members, as well as strong ties with agencies and organisations in the region. In five years, they also anticipate working full time at expanding the co-operative, reconciling management and facilitation tasks on an equal basis. The young co-operative also hopes to diversify its clientele in accordance with its goal to democratise and practise philosophy outside institutions of learning.

Additionally, the founders would like their business to become a reference in the field of philosophical facilitation. They want to establish a gathering place for relevant tools to practise CIs. Because CIs are becoming increasingly popular, the worker members expect the need to professionalise the practice on a larger scale. The mission of Antidoxe might then extend from Québec City to the four corners of the world:

The potential for development is infinite. The beauty of the thing is that the need for reflection and understanding is infinite also. So if, as we believe, the CI approach is a good way to meet this need, there will always be a demand (Myriam).

The facilitators are hopeful that Antidoxe will become an ambassador of the practice of philosophy. This is the same hope that motivated the birth of the co-operative:

We wanted to envision a model that might be exportable. While Antidoxe might have its headquarters in Québec City and user members across Québec or even the world, we also considered the idea that if someone in Ontario wanted to do something similar, he might import the model and do the same thing elsewhere (Myriam).

In the long term, the philosophers would like to add the publication of educational material to services offered. Design and publication would be ensured entirely by Antidoxe and would serve to enhance knowledge of philosophy. The translation into French of some of Matthew Lipman’s not yet translated work is another research and publishing project to develop in the future.

Finally, the facilitators insist on the many paths open to Antidoxe:

The way we envisioned Antidoxe, it cannot be something static. It should remain a work in progress and ever in development, just like a human being. In five years, the adventure will be far from over, yet we have no precise idea of the exact outcome (Julie).

Marie-Ève agreed:

I hope that in five years' time there will be components of Antidoxe that we haven't even thought about, things that we will find as we move forward and choose to develop.

In the opinion of the founders who first joined forces to promote the democratisation of philosophy, the meetings to come in Québec and abroad will add even greater depth to the co-operative.

Conclusion

With this paper, our goal was to narrate the story of six young entrepreneurs who adopted the solidarity co-operative model for their new enterprise, a decision rooted primarily in their desire to establish and provide guidelines for the profession of philosophical facilitator, to work in their field of study — philosophy — and to improve their employment prospects. The solidarity co-operative model was particularly relevant because it comprises different categories of members — worker, user and supporting members — who share a common interest in the success of an enterprise. The solidarity co-operative model has only been scarcely studied. Yet, it is getting very popular amongst the population, at least in the province of Québec (Langlois & Girard, 2006; Girard, 2008; 2010; Comeau, 2009). More than 600 solidarity co-operatives in Québec operate in all major industry sectors (MFE, 2013).

This case is undoubtedly an extreme case. While many co-operatives still emerge as bottom-up answers to socio-economic distress or in communities that are under-served or otherwise on the margins, the co-operative abovementioned is comprised of graduate students in philosophy with high cognitive, cultural and networking resources. Nonetheless, this case study offers an example of the ways in which co-operatives innovate to champion social inclusion (Girard & Langlois, 2009; Malo et al, 2001): *employability* for philosophy graduate students, *accessibility* to philosophy through the promotion of CIs, *connectivity* through the development of the organisation's network and *democracy* through its plural membership. Indeed, one of the co-operative's goals is to disseminate concrete tools — including “communities of inquiry” — to foster social progress by encouraging the practices of reflection, listening and expression required for better dialogue among individuals of different origins. Furthermore, the new co-operative exemplifies an economic activity rooted in solidarity rather than self-interest. Indeed, the complexity of the solidarity co-operative model, which comes with the necessity to find a compromise between different stakeholders embedded in the DNA of the enterprise, is in itself a test to the feasibility of “solidarity” (Girard & Langlois, 2009; Leviten-Reid & Fairbain, 2011). In sum, this case shows how the co-operative formula has a lot to offer for those socially conscious citizens who wish to have a positive impact on their environment.

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