

Learning alterity in the social economy: the case of the Local Organic Food Co-ops Network in Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

While the origins of the social economy date long before the period of industrialization or the modern state (Shragge & Fontan, 2000), it is growing in importance as we find ourselves in 'the cancer stage of capitalism' (McMurtry, 2013). Facing issues such as exponentially growing inequality, the demise of rural communities, an exploding obesity epidemic and jobless recoveries from repeated financial crises, more and more people are turning to the social economy for solutions to their problems (see McMurtry, 2010; Mook et al., 2010). This paper reports on a pilot study that focused on the Local Organic Food Co-ops Network, created by people who oppose the industrial food system and want to specialize in local, organic food. Adopting a political-economy lens to understand this opposition through the words of participants, the study employed semi-structured interviews to explore the learning dimensions of this social economy organization. The study found that respondents participated in social learning and learned alterity in the social economy. The paper concludes that social economy organizations need to prioritize social over economic values, and the potential for change associated with social learning is key to making this choice.

Keywords: alterity; co-operatives; learning; social economy; social learning

Introduction

Although learning has been associated with a number of distinctively neutral meanings, such as receiving, storing, retrieving and using knowledge, it has also been connected to a change in behaviour or the potential for change (Taylor, 2005). Learning and change have a long, interconnected history, particularly in terms of social movements. The labour movement, women's movements, the gay rights movement and the civil rights

movement have all been fecund sites of learning that have spawned enormous social change, leading to the term ‘social movement learning’ (Hall, 2006).

A number of social movements have also been directly involved in what is known as the social economy – ‘economic activity neither controlled directly by the state nor by the profit logic of the market; activity that prioritizes the social well-being of communities and marginalized individuals over partisan political directives or individual gain’ (McMurtry, 2010, p. 31). For example, the fair trade movement prioritizes the well-being of farmers in developing countries, while operating both in, as well as against, the capitalist market (Raynolds, 2002). Like many other actors in the social economy, these farmers are active learners who contribute to change not only in their own communities, but also in the developed world.

Co-operatives provide another example of a social movement that is directly involved in the social economy – their economic activity prioritizes the social well-being of members and the communities they live in. Like the fair trade movement, the co-operative movement operates both in, as well as against, the neoliberal market and many co-op members are active learners (MacPherson, 2002). One particular group of co-operatives in the province of Ontario, Canada, has distinguished itself as a hotbed of learning and change: the Local Organic Food Co-ops (LOFC) Network.

This research paper will focus on learning in the LOFC Network, based on a pilot study carried out in 2015. It will begin with a description of the LOFC Network, followed by a brief outline of the study, then hone in on the learning dimensions of this social economy organization. It will connect this learning to what Goodman, Dupuis and Goodman (2014, p. 82) refer to as alterity, by which they mean ‘the transition between reflexivity and routine, which describes the passage from individual reflexivity to the collective action needed to resolve contradictions between ethical and political values and the patterns of daily life in conventional food systems’. To illustrate their point, they call on Brunori, Guidi and Rossi’s (2008) analysis of innovations by both producers and consumers in new provisioning networks, who scale up values that underpin individual reflexive consumption (i.e., consumption carried out by critical, self-aware actors who articulate values in their everyday routines) into a form of organized social practice. According to Goodman et al. (2014), these successful alternative experiments act as demonstration sites that can, in turn, stimulate further restructuring of both daily patterns and technologies of distribution and consumption. Such alterity is at the heart of alternative food networks (AFNs), of which the LOFC Network is an inspiring model – using the social economy to forge a working alternative to the industrial food system and learning to bring social values to the forefront of their practice.

The Local Organic Food Co-ops Network

The Local Organic Food Co-ops (LOFC) Network is a coalition of co-operatives that focus on locally and sustainably produced food in the province of Ontario. Beginning with a group of 18 co-ops in 2010, the LOFC Network now includes over 75 active co-ops and continues to grow. It came about as a result of a meeting organized by the Ontario Co-operative Association, a non-profit organization that provides resources and a common voice for Ontario credit unions and cooperatives (On Co-op, n.d.). The purpose of the meeting was to bring together a number of new co-operatives with three established co-ops to encourage information sharing and potential collaboration. After a follow-up meeting a year later, the Local Organic Food Co-ops Network was born,

hosted by the Ontario Natural Food Co-op, and a network animator was hired. Essentially, the LOFC Network links cooperatively structured food and farming enterprises in the province of Ontario: ‘Through the sharing of information and exploration of innovations in food-based social enterprise, the co-ops are co-creating the network as a platform for internal strengthening and province-wide collaboration’ (Renglich, 2012).

The purpose of the LOFC Network reflects its status as part of both the co-operative movement and the social economy: to educate about and advocate for local and organic agriculture and food co-ops; to facilitate and support the growth of existing co-ops; and to connect and scale-up toward regional food processing and distribution hubs (LOFC Network, 2013). A variety of organizational models exists within the Network—farmer-owned, eater-owned, worker-owned, and multi-stakeholder—but all the co-ops within the Network have six common characteristics that aim to contribute to the establishment of a sustainable food system:

1. Bringing local farmers and eaters closer together;
2. Growing and supplying fresh, healthy food locally;
3. Keeping money in the community;
4. Trading fairly, whether domestically or internationally;
5. Saving energy, building the soil, and protecting water; and
6. Celebrating good food, culture, and community (LOFC Network, 2013).

One distinguishing characteristic of the LOFC Network is its combination of three social movements: the co-operative movement, the local food movement and the organic movement. This alliance building has made it an incubator for learning alterity in the social economy, such as alternative business structures, co-operation and new supply chains.

The study

This research paper is based on a pilot study of the LOFC Network that was funded by an Institutional Grant awarded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council and administered through OISE/University of Toronto. It involved conducting semi-structured interviews with seven people involved in six co-ops (Garden City Food Co-operative, Eat Local Sudbury, On the Move Organics, The Mustard Seed Co-op, The Karma Project, and Karma Co-op), plus the animator of the LOFC Network. Five interviews were conducted face to face and three by telephone, using the same set of open-ended questions. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, and the final part of the interview focused on what respondents had learned by being part of a co-operative network. Participants were co-op managers chosen by the animator and represent a mix of old and new co-ops from around the province. While this sampling strategy is not necessarily representative of all the co-ops in the LOFC Network, it does provide a rich picture of the learning dimensions of the Network, while laying the groundwork for a larger study.

Findings

The learning reported by participants in this pilot study falls into a number of recognized learning categories: co-operative learning, instrumental learning, skills building and sharing, and community learning. Although these categories may overlap to some degree, for the purpose of this paper they are discussed separately.

By far the largest category of learning was co-operative learning – not only learning about and through co-operatives, but also simply learning to co-operate instead of compete. MacPherson (2002, p. 10) described co-operative learning as including the following aspects: ‘dispensing information, providing training, encouraging reflection, creating knowledge and facilitating learning,’ all within a co-operative framework. One participant highlighted this kind of learning when she exclaimed that being part of her co-op was probably the best job she’d ever had, ‘in terms of learning how to organize, learning how to sell, learning how to sell memberships. Learning how to be democratic’. She also learned what it means to be part of a network of co-ops and how to run meetings and generate ideas for annual general meetings (AGMs). From the LOFC Network, she learned ‘everything about being a co-op,’ which she felt would be impossible without the Network support. Another participant mentioned the lessons she learned at the AGMs, which she could bring back to her co-op right away and start applying. This same person emphasized the importance of the knowledge of peers in the Network – she could easily get feedback and advice on how to do things differently or better, so she did not have to ‘reinvent the wheel’.

While one participant learned all about worker co-ops, two co-participants learned about the local focus as well as lessons from more established co-operatives. These same participants also spoke about shared learning among LOFC Network members, such as how to produce a newsletter, which gives ‘a big boost’ to those who have neither the time nor the resources to learn this on their own. They also spoke about the ‘really big challenge and learning curve’ of staying financially viable as a co-operative business, so they could achieve their other goals, and about learning policy governance as management board members, which the LOFC Network helped them with. Another participant discussed her learning around communication and conversation with respect to co-op meetings, and in particular learning to ‘appreciate that sometimes communication is quiet’.

One participant explained that, ‘my learning in co-ops is that it’s not just you’. She went on to explain that ‘co-ops ask you always to look at the ripple. Look at if you do that how many generations, how many other downtowns, how many other farmers are going to be affected by that?’ For her, this entails learning from other people’s perspectives, ‘learning to listen’ and ‘learning to share’. In addition, ‘learning how to use the conversations and the communication and all of those “co” things that co-operatives breed and putting it in a personal level, I think it’s growing me as a human being’.

When asked about some of the lessons he had learned from his role in the co-op and the Network, another participant talked about ‘bridging that gap between business necessity and activism – you have to find a balance’. He went on to explain that through his association with the co-op and the Network, there was ‘no doubt in my mind that the co-operative model is the future. It is a decent solution at least for now to capitalism and that is the most sustainable direction to go, whether we’re serving people local food or we’re building them a bicycle – co-ops are definitely the future’.

An inspiring example of co-operative learning was referred to by a number of participants. At the 2013 AGM, one of the longest-running food co-ops in the province

announced that it was on the verge of closing. The other co-ops in the network quickly organized a rescue session and each committed to help the ailing co-op survive; the animator was tasked with ensuring that each co-op carried out its commitment. The result was not only a reversal of the fortunes of this co-op, but also a realization among the members of the LOFC Network that ‘we felt like that was the moment we became a network. Because here was a group that was asking for help and sharing their vulnerabilities and that let us jump in’. One participant summed up the kind of co-operative learning associated with the LOFC Network when she observed that she not only learned at the AGM, but also, ‘when we go and visit other co-ops and learn from them, we thrive and I think they also learn from us’.

A second category of learning found in this study involves instrumental learning. Derived from Habermas’ (1978) concept of instrumental knowledge, instrumental learning is goal-directed and ‘comprises ways to control the environment, predicting physical events, and managing reality’ (Cranton, 2013, p. 98). One participant described how she learned what it means to be a buyer and understand ‘shipments of food and crates and pallets and haystack deals and SKUs [stock keeping units]’. When reflecting on what she had learned, another participant brought up a number of practical learnings:

...from like, where to buy toilet paper, to like how do you do your books, and you know how you deal with HR issues, how you integrate membership into like get membership engaged in the co-op, and how to do governance sessions with the board of directors, and all sorts of management strategies as well as just functional operations, day to day operations, saying like oh like if I switch this around and I do things this way it can be way more efficient.

Another participant who was involved in the renovation of a building to house the new co-operative learned ‘all kinds of things about building codes and how to work with tradespeople and how not to work with tradespeople and how never to trust a plumber’. In terms of instrumental knowledge, this person felt that she ‘learned something every day’ from managing a website to organizing policies and procedures within the co-op.

A third, and associated, category of learning found in this study is skills building and sharing. Rigby and Sanchis (2006) remind us that while discussions of skills tend to focus on such areas as technical/professional dimensions, manipulation and knowledge associated with the techniques of the work process, they are also socially constructed. This means that learning skills involves both technical and social processes, which was clearly evident in the study. For example, one participant discussed the governance of her co-op and the skill building required to enact this governance: ‘...this is a working board and the committees work and I see different people doing new things and getting lots of different skills’. Another participant talked about peer-to-peer workshops and skill sharing within the Network, while also learning how to manage and maintain a website. Another participant brought up the subject of learning overload – with board members having to learn so many new skills that they were becoming exhausted.

A fourth category of adult learning found in this study is community learning. Falk and Harrison (1998, p. 614) describe community learning as a ‘broad name for those individual and group processes which not only produce, but also *sustain* community development outcomes’. In terms of community development, they argue, ‘little progress can be made and then sustained without the oil of the community learning mechanisms being put in place to achieve the smoothly operating machine of socio-cultural, economic and environmental outcomes’ (pp. 611-612). In other words, community learning smooths the path of development.

When asked what she had learned, one participant responded in terms of learning with respect to two types of community: the community of the co-operative and the larger community of St. Catharines. First, as different board members learned new skills, they came together and solved problems: ‘We’re building a little community, and we’re starting, we’re trying to solve problems, and I think people feel empowered. I feel empowered; I’m not just sitting back and complaining’. With respect to the larger community, she learned that people were not apathetic, contrary to her expectations: ‘...ultimately, I learned a lot about the community, and got to know people and got to have a better appreciation of St. Catharines that I didn’t have before’.

Data from the interviews also provides evidence of the co-operatives being centres of learning for people not directly involved in organizing and running them. For example, one participant talked about educating members about the food system and inviting farmers, nutritionists and environmentalists to come in and educate consumers. She also spoke about the importance of such teaching tools as labels and emailed newsletters. Another participant explained that her co-op offered 6 to 10 workshops every year on such diverse subjects as the meaning of organic, how to make bread, and bookkeeping, and hosted conferences for market gardeners, while also launching a co-operative UPC code program for producers. She also mentioned that her co-op organizes farm tours, as well as co-ordinating ‘volunteers to go and work on farms to learn how to farm as well as to assist farmers with whatever they may need help with’.

The learning associated with the LOFC Network is operationalized through different means, including the aforementioned workshops, conferences, AGMs, farm tours and listserv, as well as other means of learning such as webinars, regional cluster meetings and “virtual campfires” – phone conferences where people assemble and chat. Organized and co-ordinated by the animator, they are a chance for co-ordinators or managers of co-ops to get together informally, with no particular topic, and talk about various issues of mutual interest.

Discussion: the learning dimensions of the Local Organic Food Co-ops Network

Overall, the categories of learning in the LOFC Network can be broadly described as social learning, defined by Finger and Verlaan (1995, p. 505) as ‘collective and collaborative learning that links the biophysical to the social, cultural, and political spheres, the local to the global arena, and action to reflection and research’. Social learning begins and ends with action – understood as purposeful activity – which often involves change, including modelling new roles and behaviour (Friedmann, 1987; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Participants in the study were certainly involved in purposeful activity – setting up and/or running co-operatives that specialize in local, organic food, while building a network designed to help them to meet their collective needs. They were also focused on democratic change, particularly in the food system, by countering the prevalence of nutrient-poor, highly processed ‘edible food-like substances’ (Pollan, 2008, p. 1) or ‘pseudo-foods’ (Winson, 2013, 25) with fresh, local, organic food. In doing so, they were modelling new roles as co-op managers and network members, and modelling new behaviours, such as co-operation, democratic participation, fairness and transparency. For example, as members of co-operatives and the LOFC Network, the participants are modelling co-operation. As one participant pointed out, ‘because it’s a co-op network, it’s amazing how much people share information differently than through a normal business network. There’s just not nearly the competition or protecting sort of your intellectual property’. In terms of democracy,

co-operatives are democratic workplaces – one person, one vote – so members are learning and modelling democratic behaviour by participating in decision-making. In the words of one participant, ‘there isn’t a major decision that doesn’t get made by consensus.’ Unlike many other co-operatives, fairness is one of the pillars of the LOFC Network. This is particularly true in the realm of trade: while most fair trade programs only involve farmers in developing countries (who form co-operatives as part of their fair-trade agreement), the LOFC Network espouses fair trade for all farmers, so they can make a living wage. And, finally, transparency is central to the LOFC Network. Many people have become alienated or distanced from their food (Kneen, 1993), and know little about what they are consuming. The LOFC Network aims to educate people by bringing farmers and eaters closer together.

Social learning, like all forms of learning, has negative as well as positive aspects. Spencer and Lange (2014) remind us that not all learning is socially beneficial, citing examples of learning to use cocaine or learning how to con pensioners. The social values of the LOFC Network, and of the social economy in general, help to steer members’ learning in positive directions. No evidence was found in the study of socially unbeneficial learning, but a future study could investigate this further. Another facet of social learning involves the question of power – ‘one of the fundamental realities of human experience’ (Nesbit & Wilson, 2005, 496). In spite of the ubiquity of social learning, some always have more opportunities or skills than others do, which can affect the equality of people who work together. Through its AGMs, listserv and virtual campfires, the LOFC Network encourages its members to share knowledge and resources, thus helping to iron out power differences that could become exacerbated in a more competitive environment.

Church’s (2001) three dimensions of social learning begin to address some of these complex aspects:

1. *Solidarity learning*. Learning that takes place not according to an explicit curriculum but spontaneously and unpredictably through social interactions that foster people’s participation.
2. *Reshaping the definition of self*. Learning in which participants build new identities, rethinking who they are in relation to society.
3. *Organizational learning*. Learning that involves the ways in which community organizations come to understand how to operate and position themselves within an entrepreneurial culture while continuing to carry forward their historical concerns for social and economic justice (Church 2001, p. 3).

In terms of solidarity learning, participants in the study learned spontaneously and unpredictably through the myriad social interactions inherent in being both a co-operative and a member of the LOFC Network. They learned how to co-operate on many levels, they learned practical, everyday things, they learned to develop and share skills, and they learned about community. As for reshaping the definition of self, many learned to become responsible board members, successful business people, valued community members or better human beings. And in terms of organizational learning,

some of the participants learned to find the balance between financial survival and ethical commitment – a task made easier by the support and encouragement offered through the Network.

Wildemeersch and Jansen (1997, p. 2) go so far as to understand social learning as “a particular way of framing reality,” seeing it as not only action- and experience-oriented, but also characterized by critical reflection, interaction and communication, multi-actorship and social responsibility. Participants in the study clearly engaged in critical reflection about the dominant food system, and the co-operative form of the Network encouraged interaction and communication. Multi-actorship was inherent in the Network, as was social responsibility, described by Wildemeersch and Jansen (1997) as encompassing the reinvention of ethical and political considerations. Participants in the study felt able to prioritize their ethical commitments and social values while aligning their politics with their working life.

The social learning dimensions of the LOFC Network bring to mind Senge’s (1990) definition of a learning organization, which possesses adaptive capacity and generativity, and the ability to create alternative futures. Bolstered by participants’ engagement with co-operative learning, instrumental learning, skills building and sharing, and community learning, the Network grew quickly and overcame the inevitable challenges associated with rapid expansion, adapting to the local food environment and establishing a niche for its products and its people. In addition, the nature of the Network is such that it encourages the generation of ideas and practice, crucial to both adaptive capacity and the creation of alternative futures – the aim of the social economy. In the words of Shragge and Fontan (2000, p. 9), ‘A social economy implies the basic reorientation of the whole economy and related social institutions’.

This basic reorientation can be facilitated by the social learning involved in what are referred to as communities of practice, defined by Wenger (2011, p. 1) as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”. Wenger posits three characteristics of communities of practice: the domain, the community and the practice. First, communities of practice have an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Second, members participate in joint activities and discussions, help each other and share information. Third, members of a community of practice are practitioners who develop a shared practice through sharing resources such as experiences, stories, tools and ways of addressing recurring problems. According to Wenger, developing these three characteristics simultaneously cultivates a community of practice. Participants in the study would qualify as a community of practice because they simultaneously share a common domain of interest – local, organic food – form a community through their activities and mutual support, and develop a shared practice through sharing a range of resources.

Social learning and communities of practice are particularly pertinent to the area of food. For example, as mentioned earlier, Brunori et al. (2008) analyse the myriad of innovations by both producers and consumers in alternative food networks (AFNs) as a collective process of social learning to scale up the values that underlie individual reflexive consumption into organized social practice. Goodman et al. (2014) reinforce the point, arguing that patterns of social practice embedded in AFNs co-evolve through social learning, adding that producers and consumers need to gain both new and revived knowledges and skills before these novel patterns can be normalized in everyday routines. The LOFC Network is scaling up the social values that have driven participants to form a local, organic food co-op and join the Network. Through the listserv, AGMs and regional meetings, individual co-ops are praised and encouraged to live their values and make them normal social practice, while setting an example for the

others in the Network. Friedmann's (2017) use of communities of food practice applies particularly to the LOFC Network. Not only does it encompass Wenger's (2011) conceptualization of communities of practice, but also links it directly to food. For Friedmann (2017, p. 28), communities of food practice consist of "networks of individuals and organizations – public, private, and non-profit – engaged in creating a regional, integrated, inclusive agri-food economy".

The social learning exhibited by participants in the study can be viewed through the lens of alterity – transitioning from their individual reflexivity with respect to the industrial food system, which prompted them to create or join a co-operative that specialized in local, organic food, to the collective action of establishing and maintaining the Network. This not only reinforces their reflexive choice to create or join a co-op, but also helps to resolve the contradiction between their values and the normalized economic, social and environmental transgressions of the industrial food system. In practice, this alterity springs from what Goodman et al. (2014) describe as developing new ways of doing things that do not directly oppose the hegemonic capitalist system, but coexist with it and attempt to change it from within. By establishing a closely linked network of local, organic food co-ops across the province, which aim to, as much as possible, source from and sell to each other and a committed public, they are forging a social economy alternative within the industrial food system. Whether the fledgling Network can actually change this system remains to be seen, as the number of members continues to grow.

This social economy alternative is as important to create as it is difficult. People have strong social, cultural and emotional affiliations with food from the industrial food system and those affiliations are not easily severed. And yet, the system is broken (Scharf, Levkoe and Saul, 2010; Baker, Campsie and Rabinowicz, 2010) or on the road to collapse (Fraser and Rimas, 2010), creating hunger and obesity in equal measure while inflicting cruelty to animals and laying waste to the planet. This unsustainable food system is, in essence, an evolutionary dead end that must be replaced by more sustainable systems. Sustainability, however, does not come naturally; it must be learned (Sumner, 2007). This is the goal of learning alterity in the social economy. The social learning exhibited by participants in this study models how the rest of us can not only 'learn our way out' (Röling, 2000) of this unsustainable food system but also learn our way in to more sustainable food systems.

Learning alterity in the social economy is not without problems. As Goodman et al. (2014) point out, the market embeddedness of many AFNS limits their strategic options and manoeuvring room. Indeed, they argue, their implication in capitalist commodity markets can hardly be regarded as oppositional, leaving the values inscribed in their commodities as somehow alternative to the faceless, placeless foods of the industrial food system – values that are open to mainstream capture and assimilation (consider, for example, the contested meaning of 'organic'). This leads them to ask, alterity for whom? Otherwise put, 'the social relations of consumption of market-oriented "alternative" food networks have long been ignored by those asserting their alterity' (p. 84). While these authors maintain that this does not negate the work of AFNs, they contend that social justice is the Achilles heel of these networks because the poor and the disadvantaged continue to be ill served.

Evidence of this Achilles heel can be found in the LOFC Network. The food produced by many of the co-ops in the Network is beyond the access of poor and disadvantaged people. And yet, a number of co-ops are learning alterity by working toward basic food security. For example, the Fort Albany First Nation on James Bay, in conjunction with the non-profit LOFC Network member True North Co-op, has been

working with FoodShare Toronto (a non-profit organization that promotes food security) to bring fresh food to remote northern Canadian communities at an affordable price (LOFC Network, 2012). A formidable role model can be found in the Mandela Foods Co-operative, a non-profit workers' co-op in West Oakland, California, that serves low-income neighbourhoods and sources much of its produce from local, minority farmers (www.mandelafoods.com). Its mission is to “strengthen community health, integrity, and identity by providing economic opportunity and empowerment for inner-city Oakland residents and businesses, and local family farms” (www.reimaginepe.org/cj/dharvey). For both examples, foregrounding their social values and circumventing the profit motive in food takes them out of the capitalist orbit and forges the beginnings of a non-profit food system – the foundation of a sustainable food system (Sumner, 2016).

It is examples like this that hearten Goodman et al. (2014) to look to what they refer to as the ‘politics of practice’ that underlie ‘the accelerating growth and eclectic range of mutual forms of social enterprise organizations and community-owned food projects’ (p. 247). For these authors, the emerging and diverse social economy of food ‘opens up political opportunities to create possible worlds beyond the reach of heavily market-embedded movements’ (p. 248), such as the establishment of sustainable food networks in low-income urban neighbourhoods or food-insecure rural communities, particularly in the far north. In effect, these organizations are ‘*decentring the economic* – as profit making and other related market constraints – and *restoring the social* to the forefront’ (p. 248). In the new social economy of food, they see co-operatives making a difference. Although co-ops may only affect a relatively small number of people in particular places, the authors emphasize the multiplier effects of such organizations ‘in disseminating new ways of knowing, growing and organizing food using *horizontal* networks of knowledge sharing and learning’. Adding that many small acts can have cumulative, and even radical, effects on the social control of food provision, they conclude by reminding us about ‘the social injustice of the many excluded and “missing guests at the table” set by alternative food and fair trade movements’ (p. 249). This is the challenge, but also the promise, of social economy organizations like the LOFC Network.

Conclusion

Like fair trade, the social economy operates both within and against the market, offering an alternative while still being embedded within the capitalist economy. In the words of Goodman et al. (2014, p. 83), organizations in the social economy ‘sit somewhat uneasily between the private sector and the state, between market and non-market relations, and profit-making and non-profit structures, often combining elements of each’. While the economic values of these organizations may be similar to market values, their social values stand in stark contrast to the individual, self-serving values championed by the capitalist economy. These social values must come to the fore and supersede economic values if we are going to survive the well-documented ravages of capitalism. As Quarter (1992, p. xi) has observed, the social economy implies that ‘the social value of an organization stands alongside and indeed precedes its economic import’. In the LOFC Network, members foreground their social values by the choices they make – to form a co-op instead of a private business, to join the Network and to work with local farmers.

McMurtry (2010) reminds us that ‘the social economy is an idea which requires us to confront the economy not as a choice already made for us, but one which we are making all the time’. Learning is central to making this choice. Learning alterity in the midst of capitalist conformity is happening every day, and the growth of the LOFC Network is but one example.

This paper has provided a window into learning alterity in the social economy. Based on a pilot study of the LOFC Network, it has explored the learning dimensions of this social economy organization, highlighting forms of social learning and linking them to alterity. As one participant offered, ‘There isn’t a day that I’m not learning something’. Such avid learning can point the way to a more sustainable world. At its best, the social economy is an open possibility that emerges from learning processes that take place through horizontal networks built by critical and constructive adult learners who dream of alternative futures. These futures will only be realized if social-economy organizations like co-operatives cultivate alliances among different forms of social enterprise, thus leveraging their strengths in new ways while overcoming inherent weaknesses (Sumner and Wever, 2015).

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