

2 Towards a Definition for Cooperative Education

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Someone once said that language is the highest form of democracy. The meaning of words evolves. People assign words to things they wish to name. Further, people often assign new meanings to existing words. The same word is often used by different groups to identify different things. Cooperative education is no exception. This chapter starts by defining *cooperative education* followed by reviewing the meaning of the original concept. The components of good practice or distinguishing elements of the concept are further addressed. Additionally a number of evolved understandings or meanings are discussed in brief.

DEFINITIONS OF COOPERATIVE EDUCATION

In examining the literature, one is likely to find a number of attempts to define the term cooperative education. Two of the more recent attempts are listed here to provide some perspective on what follows in this chapter. The *National Commission for Cooperative Education* (n.d.), a private non-profit organisation in the United States of America, was formed in 1962 to promote cooperative education and to raise funds to sustain the practice (Carlson, 1999; Sovilla, 1998). The Commission defines cooperative education as:

...a structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to a student's academic or career goals. It provides progressive experiences in integrating theory and practice. Co-op is a partnership among students, educational institutions and employers, with specified responsibilities for each party.

The *International Dictionary of Adult and Continuing Education* (1999, p. 37) defines *cooperative education* and *cooperative programme* respectively as follows:

A form of education in which the school [educational institution] and the occupational field cooperate in order to provide a joint educational programme with alternate attendance in both school and work. A concept used in US [United States of America] education.

US equivalent of the sandwich course in the United Kingdom, where a student spends blocks of time in an educational institution and blocks in the workplace. Courses of this nature are usually either at professional qualification or undergraduate level.

THE ORIGINAL MEANING OF COOPERATIVE EDUCATION AS CONCEPT

As pointed out by Sovilla and Varty in this *Handbook*, in the USA, Herman Schneider is regarded as the founder of the 'cooperative system'. At the fortieth anniversary of cooperative education, held 16 October 1946, the president of the University of Cincinnati acknowledged that "the idea of combining work with study had earlier exemplifications, as in the medieval guilds with their apprenticeships" (Walters, 1947, p. 9).

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