# CONSUMER COOPERATION AS AN EMPOWERMENT TECHNOLOGY: How Might it be Improved?

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ABSTRACT: Consumer cooperatives represent a time-honored technology of empowerment that behaviorists interested in social action might benefit from studying. Cooperatives are user-owned businesses that subscribe to a set of principles (e.g., one member-one vote) that promote democratic member involvement. One of the cooperative principles is "continuous education," which researchers have identified as essential to the success of cooperative groups (e.g., Schildgen, 1987; Sekerak & Danforth, 1980). Education, however, is often neglected by co-ops, thus undermining the democratic, empowering nature of such organizations. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that behavior analysis might be helpful in designing an active program of member education for cooperative groups. Specifically, the Personalized System of Instruction is recommended as a set of educational procedures that would be compatible with the needs and goals of most cooperative groups.

Behavior analysts who design technology for promoting citizen involvement and community empowerment might benefit from learning about the cooperative movement. Consumer cooperation is a time-honored technology for promoting self-help and empowerment that has played an important role in communities throughout the United States for over 100 years (see Sekerak & Danforth, 1980).

One purpose of the cooperative movement is to give consumers greater control over their lives through shared ownership of a business. Cooperatives differ from ordinary businesses in that they are run by the members on a one member-one vote basis regardless of member investment in the business. For example, in a housing cooperative, the residents are, in a very real sense, the landlords. That is why student housing cooperatives, unlike private apartments or dormitories, usually offer leases and other services that are accommodating to student needs (see Altus, 1990). Similarly, in a food cooperative, the shoppers are the owners. In other words, the people who *use* the business are the ones who control the way the business is run. This cooperative philosophy is expressed by Sekerak and Danforth (1980, p. 20):

> Let the *wearer* of the shoes produced in a shoe factory own the factory -- not the
> capitalist or the corporation or the worker. Let the *consumer* who buys from the store
> own the store. Let the user be the owner. And let all this ownership come from
> voluntary, peaceful, ethical action by consumers, not by investor manipulation or state
> confiscation.

Most organizations that call themselves "cooperatives" have, as a common bond, a set of six operating principles called Rochdale Principles: open membership;democratic control (one member, one vote); limited return on equity capital; net surplus belongs to user-owners; continuous education; and cooperation among cooperatives (Sekerak & Danforth, 1980). Of these principles, one researcher suggests that "continuous education" is the most important, but the least likely to be practiced (Schildgen, 1987). The purpose of this paper is to suggest a way that education programs for cooperatives might be designed to insure that their democratic, empowering nature is enhanced.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Rochdale Principles were developed by a group of English workers who, in 1844, started a consumer-owned and consumer-run business in response to the low pay and poor working conditions of the factories in which they worked. The cooperative venture started by this group, the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, "became the model in many countries, on every continent, for people of every color and religion" (Sekerak & Danforth, 1980, p. 14). As Schildgen (1987) has stressed, the principles set forth by the Rochdale Pioneers are not moral injunctions, but operating guidelines forged from experience. Indeed, Sekerak & Danforth (1980) suggest that cooperatives that deviate from these principles "do so at their peril" (p. 22).

"Continuous education" to the Rochdale Pioneers, most of them illiterate, meant training in basic skills such as reading and writing (Cowling, 1938). Today, however, this principle refers to educating members in the history and practices of cooperation. According to Gamson and Levin (1984) and Muza (1978), the rationale for such education is that it helps to create a culture of rights and responsibilities that promotes supportive member behavior.

For decades co-op scholars have stressed the importance of education to the survival and health of cooperative groups (e.g., Bonner, 1970; Cowling, 1938; Elliott, 1925; Gamson & Levin, 1984; MacPherson, 1984; Parker, 1961; Sekerak & Danforth, 1980). For example, Thomas and Logan (1982) suggested that "intensive and continuing education of cooperative members is one of the most important phenomena" (p. 43). Wilson (1949) stated that unless members are educated about how a cooperative operates, "the concept of democratic control is meaningless" (p. 98). Similarly, Cowling (1938, p. 45) stressed that an informed membership is "essential to the proper functioning of democratic group effort."

Despite the importance placed on education by researchers, there are data to suggest that cooperatives have not fulfilled the principle of "continuous education" -- either in the past or currently. For example, in 1949, Wilson surveyed 75 cooperative groups across Kansas and found that only half had education programs, with most of those consisting only of newsletters. Only 3 of the 75 cooperatives surveyed had active educational programs of movies and lectures.

In 1988, the first author conducted an informal survey of housing cooperatives in the United States and Canada that revealed that 42 out of the 55 respondents had education programs. The adequacy of these programs, however, was questionable. For example, 23 respondents said their education programs involved new-member orientation sessions lasting no longer than one day. Further, 30 of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their education programs, and 20 said that less than half of their members participated in educational activities. Although most of the respondents said their cooperatives made written educational materials available to members, *none* required members to read the materials, nor did any provide study-guides to help with mastery of the material. Respondents did, however, indicate that education was important. On a scale from one (not important) to seven (very important), the mean rating by respondents was 5.9.

Although these results represent a small sample of cooperatives, they are in agreement with researchers (e.g., Parker, 1961; Schildgen, 1987) who claim that education is widely neglected. The survey suggests that cooperative education programs are not being designed to insure participation. Further, for those who do participate, steps are not taken to insure material is mastered. An education program in which rates of participation and mastery are low cannot be a very effective program.

One might argue that co-op education programs flounder because co-ops don't know what they should be teaching their members. We doubt this is true. Ideas for co-op education are not hard to generate (e.g., co-op history, principles, by-laws, mission statements, equity systems, work-sharing systems, specific co-op rules and policies, corporate structure and financial organization, to name a few). Indeed, the first author's informal survey suggests that co-ops generally make written materials on these topics available to their members. The problem with co-op education programs seems to lie not in *what* material to present, but *how* to present it so that levels of participation and mastery are high.

## DESIGNING AN EDUCATION PROGRAM WITH BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS

Problems with participation and mastery might be solved if behavior analysis was used to determine the format, implementation, and evaluation of cooperative education programs. As Keller and Sherman (1982) have stated, "without a theory of behavior there are no general principles to guide the decisions of an educational institution" (p. 4). Indeed, behavior analysis has been successful in developing

effective education programs not only in schools but in settings ranging from a low-income community center (Mathews & Fawcett, 1977) to an experimental community (Muza, 1978).

## FORMAT

A teaching method likely to be compatible with the needs of cooperative groups is the Personalized System of Instruction (PSI), an educational technology based on behavior analysis (see Keller, 1968). There are several reasons why a cooperative might want to adopt this method.

First, PSI is effective. According to Kulik, Jaska, and Kulik (1978), more than 500 papers have been written on PSI, with research indicating that test performance of students taught by PSI is significantly better than that of students taught by lectures (e.g., Born, Gledhill, & Davis, 1972; McMichael & Corey, 1969; Sheppard & MacDermot, 1970). Second, PSI is individualized. Participants work at their own pace instead of an instructor's pace, which, according to Hursh (1976), is an important advantage for groups with members of different educational backgrounds. Third, PSI is mastery based. Participants cannot advance to a new lesson until they have mastered the previous lesson, which, as Semb (1974) has demonstrated, improves performance. Fourth, PSI involves active participation. Questions are dispersed throughout the written material, a procedure that facilitates mastery (e.g., Miller, 1975; Santogrossi & Colussy, 1976). Fifth, PSI is flexible. Participants can work on PSI lessons at home, thereby avoiding the scheduling conflicts often created by lectures. Sixth, PSI is personalized. Participants meet one-on-one with more advanced students (proctors) for discussion and assessment of their mastery of the material -- an arrangement that is liked by the participants (e.g., Kulik, Kulik, & Carmichael, 1974) and provides benefits for both the student *and* the proctor (e.g., Kalfus, 1984). Seventh, PSI is preferred by participants. Research suggests that students enrolled in PSI classes like them much better than traditional lecture-style classes (e.g., McMichael & Corey, 1969). Finally, personalized instruction has a successful track record with at least two cooperative groups (e.g., Altus, 1984; Los Horcones, 1989).

## IMPLEMENTATION

For an education program to survive in a cooperative, it should be inexpensive and easy to implement, since, according to Gamson and Levin (1984), resources are typically in short supply in cooperative organizations. As Semb (1976) has pointed out, however, developing the written materials is likely to be expensive. One way to reduce this cost is to use educational materials that are already available at little to no cost from the North American Students of Cooperation (NASCO), a resource group for cooperative organizations (see NASCO, 1989). Study-guides would need

to be written to accompany these materials, but cooperatives in university towns might be able to find student-members who could develop materials inexpensively, and, in some cases, perhaps for course credit. Additionally, cooperatives could take advantage of an internship program run by NASCO that supplies interns to help with cooperative projects. In any event, the initial development of the program is a one-time expense likely to be cheaper than paying the salary of an instructor on an on-going basis.

Another way to reduce expenses is to rely on local staff rather than outside professionals to administer the program. According to Fawcett, Fletcher, and Mathews (1980), using local staff is effective, inexpensive, and preferred by the participants. With that in mind, the following scenario outlines one way a cooperative might implement an education program using PSI. It is important to note that this scenario does assume a literate, disability-free membership. Adjustments (e.g., putting lessons on audio or video tape) would certainly need to be made when this assumption cannot be met.

First, the written materials would be broken into short lessons followed by study-guides, since Semb (1974) has shown that performance improves with shorter lessons. Members would be responsible for checking-out lessons, one at a time, and returning completed study-guides according to an easy-to-meet schedule (e.g., a minimum of one lesson per week or month). Longer-term members, designated as proctors, would grade the study-guides, give performance feedback, and track members' progress. Proctors would require students to meet a high mastery criterion, since Semb (1974) has demonstrated that performance matches the level at which the mastery criterion is set. A proctor training component (e.g., Weaver & Miller, 1975) would be added to insure that proctors were well trained. Additionally, an experienced member -- designated as "education coordinator" -- would supervise the program.

Praise, merit certificates, and public charting of progress are techniques that proctors could use to promote participation in the education program, given that researchers have shown them to be effective, simple, and inexpensive (e.g., Stokes, Mathews, & Fawcett, 1976). However, co-op groups may be particularly wary of conditions that might promote competition among members (e.g., public charting of progress) or that might seem contrived or insincere (e.g., canned praise statements). With this in mind, a proctor's praise might gain value and acceptance if it were paired with rationales for why progress through the education program was important. For example, proctors might be instructed to congratulate members upon mastering lessons by reminding them that they are doing a service to the group by educating themselves about co-op operations.

Another method for promoting participation is the "labor-credit," something that Feallock and Miller (1976) showed to be powerful in increasing equitable work-sharing in a cooperative setting. In a labor-credit system, members work to earn credits that can be traded for discounts on merchandise (as in a food

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cooperative), or reductions in rent (as in a housing cooperative). A cooperative might allow members to earn labor-credits, exchangeable for benefits, by mastering education lessons. Further, to avoid having to hire instructors, a similar arrangement could be set up for the proctors and the education coordinator. The type of incentive system that would work for a given cooperative is, however, an empirical question.

## EVALUATION

One of the critical dimensions of behavior analysis is its analytic approach to solving problems (Baer, Wolf, & Risley, 1968). Cooperatives might want to adopt this approach to insure that a PSI program met their goals. As a first step, cooperatives would need to specify target behaviors, and develop a means for measuring them. For example, a cooperative might decide that participation in the education program and mastery of the educational materials were the two behaviors they wanted to increase. Participation might be defined as the number of study-guides completed, and performance as the accuracy of study-guide answers. Additionally, cooperatives might want to define and measure longer-term outcomes that are targeted by their education programs, such as increasing patronage, voter turn-out, volunteerism, member recruitment, running for office, committee participation, and reducing the rate of turnover in membership.

After specifying the target behaviors, the next step might involve conducting a formal evaluation of the program. For example, a reversal design (Baer, Wolf, & Risley, 1968) might be used to measure the target behaviors under three conditions: baseline (e.g., regular operating conditions); treatment (e.g., the new education program); and return to baseline. Additionally, a cooperative might want to conduct an analysis of mastery-test errors, as suggested by Hughes (1962), to determine areas where the written materials should be improved.

Another hallmark of behavior analysis is its emphasis on social validity (e.g., Wolf, 1978). Innovations are judged not only by their effect on target behaviors, but also by the extent to which participants are satisfied with the innovation. To evaluate the social validity of a program in the manner suggested by Wolf (1978), cooperatives might distribute questionnaires to members asking them to rate their satisfaction with three aspects: the goals of the education program, the procedures used to run the program, and the results achieved by the program.

After the initial evaluation of the program was completed, an on-going evaluation component might be added to keep the co-op appraised of the health of the education program. As researchers have suggested, such quality control checks may be essential to program survival (e.g., Blase, Fixsen, & Phillips, 1984; Johnson, Welsh, Miller, & Altus, 1991; Ramp, 1984). These checks could be accomplished by having the education coordinator periodically collect data on levels of participation, mastery, and satisfaction. The board of directors of the co-op might review these

data at their meetings to keep abreast of the effectiveness of the education program and to insure the early identification of problems.

## CONCLUSIONS

Fawcett, Mathews, and Fletcher (1980) have stressed that appropriate behavioral community technology should be effective, inexpensive, simple, flexible, decentralized, sustainable, and compatible. The education program described in this paper meets these dimensions. As indicated earlier, research has shown that PSI is effective at producing mastery, adaptable to a wide range of settings and students, liked by the participants, and sustainable by local staff. Also, it can be set up so that it is inexpensive and easy to implement (e.g., Altus, 1984; Stokes, et al., 1978). Finally, the idea behind PSI, which suggests that anyone can master the material given the proper conditions, is perfectly compatible with the egalitarian philosophy of cooperative organizations.

As Danforth (1980) has noted, the survival of a business can be guaranteed by following good business practices, but survival as a *cooperative* business can only be insured by the combination of good business practices *and* member education. To echo Wilson (1949), the idea of democratic control is meaningless unless members are educated about the operation of the cooperative. Despite these admonitions, active education programs are rare and their absence may contribute to the failure rate of cooperatives (see Danforth, 1980). Perhaps with improved education programs, cooperatives will represent one of the best technologies of empowerment available to the behavior analyst interested in social action.

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