

# The Social Science Centre, Lincoln: the theory and practice of a radical idea

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**Abstract:** The Social Science Centre, Lincoln (SSC), is a co-operative organising free higher education in the city of Lincoln, England. It was formed in 2011 by a group of academics and students in response to the massive rise in student fees, from £3000 to £9000, along with other government policies that saw the increasing neo-liberalisation of English universities. In this essay we chart the history of the SSC and what it has been like to be a member of this co-operative; but we also want to express another aspect of the centre which we have not written about: the existence of the SSC as an intellectual idea and how the idea has spread and been developed through written publications by members of the centre and by research on the centre by other non-members: students, academics and journalists. At the end of the essay we will show the most up to date manifestation of the idea, the plans to create a co-operative university with degree awarding powers where those involved, students and academics, can make a living as part of an independent enterprise ran and owned by its members for their benefit and the benefit of their community and society.

**Keywords:** Cooperative higher education; cooperative university; adult education; community education; democratic education.

## Introduction

The SSC was formed in 2011 in order to provide higher education in Lincoln, a small city in the East of England, for people who were unwilling or unable to take on the burden of massive debt over three years, to pay for a university degree (SSC Collective, 2013). The Social Science Centre was inspired by the Social Centre model of community organisation that had been developed in Italy in

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the 1970s and had been taken up by some organisations in the UK, e.g., SUMAC and The Cowley Club in Brighton (Chatterton et al, 2010). The Social Science Centre is distinguished by its focus on organising higher education. We became a co-operative because it seemed to be the most appropriate form of organisation for our purposes. There are many similarities between co-operatives and the academic values which underpin the collegiate model of higher education: democratic, consensual decision making processes and with a membership structure of governance (Cook, 2013). We felt it was important to develop the SSC within a recognised legal and bureaucratic framework with radical pretensions to express our commitment to create a new form of social institution based on a model of the co-production of knowledge (Roggero, 2011). Doing so, gave the SSC a life of its own beyond the involvement of any individual member, including its founders.

Members of the SSC had already been involved in developing a radical pedagogic model in the University of Lincoln, that had very close affinities to the idea of *conricerca*, or the co-production of knowledge (Roggero, 2011). This model, Student as Producer, is a form of research-engaged teaching that had been adopted by the University of Lincoln, where some members of the SSC work (Neary and Winn, 2009; Neary and Saunders, 2016). Research-engaged teaching means that the curriculum is organised around research and problem solving activities, rather than a model where lecturers transmit knowledge to students. Student as Producer became the organising principle for all subjects and degree programmes across the University with high levels of support from staff and students (Neary et al, 2015)

At the core of this approach was the recognition that students were already making an important contribution to academic life as a form of academic labour that was going unrecognised and uncompensated (Winn, 2015a). There was a strong democratic aspect to Student and Producer with the idea that organising teaching in a collaborative and co-operative manner could underpin the creation of a democratic university in opposition to the neoliberal model of university education that was dominating higher education in England. This model of teaching is derived from the idea of the university developed by idealist philosophers at the University of Berlin in 1811, which established a curriculum to promote liberal humanist political project against the dogmatic scholasticism of the medieval university. Student as Producer set out to radicalise this approach, not an idealist philosophy but a pedagogy grounded in materialised history of radical social movements, class struggle and insurgent learning (Neary 2016).

The title Student as Producer, was derived from Walter Benjamin's 'The Author as Producer', a paper he wrote to present at the Committee of Anti-Fascists in 1934 in Paris. In this paper Benjamin asked the question 'How do radical intellectuals act in a moment of crisis?' His response to his own question was to revolutionise the social relations of capitalist production to create a communist society. Student as Producer focuses on the social relations of the production of knowledge and the ways in which that process of knowledge production can be made more democratic and collaborative. This title of our curriculum model showed very clearly that the project was inspired by Marx's critical social theory, which in the political context in which we were working felt like a triumph of sorts. We deliberately set out the aims of the project as a political manifesto, which was expressed in the poster design for the project (Figure 1):

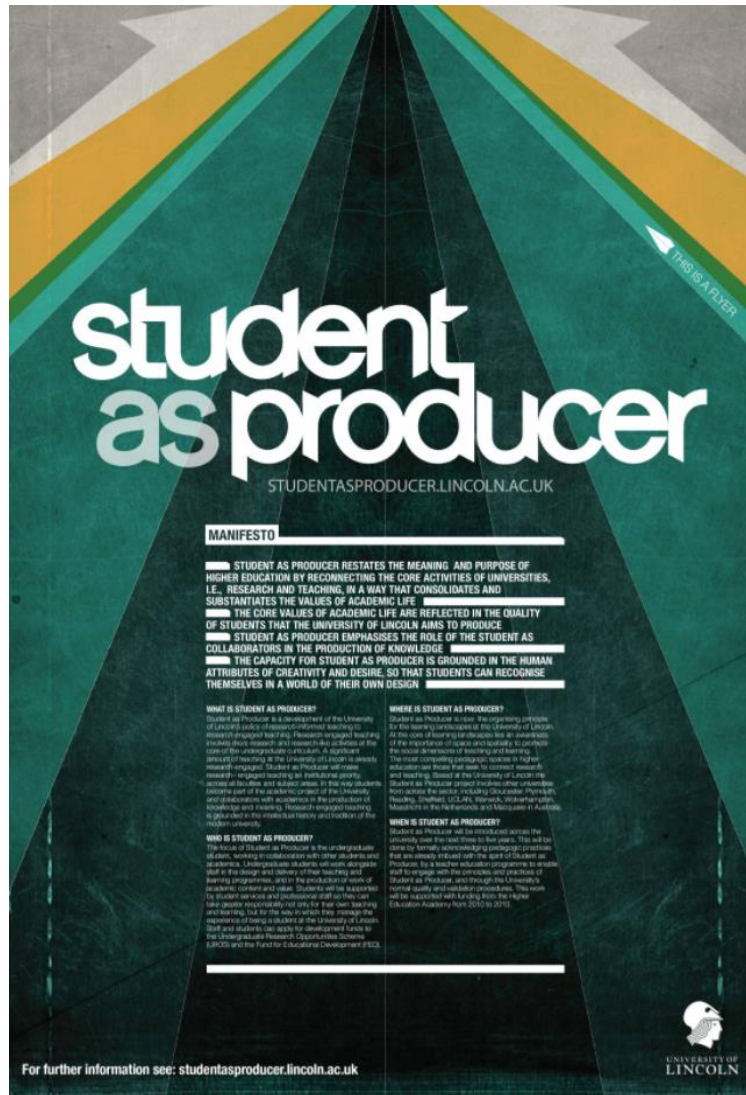


Figure 1. Student as producer manifesto (<http://studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk/files/2010/09/Student-as-Producer.jpg>)

Student as Producer moved the University of Lincoln towards a model for teaching and learning where students were regarded as having a significant contribution to make to the academic project of producing knowledge and meaning, but the impact on the democratisation of the institution was limited. Given this limitation and in a context where the neo-liberalisation of higher education policy was being intensified, a group of academics and students set up the SSC outside of the University of Lincoln, while remaining employed at the University. We had not given up the struggle inside higher education to oppose government policy, but we felt the need to create an alternative model outside of the current provision. Our strategy was to work in and against the model of higher education where we are working; not avoiding the contradictions in which we are operating and by working subversively in full view.

Since 2011, the SSC has ran a series of educational courses on the Social Science Imagination, the history of Co-operative education, as well as documentary photography and poetry projects. The courses are developed and taught in a collaborative and co-operative way between students and teachers. Each course is led by a teacher and a student. To express the democratic sensibility that underpins the SSC we do not use the terms 'students' and 'teachers' but all members are referred to as 'scholars'. Courses are taught for two hours on a week-night once a week for ten weeks. The pedagogic approach is grounded in the traditions of critical pedagogy and popular education, making for a dialogical rather than didactic style of teaching. This way of teaching does not require a particular set of skills but rather a commitment and solidarity to the students and to each other as part of an ongoing project for intellectual emancipation. The Centre also runs a programme of public lectures as well as conferences. Recent public lectures include War and the Media, The Problems of Economic Growth and Distress in a City: Racism, Fundamentalism and a Psychosocial Imagination There are monthly planning meetings on a Saturday morning to manage the affairs of the co-operative, as well as an Annual General Meeting every year.

The SSC does not have degree awarding powers, but provides the opportunity for scholars to work at a level that is equivalent to a university degree, including postgraduate, and to be able to have an intellectual life collectively with other members. Some scholars have joined the SSC to study at a level that is equivalent to degree work, but no students have completed a degree level programme. Some students stop attending sessions before completing a programme, while others get caught up in managing and running the Centre as an educational experiment, which becomes more important than gaining academic recognition for their studies. The desire for equivalent qualifications has never been a major part of the SSC, although members feel offering the possibility of an equivalent degree is an important facility, providing a real alternative to mainstream provision.

There is no fee to take part in the teaching sessions and none of the members are paid for the work that they do at the Centre. Members pay a subscription based on what they can afford in money or by some other payment in kind. The SSC does not have large running costs, operating with a turnover of approximately £2000 per annum. It benefits from the public library system, the increasing availability of Open Access scholarly work, and the 'general intellect' of an Internet-enabled Commons. (Neary and Winn, 2009, 134-137; Hall and Winn, 2017) There are currently 20 members, which was the number we had originally envisaged, as well as 50 associate members not involved in the day to day running of the centre and its activities who act as our critical friends and supporters, all around the world.

The SSC has no institutional connection to any higher education provision, but is linked to other alternative providers, including the Free University of Brighton, SSC Manchester, the Ragged University and People's Political Economy. The SSC feels a strong connection and resonance with the history of the adult and community education and its members recognise that we have much to learn from these traditions. However, what distinguishes the SSC from earlier forms of alternative education is that it has always been formally constituted as a co-operative and its founding members saw a direct connection between the pedagogical principles of Student as Producer and the values and principles of the international co-operative movement (ICA, nd.). It was also envisaged when we set up the SSC that other higher education co-operatives could be established using the SSC

model. That has happened, with the SSC Manchester formed in 2016 on a very similar co-operative arrangement, running programmes on Brexit and Donald Trump.

Other forms of co-operative higher education also exist elsewhere in the world; some pre-date the SSC, while others have been influenced by it. For example, in 1997, the University of Mondragon in the Basque region of Spain was formed out of three existing co-operative faculties in Engineering, Business and the Humanities. In Greece, there is the Co-operative Institute for Transnational Studies (est. 2016) and The People's University of Social Solidarity Economy (est. 2013). In Mexico, academics and students established Unicoop (est. 2013), and most recently, in 2017, academics and students from Vaughan College, an adult education college in the UK with a 150 year history, re-established it as a co-operative. Although each of these co-operatives has its own distinctive character, like the SSC, they have all been created with a strong sense of critical purpose in response to social crises, and a belief that the production of knowledge should be under the democratic control of both academics and students.

The membership of the SSC Lincoln reflects the demographic of the city, with a mixture of gender and ages, although most are mature students. A major consequence of the rise in fees in England has been the collapse of the involvement of older students in adult and higher education. The participation of this group of people at this level of education had once been a progressive feature of the education system in England. (Rose 2010).

The SSC sees itself as a local provision based in the city of Lincoln. The SSC does not have its own building but makes use of the local public facilities: libraries, cafes, community centres, pubs, museums, art galleries and parks. We like to say we occupy the city (Neary and Amsler, 2012). The SSC has a website but there is no web-based teaching (<http://socialsciencecentre.org.uk>).

An important aspect of this provision is to critically reflect on our activities. We are concerned about the nature of what we are providing: is the SSC a genuine alternative or is it a place to discuss what an alternative might look like? To what extent is the SSC replicating the hierarchies of academic power relations in another form outside of the university? How can we make meaningful connection to real issues that affect people living in the city?

In order to make more of a connection we have just started a new term where the focus is on Lincoln and the Built Environment. This will include guided tours of areas of social housing in Lincoln, as well as a class on Building Prosociality. An introductory class for the course generated new energy and ideas for issues to be explored, including sessions on anthropology, violence and war; sustainable environmental planning; safe spaces in dystopian sites, and colonial, settler and indigenous knowledges.

Maintaining the SSC in the current social and political context is problematic; much of the organisational work is mundane and can be very time consuming. This can be compensated for when sessions go well, and there is much to be gained from the friendships and sense of solidarity that has been built up over the years as well as the sense of renewal when new members join.

## SSC - the idea

Members of the SSC have written extensively about the work that we have been doing in a series of publications. There is now a considerable body of work on Student as Producer, as it was developed as an original idea to the organising principle for teaching and learning across the University of Lincoln (Neary et al, 2015) and its transition from a project inside the University to a local city wide co-operative for higher education. Members of the Centre have written collective pieces about the SSC (SSC Collective, 2013; Wonkhe, 2017). There are a number of essays that critically reflect on the SSC as reformist or revolutionary project (Saunders, 2017; Neary, 2014) and the function of community organisation as a type of radical practice (Amsler 2017) as well as papers on academic labour and co-operative leadership (Winn and Hall, 2017; Hall and Smyth 2016; Winn 2015a 2015b).

The SSC has been written about by observers in the Higher Education press (Bonett 2011, Bonnett 2013), and in *The Guardian* (Swain, 2013, Swain 2017), as well as PhD research projects (Earle 2015) and as the subject for an undergraduate dissertation (Macrae, 2016). Academic papers have explored the extent to which the SSC is a radical alternative for higher education (Cole and Maisuria, 2017; Pusey and Sealey-Huggins, 2013) and the SSC and Student as Producer have been the topics for interviews in publications about radical forms of academic practice (Withers 2013; Class War, 2013). References to the SSC appear in interesting publications, for example in *The Debt Resistor's Operations Manual* (Graeber, Ross and Caffentzis 2014).

The SSC has created a base from which to develop further research into the development of co-operative higher education. This has included work to develop a conceptual framework for higher education: *Beyond Public and Private: a framework for co-operative higher education* (Neary and Winn, 2017a; 2017b). This research established a set of key principles on which to base this framework: *knowledge* - the production of knowledge and meaning by the organisation as a whole; *democracy* - the levels of influence on decision making; *bureaucracy* - not only administration but a set of ethical and moral principles on which administration is based; *livelihood* - working practices that support the capacity to lead a good life and *solidarity* - sharing a commitment to a common purpose inside and outside of the institution.

This research is grounded in value-form analysis, a version of Marxist critical theory that informs the work of some of the members. The basis of this theoretical approach is that struggle is derived out of the of contradictory processes that maintain capitalist productivity, while at the same time creating the conditions which can overcome capitalist social relations for the benefit of people and the planet, vitalising new forms of social institutions (Holloway 2005). Working with a design student we developed a poster to visualise this approach, which we describe, (after Dyer-Witford 2015) as 'the value vortex'.



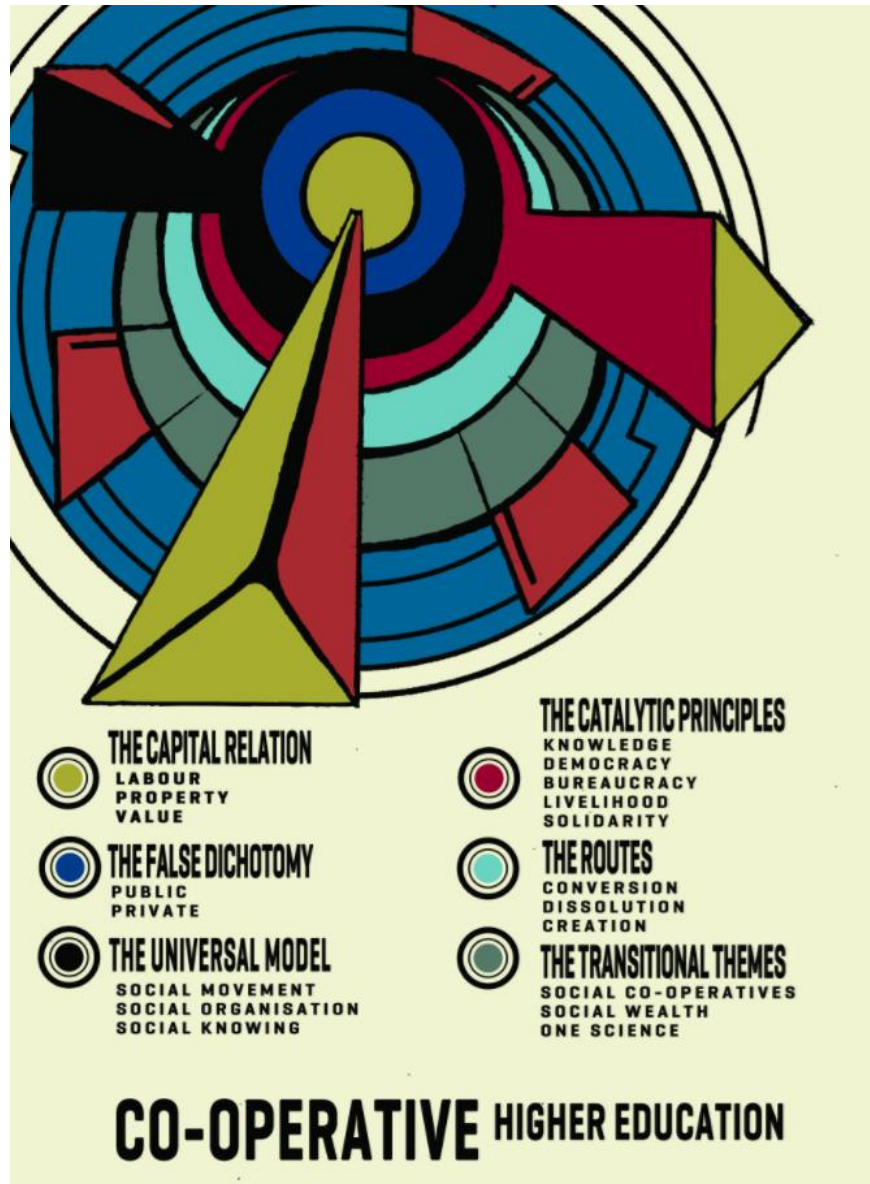


Figure 2. The value vortex (<https://i0.wp.com/josswinn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Coop-HE-Framework-Poster-FINAL.jpeg>)

The most recent research (Neary, Venezuela Fuentes and Winn, 2017) has involved visiting already existing co-operative organisations: a co-op school, there are about 500 in the UK; a worker co-operative wholesale food retailer with 70 members; a major high street retailer owned by its employees; and an already well established co-operative university, the University of Mondragon in the Basque country in Spain. One of the main lessons from this research was to affirm our strategy of working within and against institutional and social contradictions. This was put very clearly by the former assistant head principal of the co-operative school that we visited:

*It is actually at this point of heightened tension and conflict that the objective can be co-constructed and substantial transformation take place. This is important as it informs us that we should accept the conflict and tension rather than seeing it as a dysfunctional measure of the democratic work we are undertaking' (Jones, 2015, 82).*

In the recent period members of the SSC been part of a working group made up of academics, activists and students, led the Co-operative College, the major promoter of co-operative education in the UK and internationally, to create a co-operative university with degree awarding powers in England. This new co-operative university would not have any formal connection with the Social Science Centre, Lincoln. For over a century, the Co-operative College has had the ambition to establish a co-operative university. In 1909, W. R. Rae, Chair of the Co-operative Union educational committee, addressed the Union and stated that “What we want and seek to obtain is a co-operative journey that will end in a co-operative university”. Writing at a time when there were only 15 universities in the UK, Rae saw the development of a co-operative university as another example of Co-operators providing for themselves where the State did not: “So long as the State does not provide it, we must do, as we have in the past, the best we can to provide it ourselves.” (Woodin, 2017, 34) Later, in 1944, the Co-operative College wrote about how it “could become the nucleus of a Co-operative University of Great Britain, with a number of affiliated sectional and regional Colleges or Co-operative institutes, as the demand arises.” Both of these ambitions are now close to being realised, in part made possible by recent changes in higher education legislation to promote the involvement of alternative higher education providers. The intention of the government is to use this legislation to challenge the existing model of higher education in England through the enforcement of neoliberal principles. The new co-operative university seeks to disrupt this vision for higher education with a new university based on democratic and co-operative principles. Recently, there has been a change in the political mood in the UK, led as a political project by the Labour Party away from the politics of austerity, which includes a no fees model of higher education, and with ideas for public provision based on ‘people power’, including co-operatives (Labour Party 2016). The plans for a co-operative university feel like we are very much a part of this political change, although this political transformation is by no means assured.

The project for a co-operative university has become an urgent necessity to support academics who have been made redundant after their teaching programmes were shut down. Two co-operatives enterprises have been recently established by academics previously employed at Ruskin College, Oxford, to run courses for local Trade Unions and Leicester Vaughan College which will provide local adult education courses. The current thinking is that the new co-operative university would act as a secondary co-operative, supporting a network of independent and autonomous co-operatives providing a range of different subject courses. The model for this federated network of co-operative providers of HE is the Mondragon University governance structure, although the new cooperative university in the UK would initially be on a much smaller scale.

## **Conclusion**

Student as Producer and the SSC emerged out of the crisis of higher education in England. Together they form part of a radical historical movement to provide an alternative form of higher and adult



education. Student as Producer and the SSC, as actually existing projects grounded in radical intellectual ideas, has enabled us to protest the assault on higher education inside and outside the university. Student as Producer and the SSC provide an alternative pedagogical model for higher education and a governance structure and ethical and moral framework (*bureaucracy*) derived from the radical democratic principles and practices on which that pedagogy is based. The co-operative form of *knowledge* production between academics and students and the co-operative university are not the future as it was envisaged by Walter Benjamin, but they are forms of *democratic* higher education on the way to the future, based on friendship and *solidarity*, as a moment of transition beyond capitalism towards a new *livelihood* or good life.

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