



# Co-operative Learning - a Contextual Framework



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Co-operative learning (CL) is more complex than might be apparent from an initial impression of a group of learners learning together. This paper attempts to provide a framework by clarifying all the contexts associated with what is currently understood as CL. The historical and philosophical perspectives of Owen, Dewey, Holt and Holmes are introduced to illustrate that our current thinking is not new. Recent contributions by educational thinkers on values, methods and brain science lead to a contemporary account of this pedagogic (educational theory and practice) approach. Related fields of practice are acknowledged (group work, group development, experiential learning and education for enterprise) that all contribute to a fuller interpretation of the wider parameters of CL. The close association with co-operative development as a social movement in the UK is detailed as a distinct contribution to the exploration and provision of CL in this country and abroad. Finally applications to current social and economic concerns (active citizenship, community cohesion, identity and belonging) place CL at the centre of an entitlement for all learners whatever their age. The success of meaningful co-operative educational programmes using diverse CL approaches demands considerable skill and dedication of the educator/facilitator/mediator committed to a belief that places the learner at the heart of all they do in education.

## Introduction

This article attempts to construct a framework of contexts that variously define co-operative learning (CL) as a process, a form of learning, a collective endeavour and a social intention. Sociologists describe these contexts as 'discourses'; the language, images and key concepts that structure, reflect and define areas of knowledge and social practice. Different practitioner sectors (eg academics, trainers, co-operators, teacher educators) will encounter CL differently and their collective interpretations and understandings will change as they evolve as a social entity. Behind this is an evolutionary logic for co-operation as a feature of being human. The personal desire that some have to leave, in the wake of their actions, a contribution that mutually benefits others; an intuitive legacy for future generations (Kropotkin, 1902:234).

This article is not just an analytical exercise to comprehend '*co-operative learning*' in an educational and pedagogic sense, but is also a study of '*co-operative learning*' as part of an alternative social and economic way of living, part of a co-operative movement. It is in this sense of co-operative human endeavour that this article aims to analyse the nature and scope of co-operative learning across the varied and changing social, economic and educational contexts that exist in the UK.

## Co-operative Learning as a Learning Philosophy

Learning individually has value, but co-operative learning implies a social context. It is not just what the individual gains from the process, it also provides a context for their thoughts, understandings and experiences. Rather than entrapment in the mindset of an internal dialogue, the discursive exploratory nature of the dynamic (dialectic?) leads to an individual having to justify, explain, listen and understand in a collective setting. This gives an added dimension to the learning process, denied to those restricted to solitary, individualistic, even solipsistic, learning experiences.

The emphasis on relevance to the learner, community and citizen is aligned with prominent educational thinkers. It is a rich heritage and four philosophical perspectives in particular have contributed to my understanding of CL. Robert Owen formally opened the *Institute for the Formation of Character* in New Lanark, Scotland on New Year's Day 1816 (Harrison, 1969:160), and established the first primary school in Britain. Siraj-Blachford in his insightful small book

*Robert Owen: Schooling the Innocents* captures the essence of Owen's thinking:

Apart from the basics, geography, history and natural sciences were taught at New Lanark. These subjects were taught from natural objects and specimens that were brought in from the countryside. Models, charts and pictures hung round the classroom ... music, dance and even elementary military drill. The children were controlled simply by kindness and affection, no punishments were permitted, nor were any prizes given that might encourage individual emulation. Instead the entire emphasis was upon the co-operative search for knowledge which would be its own reward (1997:10).

The American philosopher John Dewey writing in 1902 advocated a radical rethink in pedagogic traditions. It was obvious to him that the focus should be on *learner need* rather than the discourse of the dominant educational elite. Dewey's postulation has an uncanny resonance for those concerned with current educational provision; the need was and is to be *learner-centred* rather than *teacher-centred*. He writes in *The Child and the Curriculum*:

If the subject matter of the lessons be such as to have an appropriate place within the expanding consciousness of the child, if it grows out of his own past doings, thinkings, and sufferings, and grows into application in further achievements and receptivities, then no device or trick method has to be resorted to in order to enlist "interest" (1902:27).

The challenge to the teacher was finding ways to enable the child to express themselves, rather than be dominated by the curriculum:

It is his present powers which are to assert themselves; his present capacities which are to be exercised; his present attitudes which are to be realised (1899:31).

John Holt who died in 1985, at the time a rigid curriculum was being reintroduced into America, wrote ten books, the first *Why Children Fail* and the last *Learning All the Time*. Roland Meighan successfully summarises part of Holt's perspective:

Holt proposed that children cannot learn all that much of any use from cookbooks (various instruction and textbooks), new or old, because they do not learn effectively by trying to transplant someone else's reality into their own, but by building up their own reality from the experiences they encounter (1995:2).

Owen had earlier written (1814):

Reading and writing are mere instruments by which knowledge, either true or false, may be imparted; and when given to children, are of little comparative value, unless they are also taught how to make proper use of them (Siraj-Blachford, 1997:14).

In the British context the work of Edmund Holmes in *The Tragedy of Education*, an all embracing critique of the mechanical obedience evident in schooling at that time (1913), makes a telling indictment of examinations:

... to invite the child to regard his classmates as rivals instead of comrades is to do him a great and far-reaching wrong. It is to dam back the pure current of unselfish sympathy at or near to its source. It is to unseal the turbid fountain of vanity, of selfishness, of envy, of jealousy, of strife (1913:50).

Johnson and Johnson make a similar point:

When students are required to compete with each other for grades, they work against each other to achieve a goal that only one or a few can attain (1994:3).

This they define as 'negative interdependence', alternatively:

... co-operation is working together to accomplish shared goals ... there is positive interdependence ... students perceive they can reach their learning goals if and only if the other students in the learning group also reach those goals (1994:4).

Positive interdependence is now accepted universally as a core aspect of CL.

These extracts illustrate the contradictions evident in some learning systems. Meighan compares different learning systems and categorises them as 'authoritarian', 'autonomous', 'democratic' or 'interactive'. His main point, other than that we need a new learning system, is that:

A key lesson from the study of learning systems is that how you learn is as important, if not more important, than what you learn (2005:6).

Perhaps most importantly, before considering how to educate, we need to be clear about the aims of education. As Bertram Russell stated in his seminal book *On Education*:

We must have some conception of the kind of person we wish to produce, before we can have any definite opinion as to the education which we consider best (1928:38).

CL, as presented in this paper, is complementary to the humanistic and democratic endeavours of these educationalists. These philosophical contentions emphasise learner-centredness, the learning process, positive interdependence and a concept of an active citizen as an output of the education system. In my view, these are fundamental to the ethics and drive of those seeking to establish co-operative educational practice in the core of the national educational systems in the UK.

## Co-operative Learning as a Form of Experiential Learning

CL is both interactive and collective and is by implication experiential, ie it takes place in a group setting (two or more people) and is a concrete, real experience that engages emotions. What distinguishes learning from just experience is the review process (the reflection of individuals on their own feelings and actions and on those of others) of a collective task or activity. This then enables higher order thinking, conceptual analysis and planning for further experimentation. The learner can apply the insights gained to new challenges or to the next stage of a programme of learning. CL in this context can be considered as a cycle of learning, in which reflection, theory building, experimentation and application to new challenges and experience is a continuous cycle (Kolb et al, 1971).

Pfeiffer and Jones (1980) working from an organisational development perspective have created a huge bank of activities denoted as structured experiences. They build upon Kolb's adult learning cycle to create a five stage 'experiential learning cycle'. Visiting each stage transforms a concrete activity into a fully completed learning experience.

1. An Experience (in this instance a co-operative group activity).
2. Publishing (sharing feelings and intentions).
3. Processing (discussing patterns of interaction and group dynamics).
4. Generalising (inferring principles, theories and concepts that help make sense of the world).
5. Planning (planning more effective action).
6. Applying (putting insights, new knowledge and understanding into practice).

The significance of stages 2 and 3 is the 'de-role' function, often either forgotten or not given enough time. De-roling is a deliberate process that helps the learner extricate themselves from their role in the activity. It recognises that all experience has attendant emotions and is very subjective. This process takes the learner to a more rational reflective position outside the activity, where a relatively dispassionate more objective view can be taken on the whole experience. Individuals become more able to understand their own behaviour and the interaction of others.

Once this stage is complete learners are ready to explore and analyse more abstract conceptual ideas and new knowledge arising for the collective learning experience.

This is a form of de-briefing and requires considerable expertise and awareness of the mediator/facilitator and the learner. In my view this debriefing process is fundamental to all forms of collective experience or group work, whether a learning activity or a form of community action, work-place, army patrol, meeting or catastrophic event. If we are serious about extracting the maximum learning from any co-operative group learning activity then this dimension to group working must be considered and appropriate debriefing processes planned into the learning programme.

## Co-operative Learning as Effective Group Working

Groups are complex places to be and are part of the human condition. Any individual joining a group will intuitively assess who are the other members, what is the reason for its existence, what is their own role, what are others' expectations of them? For those with little self-confidence and self-esteem it can be a frightening place. Beyond this personal psychological domain is the life of the group itself as a collection of people now having a distinct evolving entity. There are dynamic processes that happen. Kurt Lewin and others in the 1950s began an intense investigation into group dynamics, partly driven by a belief that more effective group working could make a significant contribution to the expression of democracy in post-war American society.

Cockman et al (1999:53) suggest when a group works on a task, an observer will notice three dimensions happening in parallel and sequentially:

**Formal procedures for managing the task** - these emerge or are agreed usually at the outset, eg clarification of task, decision making procedures, targets and time keeping, formal roles ie monitor evaluator, co-ordinator and resource investigator.

**Doing the task** - working on the content or actions related to the goal of the task.

**Group process** - all the sophisticated behaviours and attitudes related to helping a group be productive, eg active listening, building on contributions of others, sensitivity to feelings of others, suspending judgement and living with ambiguity.

When the procedures and processes get mixed up, a group will find it difficult to resolve the complexity they may have fallen into. This model helps us to separate the more mechanistic functions from the more subtle behaviours; both dimensions need to be fully expressed for the successful completion of a group task.

CL groups also develop over time, from a gathered collection of individuals to a productive group that eventually disbands. Stanford (1990) investigated, initially as a teacher "developing effective classroom groups" and critiqued Tuckman's (1965) analysis of group development stages in unfacilitated groups (without a teacher, mediator or formal facilitator). Sanford introduced facilitated structured experiences to assist the group to form and perform. His research culminated in a group development model that rearranged Tuckman's design (as follows in brackets) to five stages - **Orientation** (forming), **Establishing Norms** (norming), **Coping with Conflict** (storming), **Productivity** (performing), **Termination**, (adjourning). (Stanford, 1990:19-21).

Educators and trainers intending to establish CL groups must understand how groups develop over time. Each stage requires a set of skills (listening, decision making, planning etc, see Cockman above). Investigations into brain science and accelerated learning (Smith, 2002) have introduced new understandings that reinforce the significance of genuine inclusivity and participation in a group learning experience for each learner. The work of Smith and Sanford illustrate the need to plan appropriate activities throughout the learning process that relate to the composition and needs of the individuals in the group.

When the purpose of the learning is clear and group members are at ease and feel part of a learning group, then learners will feel more able to influence the programme of learning. The learning group will gradually develop into a learning force as its members become more adept and the group is more able to lead itself. The facilitator role will need to change with the increasing

sophistication of the learner; from an external directive function to ultimately a participant learner. Being able to adapt to this changing group dynamic is the art of being an educator and facilitator of learning.

It is my assertion that co-operative group working fails when educators and facilitators ignore the significance of the procedural and process dimensions described above. Effective group work requires training for the facilitator and the learner, and should be built into all learning programmes so competency can be built over time.

## Co-operative Learning as Learning in a Co-operative Group

Sitting in groups is not group work. In comparison co-operative group work is a multilayered experience comprising two core elements - 'positive interdependence' (all for one, one for all) and 'promotive interaction' (mutual self help).<sup>1</sup> Those involved in designing co-operative learning tasks will have both academic and social aims for the learning content and process.

Kutnick et al (2005) completed an extensive literature review of psychological and sociological studies investigating the social and academic effects of pupil grouping (mainly primary and some secondary school studies). They focused on three themes; school organisational grouping practices, the differences between grouping and group work, and the importance of learners' interpersonal experiences. Learners can be grouped organisationally (setting or mixed ability, age, gender), and within classes into different combinations (size, competence, friendship) but learners in any combination tended in most instances to work alongside, not with their peers on a collective learning task. They state that planning for effective learning "needs to take account of the social pedagogic relationship between group size, composition and type of learning task assigned" (2005:3). A major recommendation is the "importance of teaching and supporting group work skills for pupils" (2005:4). A key conclusion was that "in spite of the all the knowledge on group work and on its effectiveness, the application of this educational strategy in the daily classroom process is still underutilised" (2005:53).

Whilst there is a dearth of UK research on the application of CL in secondary education, the four-year Social Pedagogic Research into Grouping (SPRinG) project (Blatchford et al, 2005) results are encouraging. Based on a social inclusion model, learners in mathematics and science received skills training, were placed in topic groups and set collaborative tasks. The results were compared with whole class taught control groups and suggest a stemming of the negative attitudes and motivation; learners expressed a preference to work in this way, which resulted in more positive attitudes to learning and enhanced performance.

Anecdotally, teachers consistently spoke of improved social behaviour in their classrooms and in the playground, children's ability to integrate SEN and other children into their groups without teacher prompting, and children taking responsibility for keeping themselves and others on-task (taking a number of procedural responsibilities on themselves rather than relying on the teacher) (Kutnick, 2005:43).

## Co-operative Learning as Pedagogy

This embraces an extensive range of techniques, structures and teaching behaviours. The usual requirements of clear aim, learning outcomes, learning programme and evaluation are self-evident. The difference is the social dimension in which the learning takes place.

This pedagogy embraces a range of methodologies and models. Brody and Davidson (1998:7) have identified at least 20 different structural forms for organising co-operative learning activities. The main exemplars are: STAD - student teams-achievement divisions (Slavin, 1994); Jigsaw (Aronson, 1978); Learning Together (Johnson and Johnson, 1994); Complex Instruction (Cohen 1994); Group Investigation (Thelen, 1981 then Sharan, et al 2001); Structural Approach (Kagan, 2004). Others are modifications or extensions of these formats (Kearney 1993).

Examples of co-operative interactive techniques include paper and discussion carousels, post-it ideas storms, value continuums, cotton bud debates, energisers and review methods. All these techniques are informed by learning and intelligence theories and recent research into

how the brain works.

Beyond this are hundreds of very imaginative games and activities collected, reframed and modified into different forms and names. These originate from organisational development traditions in the 1970s and 1980s and from voluntary and educational play bodies, peace and religious organisations, and co-operative youth groups. See Dewar et al (1989), Masheder (1986; 1987) Brander (1991), Shephard and Treseder (2002) and Ginnis (2002). Curriculum plans and classroom approaches for introducing co-operation into the primary curriculum can be found in Gilmore and Dymond (1994) and Jolliffe (2007).

## Co-operative Learning as a Part of a Social Movement

In Britain co-operative forms of working were evident in the early eighteenth century and became more fully established in British culture by mid nineteenth century. The exponential growth of the British co-operative movement reached peak penetration in the 1950s. Today the major consumer co-operatives are still significant players in the retail and financial sectors. A wider movement of housing and worker co-operatives, credit unions, embracing all forms of artisan crafts and professional services are collectively a more potent social force for change than often stated <sup>2</sup>.

Fundamental to the co-operative movement then and now, nationally and internationally is a set of values that underpin the actions of all co-operators and co-operative enterprises. This movement focuses on the potential and capacity of people to do things for themselves, to act democratically and share resources for the betterment of all. The international *Statement on the Co-operative Identity* (Macpherson, 1995) refers to ten values - self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, solidarity, honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others. A detailed study of these co-operative values (see Wilkins, 2010; Rayment, 2011) discloses a very close alignment with educational values and practice.

This coincidence of values, together with the UK co-operative movement's proven commitment to educational provision over time, suggests that some CL practitioners may be unaware of how closely they are working with a social movement.

## Co-operative Learning as an Expression of Values and Educational Beliefs

Co-operative values in the British context for some educators are regarded as core to co-operative learning. For instance the value of 'democracy' will be expressed in citizenship education, learner voice initiatives and community cohesion projects. Learning becomes more than pedagogy once the value position in a community context is noticed, assimilated and then acted upon.

Brody's opening chapter, in her book with Davidson on professional development for co-operative learning, focuses on the significance of teacher beliefs,

... how teachers implement co-operative learning depends partly on the particular beliefs about education they hold, as well as the match between the models they are implementing or learning, and their beliefs (1998:26).

According to Brody the aim of education can take three forms - transmissional, transactional and transformational (1998:28). A transmissional approach is the transmission of knowledge to learners in the form of facts, skills, concepts and values. The transactional approach regards the learner as a problem solver and education represented as a dialogue between the student and the curriculum. The aim of the transformational approach is social change and personal actualisation - this is the place of co-operative learning<sup>3</sup>. Brody explains this very well:

Learning focuses on the integration of the physical, cognitive, affective and spiritual/moral dimensions ... Students have as much control as possible over their own learning ... knowledge is not separated from the individual, it is rooted in personal meaning systems. New knowledge is the effect of community where texts or curricula emerge from the collective experiences of the learners. Multiple perspectives are cultivated and promoted, and are subject to further exploration through collaboration and dialogue (1998:31).

This is a contemporary restatement by Brody of the meaning and relevance to the learner of any learning as expressed by Owen, Holt and Holmes earlier in this paper, understood as personalised learning in a collective context.

This personal meaning perspective and the importance of ensuring relevance can be extended beyond the school student to adults, teams, communities - in every action there is potential for learning and co-operative learning in an experiential context. Transformation will have consequences for all associated with a particular learning process. This can create tension for the educator/teacher/trainer as the consequence may challenge their own values, beliefs and commitments causing each to search their educational soul for meaning. They have to answer tough questions such as "Why do I teach?", "What should I teach and how?" Ultimately, as learners become more aware of their needs and are able to express them, a more negotiated curriculum emerges and the locus of control is realigned. Transformation challenges values and beliefs and can create discord with colleagues, senior managers and administrators if their educational goals are consciously or unconsciously different (autocratic, transmissional and teacher centred). It is at the personal level that this discord, in my opinion, can be so intense for the teacher/facilitator because if authentic, it is unpredictable - we cannot dictate the character of someone else's transformation. In a co-operative setting expecting others to be open to transformation requires a reciprocal willingness of the teacher/facilitator to also embrace transformation. When the co-operative educator enters the learning space, she or he must also be open to change.

### **Co-operative Learning as an Agent of Change**

When learning is designed to also develop social competences, the learner will begin to possess transferable capabilities, which can be applied in community, family and work settings beyond the formal school or college. By helping young people to develop in this way we are creating young agents of social change, able to participate and shape the segment of society they find themselves in. These young people are no longer passive recipients of knowledge, they are vibrant challenging social beings, ready and keen to take a role and make something happen for the good of all and themselves.

The introduction of citizenship programmes in schools for pre-16 year olds (Crick, 1998) and then 16-19 year olds in education and training (Crick, 2000) heralded a decade long promotion of active citizenship promoted by the Post-16 Citizenship Support Programme (LSN, 2009). These new initiatives enabled learners and educators to participate in democratic processes and experience expressing their voice. As citizens and customers using the services provided by schools, local authorities and other youth support agencies, they begin to influence the quality of learning and other provisions through college/school councils, youth forums and consultations. Active citizenship, if it is to be meaningful, needs young people to develop new skills and confidences to stand up and be heard in public arenas. They need the capacity to critically review, give constructive feedback to themselves and others, and to contribute creative solutions to problems they encounter as individuals and as members of multiple communities.

Co-operative enterprises are real businesses with fundamental differences to conventional limited companies. If we believe that young people are entitled to a balanced understanding of different economic, industrial and organisational forms, then opportunities should be provided for young people to form social and co-operative enterprises. This alternative co-operative business experience already exists in a range of educational settings, theatre groups, business studies students, primary school credit unions, sale of school stationery and fair trade products. All run as co-operative enterprises and there are endless possibilities. Students can feel the experience and explore and learn about work based democracy, equal opportunities, mutual participation and corporate responsibilities; in addition to understanding the importance of making surpluses for the sustainability of a business or a community service.

### **Co-operative Learning as Social Capital and Self-Actualisation**

Young people are born into social groupings (families, foster homes or other institutions) that give an initial sense of their being and ultimately their sense of belonging; it is a form of inheritance,

social position, life chances, culture and a blended form of social capital. The wider community adds to the cultural parameters. Young people become members of parallel universes that comprise multiple communities, such as neighbourhoods, postcode gangs, sports teams and virtual social networks. Their constant challenge is surviving in and making sense of themselves in that social company. As Sir Keith Ajegbo states:

... none of us exists in one dimension ... We live in sophisticated times and we have repertoires to inhabit many different worlds and multiple identities (QIA, 2008).

Dewey (1899) made very similar observations at the turn of the twentieth century.

CL as presented in this paper will inherently contribute to initiatives that enhance community cohesion. Space becomes more congested as populations increase, exacerbating competition for scarce resources. Geographical as well as economic complexities and inequalities force migration, economic and political unifications (in Europe and beyond) and globalisation; all these dimensions collectively demand that all within a society are capable of developing more complex understandings of the concept of 'community'.

The international passenger survey annual data for 2009 details 371 thousand people who left to live permanently abroad and 567 thousand who arrived to live, work and learn in the UK<sup>4</sup> (Office for National Statistics, 2009). The Commission for Integration and Cohesion stresses that community tension is exacerbated by cultural, intergenerational, gender and social class issues and is not simplistically associated just with ethnicity and faith. The multicultural perspective embraces the mutual regard for the distinctions between people. It also acknowledges that building community cohesion for a stable and safe society must emphasise what brings people together, rather than focusing on the differences that divide people.

Cohesion is principally the process that must happen in all communities to ensure different groups of people get on well together; whilst integration is principally the process that ensures new residents and existing residents adapt to one another (Commission for Integration and Cohesion, 2007).

CL applied in this context, I suggest, embraces this inheritance and these diverse cultural settings by providing a place for a wider expansive gradual understanding of the world beyond the presenting realm. In this place of safety, learners can scale a ladder from which to see and understand what exists over the social horizon.

## **The Entitlement to CL Opportunities**

Young people learning co-operatively are more than a cluster of individuals being in the same space, they are purposeful, motivated and interdependent, working with as well as alongside one another. This CL group needs each member to develop sophisticated human and social interaction skills, emotional intelligence and a value consciousness. We know that learners learn best when they are confident and have high self-esteem (Smith, 1996:25-32). We know that learning environments should be visual, auditory and kinaesthetic (Smith, 1996). We know that there is a cycle of learning in which experience is built upon through reflection, theoretical generalisations and an application of that insight to new experiences and new challenges (Kolb et al, 1971; Fenwick, 2003). CL can contribute to a sense of place and assist the building of multiple cohesive communities, emphasising what we have and can do in common, rather than what makes us different (Wilkins, 2008).

So given these interrelated dimensions to CL, and its capacity to significantly assist communities and groups to grow, learn, and build cohesion, do we have the right to restrict young people's access to such learning experiences? If CL is an entitlement for all young people then schools, colleges, and all learning providers should adapt and include such opportunities into the fabric of its curriculum, the learning community and its governance structures.

CL comprises a firm value position, an extensive range of engaging processes and techniques, a sense of social purpose and a complete commitment to the learner. It demands application,

planning and a confidence to take risks; ultimately CL educators must trust the process. For those of us who have embraced this transformation, there is no alternative!

## The Author

Alan Wilkins is an educator, facilitator, project manager and evaluator, with over 25 years experience in co-operative learning. He has worked in secondary and further education, local education authorities, national education-industry projects and with diverse co-operative enterprises. Freelance since 2001, he has worked on education, training and action research projects in the UK, Europe and Africa, and co-founded Co-operative Learning and Development Associates (CLADA). His current interests are identity and belonging, community cohesion and active citizenship. In 2010 Alan received the International Association for the Study of Co-operation in Education (IASCE) award for *outstanding contributions through service and activism*.

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## Notes

- 1 See Wendy Jolliffe's paper in this edition of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* for a fuller explanation.
- 2 See earlier editions of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*.
- 3 See Lee Taylor's paper in this edition of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* for a case example of this transformational form.
- 4 Categories include, definite job, looking for work, accompany/join, formal study and other. Whilst these figures change yearly, they do give a sense of scale.