

Introduction to the Course on Cooperatives, by John R. Whitman

Learning objectives

1. To learn about the first two principles of cooperatives through experience.
2. To be able to name the seven cooperative principles promulgated by the International Cooperative Alliance.
3. To learn about Appreciative Inquiry and the importance of focusing on the positive dimensions of group work by asking another person to reflect on a positive experience of working in a group.
4. To learn the objectives and elements of the course using a participatory approach to reviewing and agreeing upon the syllabus.

The introductory session of this course is designed to provide students with an overview of the course and how it will be managed. After welcoming students and thanking them for their interest in the course, we immediately begin with an exercise that demonstrates the first two principles of cooperation: voluntary and open membership, and democratic member control.

Ask for two volunteers, and place one to your right and the other to your left. Tell the one on the left that he or she is the CEO of Apex Company and needs to hire (pick) four other students as employees. Tell the one on your right that he or she is starting up the Combo Cooperative and must ask the students for any willing members who want to join the cooperative as equal members, stopping when four other students have joined. Now you have a team of five students on each side. Tell the CEO to unilaterally think up an activity on his or her own to engage the employees, and then instruct the CEO to tell the employees to undertake that activity. Tell the Cooperative group to decide amongst

themselves what activity they want to engage in and then execute it. Give the teams about five minutes to get their acts together and another three or so minutes to demonstrate their activities, and then stop the exercise and ask the students to return to their seats. Now ask the teams the following questions:

1. How did you feel about what you just did?
2. Was everyone happy to be on his or her team?
3. Was everyone consulted about what to do and how to do it?
4. Did everyone feel that their situation gave them the best opportunity to contribute their best ideas?

Inform the class that this exercise just demonstrated the first two ICA principles of cooperatives: Voluntary and Open Membership, and Democratic Member Control.

Write these on the board.

Now ask the class for any other characteristics of cooperatives and write them on the board next to, but not under the first two ICA principles.

Next write the other five ICA principles on the board and explain them: Member Economic Participation; Autonomy and Independence; Education, Training and Information; Co-operation among Co-operatives; and Concern for Community. Also, explain that cooperatives incorporate the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity, and that members try to live the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility, and caring for others (from the ICA web site, www.ica.coop/coop/principles.html). Of course, encourage discussing, specifically asking students if they have experienced these principles and values by working in a cooperative or other type of organization.

At some point, stop this process and begin describing the course itself. Begin with the big questions that the course is designed to address:

1. How and why do people form different types of organizations to meet their needs, and why is the cooperative organization one of them?
2. What commitment to values makes cooperatives special as a place to work?
3. How can we find out about working at cooperatives?
4. What are the steps in starting up a cooperative, and what are the key issues than can be expected at the various stages of the cooperative life cycle?

Remind students that while you will be examining a broad range of types of cooperatives, much of the focus of the course will be on worker cooperatives.

Now introduce yourself as the teacher, and offer some background that explains why you are interested in teaching this course. Next explain the process for student introductions. For student introductions, following the teacher's self-introduction, we usually go around the room twice, from one student to the next. First, we ask each student to say her or his name and academic program. After hearing everyone's name and academic program we then go around the room in the same order asking each student to say his or her name again, and a few words about their previous work experience and their interest in cooperatives. The reason for going around the room twice in this order is to help students take note of each other for possible seating arrangements and forthcoming group work.

The next task is to engage the students in an activity that makes them aware of the value of *Appreciative Inquiry*. Ask students to form a pair with the person next to them, and take turns interviewing each other with the following request: "Share experiences

with one another in which you felt you were fully engaged, that your ideas and opinions mattered, and that the group did wondrous things” (from Harry Webne-Behrman, Collaborative Initiative, Inc., 20 May 2010). Allow five minutes each for students to interview the other, giving a signal to switch after the first five minutes. At the end of the interviews, call on several of the students to report what they found out from their interviews, and write the key words that describe positive assets on the board (e.g., being in the zone, creativity, empowerment, innovation, ownership, commitment, shared value, integrity). After a few responses, take a moment to explain that appreciative inquiry is designed to reflect on positive experiences and to recognize assets, not deficits, and that this is essential to the psychology of working cooperatively in a group. Ask the students to think about the assets that emerged in their interviews as describing the type of working relationship they might want in their future occupations.

Next the teacher attends to the logistical issues of the course. First, go through the syllabus, part by part, beginning with the course learning objectives (each student should come to class with a copy of the syllabus in hand). There are two major components to the educational material in the course. The first component addresses at a higher level what students should learn about cooperatives in general: what they are; a conceptual framework for thinking about cooperatives; historical considerations; types of cooperatives; the financial, legal, and governance issues facing cooperatives; and the start-up and life cycle phases of cooperatives, with a focus on worker cooperatives. The second component deals more specifically with individual types of cooperatives. Here the teacher has great latitude on the types of cooperatives to address in the course. A final session in the course will address cooperative jobs and opportunities.

When the review of the syllabus has been completed, ask the class if anyone has any suggested changes to propose, or whether the class can agree to the syllabus as a good plan for the course. Some students may question the timing of an assignment, which might conflict with other course obligations. If possible, consider making changes by asking the class to vote on options. This approach engages students in a democratic way of arriving at consensus. Of course the teacher always retains the power to make an executive decision, but the investment in participatory engagement should be appreciated.

By this time, the class period should be coming to a close. Ask if students have any questions about the course. Review the expectations for the next class before ending the session.

Background reading

Readings in Appreciative Inquiry.

Required reading

The course syllabus.

Nadeau and Thompson, Chapter 11.

Optional reading

None.

Exercises

1. Cooperation exercise, described above.
2. Appreciative Inquiry interviews between students, described above.