

Member Relations and Education

Journal 72 began an exploration of the changes, at present and in prospect, in Co-operative member relations and education with articles on the services from the Co-operative Union at Stanford Hall and from Co-operative Retail Services. Journal 73 contributed an account of the services from the Co-operative Wholesale Society to the individual members in its retail branches.

Now we continue the exploration with a report from the local perspective of Ipswich Society and a retrospect by Len Burch who has recently retired after over twenty years in the post of Member Education Officer for the Co-operative Union.

Member Education - Today and Tomorrow

by Richard Risebrow

When I took office some fifteen years ago I followed in the footsteps of the late Dick Lewis and Roly Walker, who together encompassed a fifty year period as full-time Education Officers. Their ground work and programming is still part of Co-operative education in the Ipswich Society today.

However, climates change, trends come and go, but at the end of the day our goal is still very much the same. I believe passionately that above all else our greatest contribution which we can make through Co-operative education is the building of loyalty and confidence, not just within the membership, but also in the community in which we operate.

The Two Fronts

Currently Co-operative education is being promoted on two fronts, first by means of the more traditional programmes and secondly by the increasing involvement within the schools system. Whichever path we choose to follow I am of the opinion that membership, with member participation and encouragement in the democratic process, is fundamental to our very existence. If the Co-operative movement is to survive through the next decade and thereafter, then Co-operative education, in its many forms, has a part to play in its re-structuring.

Here in Ipswich membership recruitment is less of a problem compared with most Societies owing to the attraction of the traditional cash "divi" which ensures a continuing influx of new members.

Our programme of work is therefore devised to preserve some of the past

traditions and expectations whilst at the same time entering into the new generation of Co-operative teaching.

Importance of the Juniors

Without a doubt the flagship of the department is the Co-op Juniors, who in 1992 actually celebrate their golden anniversary. It is impossible to measure the Co-operative learning and confidence building which this group has given, not just to the performers on stage, but also to the hundreds of volunteers who make scenery, cut the costumes or sell programmes. During the past 10 years the group has grown to almost immeasurable proportions and I often wonder what Dick Lewis would think of his modern day "babes". To give an example of their popularity, the 1991 Christmas production attracted a total audience of 20,113 patrons during a one-week run of thirteen performances. One cannot measure the value in terms of public relations which this group generates for the Society. Running alongside the theatre group are a number of dance classes where senior girls of the Co-op Juniors teach children from the age of three years the rudiments of ballet, tap and modern dance. This involves 500 members' children on a weekly basis.

Other Traditional Activities

Continuing with the more traditional activities we still maintain classes in Keep Fit and Art for Leisure, the Co-op Community Club, Scottish Dance Display Team, Majorette Troupe and a Gardening Club. Choral work is still very much part of our work with the retention of a Youth Choir and two Ladies Choirs, together with the mixed voices of the Senior Singers. For the past twenty years, 10 week Extension courses have been held twice annually in conjunction with Cambridge University Board of Extra - Mural Studies. Students are currently studying "China since 1911". All of these are generously supported and any hint of removing these from the annual budget would cause immediate reaction from the membership.

Innovations In Links with Schools -

Whilst allowing the traditional groups to continue their well-trodden path we have entered into new pastures, especially in the field of state education.

At the time of its termination we hotly disputed the decision to end the Schools Art Project which had been administered nationally for a number of years. We were forced into having to introduce local projects and we decided to pursue the idea of conservation and environment education into our projects which became more cross-curricular and gradually got away from individual prizegiving - which was not a very good Co-operative practice! The assistance we gave to an Ipswich secondary school in setting-up a permanent Co-op shop, trading in stationery goods within the campus, brought us into close

contact with the younger generation. This was followed by the advent of the Teen Co-ops and we are currently involved in Co-operative enterprise schemes with a number of local schools.

Independently the Society has engaged in a three year scheme with Ipswich Initiative, an organisation funded by local commerce and directed by a local headteacher on secondment for one year. The Society is funding nine local high schools with £2,500 each over the next three years in order that they may introduce an enterprise scheme for either their school or the local community. Looking ahead I am currently in negotiation with the L.E.A. for a local primary school project on Co-operative history within the national curriculum for key stages 1, 2 and 3.

- And in Environmental Issues

Another aspect of community involvement, and one which has an appeal to the younger members of society, is that of environmental issues. Without doubt the younger generation is passionately concerned for the world in which we live, the destruction of the rain forests, nature conservation, animal welfare, vegetarianism and so on. We have set up a Co-op Environmental Group, not a campaigning organisation but one where members can be educated in all the various aspects of the environmental scene.

A bond has been forged with the Suffolk Wildlife Trust; they have their own share number, and the Society has recently come to the rescue by sponsoring the volunteer work force who had lost financial support from the Manpower Services Commission. The Member Education Committee are working very closely with the Trust on a number of educational related projects.

All very well, but not much different from what a number of Societies are doing throughout the movement, so where do we go from here?

Future Developments?

If the educationalists within the movement are to play their part in ensuring that it comes through a very difficult period, then they must accept their share of the workload.

More work must be done with members, in terms of recruitment, servicing and education with a view to holding office. Members' meetings have got to be re-designed to attract larger attendance. We are about to commence a six week training course for potential Directors and Committee Members; this ought to be ongoing with the emphasis on younger members.

Education Officers ought to be working closely with their colleagues in the

trading side of the movement. At the end of the day a satisfied customer is on the way to being a loyal member and it is important to build loyalty for the Society in everything we do.

Sadly, the weakest link in the movement is the inability of the Sectional Education Councils to function. Even in the days of the Sectional Education Secretaries serving much smaller regions, the situation was not perfect. With their departure and the amalgamation of Sections we are left with vast geographical areas. Can you honestly say there is comradeship between Penzance in the West and Gt. Yarmouth in the East, just to quote the Southern Section?

Regionally and Nationally

It is now time for the Voluntary Groups, such as Anglia Co-operative Education, to be given official status as regional structures and a constitution, together with electoral representation, redrawn to accommodate this more satisfactory form of regional co-ordination. Unfortunately the movement doesn't like changes and I therefore feel the debate will continue for another few years.

Whilst Societies pursue their own educational programme and policies and have become more self-supporting in doing so - witness the growth of CWS and CRS in educational services, - there is still a demand for a central agency to initiate new trends and to keep the co-ordination of campaigns and projects. There is a need for the supply of printed materials which can be offered at an attractive price to the smaller independent Societies. In recent years C.R.S. in particular have produced excellent leaflets.

Despite the changing situation of the movement it is essential to preserve the National Co-operative Educational Association but I do think the funds, albeit very limited, could be put to better use.

To summarize I feel that Co-operative education is as real today as it was when Robert Marshall wrote the foreword to "A Handbook for Co-operative Educationalists". The methods of implementation may not be the same, but no one can deny that self-preservation, self-direction and self-reproduction should be very much in our minds when we plan for the next decade.

The Author

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Reflections

by Len Burch

The more we change the more different we become?

During 15 years, 1955-70, I attended each October the Labour Party conference. Memorable acquaintances were established and renewed; and unrememberable Yates winebars and other hostelrys were revisited triennially, in Blackpool, Brighton and Scarborough.

Cameras came into the conference in the 50s, and television redirected and reduced the whole event. But what we all noticed was how little anything else changed. The same "old" people continued saying the same things as manoeuvres in the same battles. Informally, in the same small groups, we also found ourselves doing and saying much the same at each event. Thus were we unhappily destined to go on into perpetuity.

From March 1970, my removal to the Education Department at Stanford Hall, did not allow for a continued attendance. By 1974 however, hankering for a reunion, I got a visitor's ticket and set off for Brighton, looking forward to meeting against that close band of regular conference companions.

Arrival at the conference soon indicated that the established layout and traditional arrangements had not been followed. Worse still, the place was populated by total strangers.

A search in recognised familiar places, found no familiar groups. The few noticeable familiar faces were busily engaged in conversation with unknown others.

Where, I wondered, had the old attractive Labour party conference gone? How could it be that an event, that had not changed in format and attendance during 15 years of my patronage, had so transmogrified itself in just 4 years of my absence?

Examining the Changes

Those pre-1970 events may appear to resemble post-1970 Co-operative member education in the symmetry of the same people at the same annual events doing and saying much the same about the same problems. On a year to year basis, it's a common observation that nothing much new seems to happen or change; but it does, of course. Looking back over 22 years it is possible to see that member education has been widely, though not yet

universally replaced by member relations; that this difference in name represents a change in purpose and function; and that the control, organisation and provision of member relations, bears little resemblance (if relevance) to what I entered in 1970.

The extent of the changes is generally accepted. Member relations is now more internally recognised, supported by management and more professionally provided on a wider basis than ever before.

Important questions arise however:

1. What are today's differences (external and internal) that condition the output and potential for success?
2. How far do the conditions within which member education/relations now operates determine the nature of the service - certainly in respect of its extent, but more so in relation to its direction?
3. What have been the changes in member education/relations over the past years which will influence its future operations?

Distinguishing Member Education and Member Relations

Labels don't fully represent contents, of course. Member education in its hey-day may have been less concerned with education than with training, socialising or even entertainment. Similarly member relations today can be more of an educational than a purely public relations exercise.

There are however criteria which enable us to distinguish between these different categories. We need to ask in respect of any particular service:

1. Who, primarily, is the intended beneficiary - is it the designated recipient or the source?
2. Is the service of intrinsic value, i.e. is it provided because it is worthwhile in itself, or merely as the means to something else, to some other end?
3. Is the persuasive element based on cognitive development or on affective manipulation?
4. Is the message, influence etc a genuinely interactive engagement or mainly a one-way operation?
5. Is the provision intended, and designed, to enhance people's potential to control and change their (social or physical) environment (in unpredetermined ways), or is it designed to change people in order that they better meet or fit some predetermined environmental desiderata?

The Power of the Members

Equally the transformation of education secretaries, appointed by and responsible to members and education committees, into the more professional member relations officers, as part of, and responsible to, management, has involved more than a change in name, and has co-incided with a reduction in the

power and voice of membership over the period. That influences the sources of decision-making, the aims and criteria applied in the selection of tasks.

A form of schizophrenia can develop where member involvement and member influence is both wanted and feared. As member relations officers become less responsible and responsive to member demands and control, and more answerable to management, they can face what sociology recognises as the waitress/waiter syndrome, trying to satisfy the conflicting demands of "customer and kitchen" without much control over either.

"Wider Still and Wider . . ."

For many reasons the service over the years (as previous articles testify) has widened from a provision distinctly for members, to one for a wider and less specified audience, including school children. And most professionals in the service are proud of that. The distinction from public relations is however becoming less clear and the danger of Co-operative member education as a separate entity disappearing physically into the public relations orbit is thereby increased.

Comforting signs are that a new band of MROs have recently taken it upon themselves to examine present trends and determine future outcomes. CWS provisions have seen a return to a concentration on developing and supplying a membership service and provision. A nationally co-ordinated service will be a benefit of the future, but will need a combining of the disparate interests and separate provisions of CWS, CRS, and the remaining independent Societies together with those of the Co-operative Union.

Co-operative member education needs to move forward in circumstances where its achievements and what it relates to are also moving forward. The facts are however that all else (relevant to member education) is at present moving backwards. The moral considerations, collective conscience and social understanding of "the audience" are not moving onward at all.

"Self-love and Social"

We operate in a social ethos that is far more concerned with extolling the virtues of self-interest and self-help in the narrow sense than with realising the benefits to be secured through considerations for the general and collective interest. Current ideology has moved back to the mistaken and already adequately disproved view that the general interest is best secured by everyone pursuing his or her own individual self-interest.

Many in the movement are not immune from interpreting situations in the terms of the prevailing and conflicting ideology. How often have I monotonously mentioned the oft repeated observation: "Why should anyone join or be a member if he/she gets nothing out of it?" Membership (like a customer relationship) is thus seen and therefore projected in the limited terms

of a business contract - like joining the RAC or AA. The whole idea of social membership where one belongs for the opportunities to contribute towards collective goals rather than to collect individual material rewards, seems to have been lost.

Members are not to be equated with customers. Just as Health Service patients (and school parents) are now misconstrued and misrepresented (by Ministers) as customers which they are not, so does customer terminology take over in terms of talking about making the supply meet "wants or choice" when the whole point of the service is to provide what is needed and what by definition the target audience is unaware of and unable to "choose". That's the situation we seek to change, not that which we seek to accommodate ourselves to. The fact that "people are not interested" is our *raison d'être*, not our reason for doing something else.

Responding to New Conditions

When we ask therefore more generally how member education should change to meet "new" conditions, it should be remembered that Co-operative member education (unlike Co-operative or any other trade) is concerned with developing the potential to get conditions (social and psychological) changed and improved rather than with changing the supply to meet a changed and ever-changing demand. Different techniques and forms of presentation, of course, become necessary, especially in a changing technological age. But those transitions present no problems and are in my experience adopted almost automatically and imperceptibly by developing groups of operators.

In response to the eternal "problems of identity" issue, a colleague in the Department (not involved in or with Co-operative member education) suggested to me that my decisions should be easy and obvious: "You should," he said, "ask yourself in respect of each and every option or proposal: 'Is it Co-operative?', 'Is it educational?' and 'Is it for the members'? If it doesn't meet those three conditions, then throw it out."

Had I thought of that myself, and 20 years earlier, things might have been easier and different - certainly, throwing much out would have hastened my own departure. Now that I am already going, however, I have no hesitation in recommending such a policy for my successor to follow.

The Author

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