

The practicalities and pedagogies of adult learning co-operatives: the case study of Leicester Vaughan College

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1. Introduction: the higher education context

That British universities are suffering a general crisis and that specialist adult education provision within them faces a mortal threat ought to be a common-place. This crisis has been one of governance, finance, and regulation, which was amplified in the aftermath of the 2007 financial crisis and subsequent long depression. As a result, the sector has witnessed a rise in financialization and marketization mechanisms, designed: to impose new public management grounded in efficiency; to embed risk-based approaches to curriculum delivery underpinned by discourses of impact and excellence; to deliver competition between individual academic, individual students (and their families), subjects and institutions; and to generate new forms of corporate governance, which re-engineer the higher education (HE) sector for economic value and productivity (McGettigan, 2013).

Here, this re-purposing of HE tends to work against co-operation and collective forms of intellectual practices that can generate understanding. Instead, the focus upon student fees and away from maintenance grants, alongside a concomitant growth in the cost of living for individual students, has pushed a more atomised, positional agenda for learning. This has been exacerbated by an emergent regulatory framework that has focused upon human capital instantiated through employability, entrepreneurship, longitudinal education outcomes and learning gain (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS), 2015; McGettigan, 2015). Thus, the new Office for Students (OfS, 2018) has a regulatory role with a focus upon educational relationships governed by risk-based approaches rather than trust, and inside which choice can be enabled through access to data about earnings and outcomes, and subject or institutional performance (Britton *et al.*, 2016). As a result, competition is a function of apparent transparency over the workings and practices (revealed through its added-value, price and costs) of universities.

One outcome is that education is increasingly being viewed as an investment vehicle, both for individuals, institutions and for private finance capital. The life-blood of HE has become increasingly commodified, and aggregated in terms of system performance. As a result, academic work in curriculum design, delivery, assessment and feedback, are affected by a need to quantify and valorise the performance of students and staff inside and outside the classroom. This underpins the data-driven governance of pedagogic practice, focused upon information about student employability or future earnings data, performance information about courses of study, forms of accreditation, or learning content (Hoareau McGrath *et al.*, 2015). It is intended that the production and circulation of data about current and predicted performance then enable a competitive HE market to emerge, although

differentiation between competing providers and the reinforcement of established hierarchies and dominant positions, is increasingly problematic.

Thus, HE policy and its implementation inside institutions points towards the importance of improving the quality of marketable data. As a result, performance measurement and management reframes classroom relationships. What happens inside the classroom becomes a primary, societal concern that is dominated by exchange rather than social use. This has ramifications for a range of learners made more marginal in a commodified system, including mature and adult learners, with a range of symptoms expressed across English HE (Jones, Moseley & Thomas, 2010). These include: an increase in departmental closures where courses are deemed unproductive; a reduction in funding for part-time students; the failure to meet the needs of care-givers and carers who are also learners; a huge increase in students needing to work whilst studying; the inability of institutions to support the needs of Black Asian and Minority Ethnic students (Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2017).

It is inside this context that a range of alternative educational expressions have emerged, many of them rooted in co-operative practices and principles. Indeed there has been a flowering of work looking at co-operative governance, regulation and financing for institutions, co-operative knowledge production and pedagogic practices, and ways of reengineering intellectual practices co-operatively, in order to span institutions and wider society (Neary & Winn, 2017a). This paper considers both the practical challenges and the pedagogic principles of the adult education co-operative through a case study of Leicester Vaughan College, focusing on governance and organization involving mature students with broader life experiences, and with different forms of engagement, with those potentially well-placed to take greater control of their learning, as well as the running of co-operatives. A number of pedagogies employed in co-operatives and well-suited to adult learners are also explored, in relation to capacity-building for the post-capitalist economy.

2. Leicester Vaughan College

In 1862 Vaughan Working-Men's College was established to provide evening classes for those seeking education – either to gain skills or to learn for its own sake. In 2016, The University of Leicester decided to 'disestablish' the Vaughan Centre for Lifelong Learning, on grounds it did not suit the University's vision for how it would meet its widening participation agenda (Marsh, 2017). Whilst latterly it answered the widening participation and lifelong learning agendas, fundamentally it served the moral purpose of the university by providing education to those missing out the first or second time around, as well as the broad benefits of adult education.

Vaughan College has existed in a number of institutional guises as an independent college and as part of what became the University of Leicester (Brown, 2012). Over the course of over 150 years, the college had lived in several homes including purpose-built adult education colleges (*ibid.*), and more ad-hoc accommodation within the main campus. Clearly, it is possible to speak of the Vaughan tradition as quite separate of any particular institution, as the wine is older than the bottle in which it is placed. However, the announcement of closure was the nadir for this local tradition.

Yet co-operative HE offers salvation to this tradition, and in 2017 Leicester Vaughan College was founded as a Community Benefit Society. This is a relatively new kind of co-operative legal personality, which is created to provide community benefit by pursuing a set of objects agreed and approved by the Financial Conduct Authority. (FCA, 2016). Members must agree to these objects, which are presented on the college's website (LVC, 2018). These protect the character and aims of the institution. Refocusing the college in this way was timely for two reasons. First, the intellectual case and proofs of concept for the growing co-operative HE movement have been made, not just in experiments in free co-operative HE in the Social Science Centres in Lincoln (Neary and Winn, 2017b) and latterly Manchester, but also in fee-paying large-scale co-operative universities such as Mondragón in Spain (Wright, 2011). Second, a by-product of government policies to transform HE into a private good (Busch, 2017), is that barriers to entry for profit-seeking 'alternative providers' are lowered, leaving opportunity for co-operatives to seek degree awarding powers and access government funds through student loans.

In terms of governance, Leicester Vaughan College is non-hierarchical, with a flat pay structure; ultimate power lies with its members. Central to its *raison d'être* are:

- to be fully accountable to its members;
- to charge lower fees;
- to be civic-facing by design through representation on the board; and
- to offer open-access courses.

This new college will meet the needs of adult learners by offering part-time classes taught in the evening, so that study may be combined with full-time employment or caring responsibilities. At the same time small groups provide time and space for adult learners to ask questions, explore topics of interest, in an environment designed to be as unthreatening as possible. Every barrier between tutors and the classes they lead is broken down; the nomenclature scholar is the most flexible to describe active members of the co-operative, but is also an authentic and accurate descriptor of all involved.

The courses offered by the new college are designed to meet local needs and demand, currently through unaccredited programmes, but the college is actively pursuing arrangements to offer degrees allowing access to student fees. The charges for a range of introductory courses and CPD programmes are modest. The curriculum is clustered around three areas of study: counselling and psychology; liberal arts; and social science. A new research seminar at which all members of the college are welcome includes scholarly papers and training in a shared space. One critical focal point for this work is to ensure that the college and its curricula are research-engaged, and that they enable scholarly communities of practice to engage in co-operative knowledge production that supports co-operative principles in practice.

3. Challenges and principles

Co-operative HEIs should not only have a different legal personality to established universities, but they should function in alternative ways. At structural levels, students should be engaged in a meaningful and sincere way, to have input into the design and management of their learning. At Leicester Vaughan College, students

are represented on the board of directors; as the institution grows it is anticipated that this proportion will increase.

Co-operation sits in binary opposition to competition. The neoliberal world of marketized governance, engineered competition, failure to win funding or to publish not because of quality but because of limited resources, has permeated the walls of the academy, in the context of neoliberalism. The appropriation of the Darwinian notion of competition, of survival of the fittest, by capitalist logic has missed the fundamental point identified by Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin that competition belongs to nature not humanity (Kropotkin, 1919). The long history of co-operation is a worthy subject for inclusion on any course and has informed pedagogic innovation. For instance, the path of co-operative learning in early years and primary school was well established in the 1970s.

Yet the design, delivery, assessment and content of much undergraduate teaching and learning is directed towards the reinforcement of positivist narratives of competition, entrepreneurship and economic growth. As a result, knowledge-production is governed less by cooperative strategies for problem-solving, and more by the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Thus, the intellectual and theoretical promise of co-operative practice has not always translated to inform pedagogic design. To support meaningful adult education, co-operative HE must pursue pedagogies and practices that ensure it remains authentic to itself. In other words co-operative HE must be co-operative.

It might seem a truism that participation in a co-operative requires co-operation. It mobilizes a broad range of skills, and requires members to develop different competences than they do working as increasingly proletarianized labourers in existing universities. Co-operation demands much from its members, positing itself within both Humboldtian and collegiate ideals, by establishing self-governing communities of scholars, contributing to research (Collini, 2017, 17-18). Thus, co-operative HE must emerge in constant dialogue with the fifth principle of co-operation, which focuses upon the production of reflexive organizations able to 'provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives' (ICA, n.d.).

One of the key challenges for education co-operatives lies beyond pedagogy in the realm of governance and regulation, as in many cases, no members will have written a business plan, have much experience of financial governance, or have taken senior leadership roles. However much co-operators might desire to flatten emergent structures, the point holds that we are learning to co-operate together. The challenge of full student and staff participation in governance requires the correct support – for which new HE co-operatives may draw on the experience of the co-operative movement, but this in itself presents opportunities which as a pedagogic principle, should be embraced. This is the analogue of 'transferrable skills' in equipping learners not just for the narrow demands of the job market, but for building a post-capitalist society. Ironically, the individuals will be well-equipped for current society too.

4. Practical pedagogical challenges and principles

The extent to which the curriculum can be realized co-operatively, in order to transform education as a participatory, communal good, is in-part dependent on how academics and students define and instantiate the curriculum. The general perspective that has prevailed to date, and upon which the quantified curriculum may be seen to be predicated, is that the curriculum comprises the range of learning opportunities that are offered to learners by their educational institution, within the context of a planned course or programme of study that is formally assessed and criterion-based.

However, the curriculum is a contested concept that can be defined and enacted in order to place different emphases on what it is, where it is located, who it is for, and, crucially, its social purposes. Thus, beyond its commodified nature, academic-activists and public intellectuals have fought for the curriculum as an open-ended process of practical engagement with the world. Inside the university, such practical engagement tends to focus upon placements, projects and ideas of research-led teaching. On occasion, for instance through the student as producer project at the University of Lincoln, and also led at The Social Science Centre in Lincoln, this catalyses a more radical view of pedagogy and the curriculum (Neary & Winn, 2017b).

The Social Science Centre (*ibid.*) forms a laboratory for co-operative production, consumption and distribution of higher learning, which is rooted in democratic organising principles (governance) for *both* the Centre and its activities, *and* its content (for instance, childcare arrangements, curricula, events). The Centre's pedagogical underpinnings are in critical theory and critical pedagogy as defined by the Student-as-Producer project (Neary, 2011). This reconceptualizes and reorganizes the curriculum around research-engaged teaching, with students and academics co-operatively producing intellectual and creative works that have a resonance and relevance across scholarly communities. It should be noted that the Social Science Centre attempts to dissolve the binary between student and staff so that the power relationships that exist in educational settings can be explored. There is a redefinition of the educational setting through a form of workers' enquiry, in which participants with different levels of expertise and knowledge can contribute as scholars. This means that spaces like the Social Science Centre operate through co-operative governance practices, including consensus decision-making and peer production, and this underpins both management of the Centre and the design and delivery of its curricula. Projects cannot be said to be teacher- or student-led.

The production, consumption and distribution of the curriculum circulates inside and through the organization of the Social Science Centre and informs its governance. In re-imagining the idea of the university inside a new form of sociability, spaces of potential and possibility become central to rethinking and reliving the possibilities for transitional alternatives. It is important to see these alternative forms as transitional and pedagogic, and not to be fetishized as academic philanthropy. This connects to Freire's (1970: 126) focus upon praxis as 'reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed'. Curriculum as praxis is manifested through: a focus on collective understandings; an emphasis on human emancipation; and, interventions designed humanely for self-actualization and collective good (bell hooks, 1994).

However, conceptualising and enacting the curriculum as praxis brings with it inherent tensions and contradictions, particularly concerning the nature and value of

academic knowledge, alongside issues of power and control (Amsler, 2015). Academic knowledge as a product of the curriculum is implicit within the commodification of education, and the positioning of the individual as commodity. Yet academic knowledge, in disciplinary, vocational and social contexts, is critical for the curriculum as praxis, in relation to the learner's becoming and in her challenging of inequity and injustice. This includes challenging colonial narratives (Emejulu, 2017), and supporting the decolonization of institutions, curricula and knowledge-production across society (Dismantling the Master's House (DTMH), n.d.).

5. Conclusion

Co-operative HE is not only about building new intuitions, but also about building new ways of learning and reassembling existing practices, so that a richer set of pedagogies can emerge. Underpinning this is the view that in the very act of providing adult education rather than lifelong learning, and in pushing against professionalization (e.g. Bowl, 2017), co-operatives are able to make a sharp departure from the official discourses around what HE *should* be. In this sense, co-operative HE recasts the hope of critical pedagogy for emancipation from neoliberalism, whilst being rooted in concrete forms of praxis to achieve it.

Leicester Vaughan College as a concrete form of praxis is emergent, and both its governance and pedagogic challenges and principles are in dialogue with projects like The Social Science Centre and DTMH. It seeks to reimagine and reconstruct the nature and purpose of the curriculum at an institutional level, by opening-up the curriculum through collective, educational work. This is much less possible inside the university, where curriculum development and reform is processed through risk-based approaches to change management, which amplify normative views of the curriculum, for example in the name of enterprise or employability.

However, Leicester Vaughan College has to respond to a curriculum context shaped by *learning gain* and *teaching excellence*, and governance through the OfS. In this context, is it possible to develop actually-existing alternatives that question the nature of the curriculum as it is framed by learning outcomes or future earnings data, to reveal what is lost in this process of measuring? Is it possible to refuse the quantified curriculum, in order to transform education as a participatory, communal good, and one that forces a reconsideration of the voices of those who are excluded?

Thus, in responding to commodification of lives, increased debt and precarious work, there is a need for us to re-imagine new, co-operative forms of HE, and to accept that those co-operatives prefigure a different world whilst having to exist inside a capitalist totality. Here, and engagement with the voices of delegitimised academics and students, a focus upon co-operative principles inside and outside the classroom, and the development of skills and knowledge for co-operative working offer a recognition of diverse interests, circumstances, social-cultural contexts, and expectations. This is a pedagogical project at the level of society, which points towards a new world whilst enabling survival pending revolution. In the face of a global set of socio-economic and socio-environmental emergencies, it is increasingly clear that HE needs to be re-imagined as a collective rather than a positional good, rooted in new, collective institutions founded on principles of co-operation.

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