

Principle 5

Co-operative 'Education Training and Information' (International Co-operative Alliance Statement of Co-operative Identity)

George Jacob Holyoake, writer of the History of Co-operation, advocate of the Rochdale Pioneers, speaker and publicist for co-operative principles and Secularist, covered in his Volume One, Part One of the History of Co-operation the period 1812 – 1844. This illustrates that there was a lot to be said about co-operative activity before the famous Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society was established in 1844. There was a powerful drive in the nascent movement to making co-operatives work in practice but during this period hundreds of co-operatives were started, but virtually all of them failed.

It is often said, quite correctly, that the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society was not the first co-operative. But I am confident in stating that the Co-operative Movement as we know it began in Rochdale in 1844 with the Pioneers.

The question to ask is why did the early co-operatives fail and what made the difference from 1844? I think that the answer can be found in the principles, practices and culture which the Pioneers established. First of all they developed business acumen by taking care not to make the mistakes of earlier attempts at co-operation. For instance, they refused to give credit, thus avoiding putting their customers in debt and risking bad debts. They made sure that the products which they sold were of good quality and that the members had good reason to be loyal to the Society because of the benefits which membership gave. But their success in making co-operation a successful movement must be owed to what we now know as principles 5 and 6, co-operative education and co-operative solidarity.

The Pioneers were always ready to give help and advice to others who were interested in setting up co-operatives. They did not see their business as unconnected to co-operatives everywhere as a capitalist business would. The strength of co-operatives was the mutual support and solidarity which transformed disparate business enterprises into a Movement. It's not surprising therefore that the sheaf became the symbol of the Co-operative Wholesale society when it was established in 1863 – one stalk cannot stand but a whole bunch pulled together stands resilient. The Rochdale Pioneers proved that there was an alternative to competition and that was co-operation.

Customers of capitalist business need not have awareness and education, all they need is money to buy the products. The Co-operative Movement however could never have succeeded if the members had been unaware, uneducated and ill informed.

“The importance of informing the customers, members and general public about Co-operation cannot be overestimated. The success which had already been achieved was due in large part to the importance which the Movement had put on co-operative education since the pioneering days of the Rochdale Co-operative.”

from Principle 5 (YCRC) Directors Report to the first general meeting 8th September 2015

“The Founding Congress of the Co-operative Union established the importance of co-operative educational establishments, self supporting by Industrial Co-operative enterprise.” **from A Centenary story of the Co-operative Union 1869 – 1969 Desmond Flanagan**

“The Second Congress urged societies to apportion a percentage of their profits for education and the law had been amended so they would be in a position to do so.”
from A Centenary story of the Co-operative Union 1869 – 1969 Desmond Flanagan

“The foundations had already been established by the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society, at that time, the seventh principle was education. “The famous rule appears in the 1854 statutes, that a separate and distinct fund be set up for the 'intellectual improvement of the members' and their families. It was to be funded by a 2.5% levy on surpluses, and to have its own committee of 11 members, appointed at the annual meeting. The rule was actually a way of making systematic what the pioneers had always done: as Owenites, they believed that only through basic education could people's characters be changed, and as followers of Dr. King that only through acquiring commercial skills could they trade successfully.

In 1846 they were already holding regular Saturday afternoon discussions at the store, and in 1848 they were able to set up a newsroom and book department, buying up the library of a failed peoples institute. By 1850 they were running their own school and adult education classes, and by 1860 had established the principle that each branch should have its own newsroom and library above the store.

So keen were they on education that they had originally proposed a levy of 10% on surpluses, but because education had (through an oversight) not been included in the 1842 Act, the Register of Friendly Societies would not let them register it. The contest with the registrar lasted several months, but eventually the 2.5% seems to have been accepted as a compromise; it is a compromise that many co-operatives since then have found difficult to live up to, but which is always cited as the measure of how committed they are to education. It caused disappointment at the time: Holyoake comments bitterly that the law seemed to prohibit workers from educating themselves, but the government refused them the vote on the grounds that they were not educated”.

From Co-op: the people's business. Johnston Birchall

“When the local savings bank collapsed, there was an influx of narrow minded Methodists who wanted to close the meeting room on Sundays and to forbid religious controversy. Now Sundays had always been precious to the pioneers as the one day they could use for self improvement, and toleration had never meant a ban on free speech and vigorous discussion. They hit back with a resolution at a general meeting:

'That every member shall have full liberty to speak his sentiments on all subjects when brought before the meetings at a proper time, and in a proper manner; and all subjects shall be legitimate when properly proposed' “.

From Co-op: the people's business. Johnston Birchall

Co-operative Libraries and Reading Rooms

It became common from the days of the Rochdale Pioneers for co-operative stores to have a library and reading room in an upstairs room for members. In this way they could borrow books and develop their understanding at a time when there were few educational opportunities. These rooms were also used for meetings, discussions, lectures, and lantern slides (which eventually gave way to film screenings) and social events. The co-op was often the centre of the community.

Co-operative Education has always been a very important element in what makes co-operative business truly co-operative. The Co-operative Union from its inception took on an educational role, and in 1919 the Co-operative College was established. The Co-

operative Press have published many journals including the Co-operative News since 1871. And every co-operative society has had its elected education council to organise co-operative and cultural activities for members. In recent decades most of this activity has been lost, partly because of mergers between societies making fewer but much larger co-operative businesses. As a result local co-operative educational organisation has been lost and the lending libraries and reading rooms have long since gone.

The last few decades, it seems, have eradicated any sense that alternatives are possible. Some of the big Co-operative Societies have marginalised co-operative education and in some cases abandoned the co-operative movement. Thatcher's declaration that "there is no alternative" seems to have taken hold and was even affirmed by New Labour. Interest in the co-operative vision has been on the decline. It is for this reason that I founded Principle 5 Yorkshire Co-operative Resource Centre in 2013 as a resource for self-help and community co-operative education.

It's time to start all over again, this may not be easy, but it is surely worth the effort. The good thing is that in the co-operative movement we are never alone.

Background and Reflections on Principle 5 in its Fifth Year

I joined the Co-operative Party eighteen years ago because my enduring belief has been that without ownership and control, people have no power. Sadly the nationalised industries, services and utilities have been privatised and they are operated for the benefit of a small elite who are addicted to vast personal wealth. We no longer have truly public services. I have seen also the demise of civic pride and municipal socialism. Citizens used to own and control their services through their elected councils and ratepayers paid for direct labour without having to pay the profits of private contractors.

In September 2000 when I went to my first Co-op Party Meeting, I was enthused by another form of common ownership, that developed by the Co-operative Movement since 1844. But by then co-operative culture and awareness was in decline. Gone were the days when a vigorous co-operative movement spent money and resources on member education. It was difficult to find answers to my many questions. If the co-operative alternative is to mean anything, it is essential to know all about it. A good starting point was the International Statement of Identity (Co-operative Values and Principles). Principle 5 is Co-operative Education, but where was it to be found?

An elderly co-op society director used to bring copies of Co-operative News, then a weekly newspaper for the Co-operative Movement, to the meetings and they formed the basis for learning more. In due course, I collected pamphlets and books about co-operation as well as saving Co-operative News. It became clear to me that there had been a time when there was a strong co-operative culture in Britain (and all over the world).

Up until the 1960's the Co-operative Movement, principally the Co-operative Union, the C.W.S. and retail societies, particularly the big ones like the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society in London, spent a great deal of money fulfilling the co-operative principle of education. The aspiration in the early days of co-operation was to spend 10% of the surplus on education. In the 1930's and 40's the co-operative movement even went into film making. Given that in those days there was a large membership because the benefits of co-operative ownership were a reality which included social and cultural life, profit sharing and other financial benefits, it is not surprising that there was a co-operative

commonwealth in the making. Despite much talk in the last decade about a co-operative renaissance, the big co-op retail giants have offered little in the way of co-operative education and culture. But there is a great development in the making which is receiving support from the Co-operative Party and the Labour Party and being put into practice by local authorities like Preston – Community Wealth Building .

In Sheffield, in response to the dearth of co-operative education and awareness, I set up Principle 5 Yorkshire Co-operative Resource Centre which was incorporated as a co-operative and a company limited by guarantee in 2014. We can all play a part in reversing the decline in co-operative education by joining and using the facilities of our co-operative. We need new members to ensure financial sustainability into the future.

Principle 5 Yorkshire Co-operative Resource Centre

Principle 5 co-operative resource centre provides a facility for members to develop ideas about co-operation. How co-operatives evolved from individual organisations into a Movement with the potential to transform society for the better, and how co-operatives are changing the world.

The lending library is full of books which tell stories of the successes and failures of co-operatives, practical information for people involved in co-ops and research materials for social historians. The Centre is a friendly and accessible place where anyone can learn more about the Co-operative Movement. We are based at Aizlewood's Mill, Sheffield, a co-operatively owned building and home of the Sheffield Co-operative Development Group.

The Centre is open for anyone to use and appointments can be made by contacting;- Steve Thompson: steve@sheffield.coop

This service is funded by members subscriptions. In order to continue, we need more members. Please consider joining us.

Time-line

- Steve Thompson proposed to establish a co-operative resource centre.
- Co-operatives Yorkshire &Humber agreed to support a co-op resource centre project **2013**
- SCDG agreed to make an office available **2013**
- CY&H agreed to pay SCDG co-op friendly rent/licence of approx £25.00 P.W.
- Office opened in **August 2013**. Cath Beatty of Aizlewood's Mill supplied a desk and filing cabinet. Steve Thompson looked after the office and developed the library and reference material.
- East of England Co-operative Society gave a large collection of books, pamphlets and documents to the resource centre. These were delivered on the **4th October 2013**
- Bookshelves, computer, scanner and printer were freely donated to the resource centre
- Other books and resources freely donated
- The initial meeting of supporters elected a steering committee which was given the task of setting up a co-operative organisation to manage the Yorkshire Co-operative Resource Centre. It was agreed to give the name 'Principle 5' to the organisation. **22nd January 2014**
Aizlewood's Mill Board Room
- The first meeting of the steering group took place on

Monday 27th January 2014

- The Launch took place on **Wednesday 19th February 2014** at the conference room of Aizlewood's Mill with a buffet lunch and talk and book signing by Rachael Vorberg-Rugh, co-author of 'Building Co-operation – the story of the Co-operative Group/CWS 1863 to 2013
There were 35 attendees.
- After opening a bank account with Unity Trust, Principle 5 became a private company limited by guarantee on the **14th May 2014** and constituted as a multi-stakeholder co-operative under Co-operatives UK model rules.
- The first AGM was held on **Tuesday 8th September 2015** at the The Harlequin, upstairs room (next door to Aizlewood's Mill). At this meeting the first Board was elected; Mary Wilkinson, Jonathan Cook, Dennis Chambers, Steve Thompson, Steve Wagstaff and Phil Watson.
- At the Second AGM on the **22nd November 2016** at Union Street the meeting those elected to the Board were; Steve Wagstaff, Jonathan Cook, Steve Thompson and Dennis Chambers.
- Principle 5 created a special edition of the Sheffield Co-operator on behalf of Sheffield Co-operative Party to celebrate the centenary of the Co-operative Party. It was published in **October 2017** with a print run of 1,000.
- The Third AGM was held on **Thursday 2nd November 2017** at Union Street. Steve Thompson and Steve Wagstaff stood down because of health reasons. Those elected were;
Jonathan Cook, Dennis Chambers, Chris Olewicz and Lisa Banes.
Steve Thompson and Steve Wagstaff continue as volunteer workers looking after the resource centre and developing co-operative mapping software respectively.
At this meeting the Purposes and aims of Principle 5 Yorkshire Co-operative Resource Centre were formally agreed.
- An archive development intern was appointed from Sheffield University, Alex Lusuardi, who catalogued the Principle 5 collection in **May 2018**
- Edition 172 of the Sheffield Co-operator was published by Principle 5 in **September 2018**

Purposes and Aims:

- Protect and safeguard the books, publications and archival materials placed in trust for the use of the co-operative movement and for future generations.
- Make these available to all members who would wish to use them.
- Provide a focus for co-operative education and culture through talks, discussions, film screenings, social events, visits to other co-operative venues, study groups etc.
- Work co-operatively with other organisations and individuals who have compatible aims.
- Be proactive in helping to cultivate co-operative community.

- Be as true as possible to the definition, values and principles of the International Co-operative Alliance. (Statement of Co-operative Identity).
- Seek support from the wider co-operative movement.

And, of course, Principle 5 is a supporter of Fairtrade.

Principle 5 of the
International Statement of Co-operative Identity

“Education, Training and Information ”

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Steve Thompson
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