Intergenerational learning for sustainability: Bridging divides across generations

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Abstract

This paper considers the possibility of intergenerational learning to bridge divides in the rhetoric of sustainability across generations in sustainability discourse and between top-down policy initiatives and bottom-up education. Sustainability discourse speaks to aspirations of meeting the needs of present and future generations, but there is little precise language on the meaning, methods, or goals of intergenerationality and intergenerational learning. Through close reading and rhetorical analysis of sustainability declarations and policy, this paper illustrates common features of intergenerationality: (1) consideration of present and future generations (2) honoring the participation and contributions of children and youth, and (3) intergenerational dialogue and solidarity. Intergenerational learning bridges divides by bringing together different generations to learn together about each other, including experiences, values, and aspirations for sustainable futures; to learn together about ecological, social, cultural, and economic events relevant to them; and to learn together through shared experiences and training activities designed to develop knowledge and skills for addressing the challenges of sustainability. This paper also presents cases of projects that illustrate the possibilities for intergenerational learning, collaboration, and communication to bridge generational divides through action research methodologies and engagement.
Intergenerational learning for sustainability: Bridging divides across generations

This paper considers the possibility of intergenerational learning to bridge divides in the rhetoric of sustainability across generations in sustainability discourse and between top-down policy initiatives and bottom-up education. The notion of “present and future generations” in sustainable development discourse is widespread, but there is little precise language on the meaning, methods, and goals of intergenerationality or intergenerational learning in practice. The rhetoric of such declarations disproportionally focuses on children and youth as a protected class and often ignores or marginalize elders. For example, the recent Rio+20 outcome document (2013) only mentions elders in two instances, both in relation to vulnerability and disability. Agenda 21 (1993) describes the role of the elderly in sustainable development through language on resource demands, dependency burdens, and health needs. While the sustainable development movement has several broad and specific declarations to take up the project of intergenerational dialogue and collaboration, these discussions often privilege the contributions of rising generations over the “burdens” of aging generations. There is an absence of specific, positive, and inclusive language that considers the role and wisdom of elder generations in this discourse.

Intergenerational learning bridges these divides by bringing together different generations to learn together about each other, including experiences, values, and aspirations for sustainable futures; to learn together about ecological, social, cultural, and economic events relevant to them; and to learn together through shared experiences and training activities designed to develop knowledge and skills for addressing the challenges of sustainability (Hollingshead, Corcoran, and Weakland, 2014, p. 21). Through close reading and rhetorical analysis of United Nations declarations (1992, 2002, 2012, 2013) and international policy, this paper illustrates common features of intergenerationality: (1) consideration of present and future generations (2) honoring the participation and contributions of children and youth, and (3) intergenerational dialogue and solidarity. This paper also examines particular cases of intergenerational projects that bridge the divide across generations and the divide across policy and action through participatory research, service-learning, and community-based scholarship. These projects illustrate the possibilities of intergenerational learning, collaboration, and communication to bridge generational divides in the rhetoric of sustainability and to bridge the divides of top-down sustainability rhetoric and bottom-up sustainability action.

Intergenerational sustainable development policy

Generational and intergenerational concern is a hallmark of sustainability discourse. Providing safety and opportunities for youth and honoring elders are common shared cross-cultural values, and as such, consideration of present and future generations is a common rhetorical device in most major international sustainable development declarations. For example, the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was an early call to “defend and improve the human environment for present and future generations” at the start of the modern environmental education and sustainability education movement (1972). This language is clearly echoed in the report of the Brundtland Commission and its famous definition of sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland 1987). Landmark proclamations like the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992), Agenda 21 (1992), Johannesburg Declaration (2002) and the Rio+20 United
Nations Conference on Sustainable Development statement on “The Future We Want” (2012) all declare an ethical imperative to consider present and future generations.

As compelling and as prevalent as the notion of “present and future generations” is in sustainable development discourse, there is little precise language on the meaning, methods, and goals of intergenerationality. Most often, the concept of intergenerational thinking and the term “intergenerational” are used to support the inclusion of children and youth in sustainable development initiatives. The outcome document of Rio+20 provides a concise example of the ways in which intergenerational thinking manifests itself within sustainable development policy and discourse:

We stress the importance of the active participation of young people in decision-making processes, as the issues we are addressing have a deep impact on present and future generations and as the contribution of children and youth is vital to the achievement of sustainable development. We also recognize the need to promote intergenerational dialogue and solidarity by recognizing their views. (“The Future We Want,” 2012, Article 50)

This statement expresses common features of intergenerational thinking across many declarations: (1) consideration of present and future generations (2) honoring the participation and contributions of children and youth, and (3) intergenerational dialogue and solidarity. “The Future We Want” also encapsulates a common interpretation of intergenerationality that disproportionately focuses on children and youth as a protected class and often ignores or marginalizes elders. For example, the Rio+20 outcome document only mentions elders in two instances, in relation to the elderly as a vulnerable population and in light of disability. Similarly, Agenda 21 describes the role of the elderly in sustainable development through language on resource demands and dependency burdens, health needs, and disability. In only a single instance does Agenda 21 promote intergenerational dialogue with older generations, as compared to numerous exhortations on the importance and role of youth.

Outside of the realm of international sustainable development policy, the Earth Charter (2000) identifies several broad ethical commitments in the context of generational and intergenerational concerns. The Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental values for building a just, peaceful, and sustainable world. In the context of intergenerational concern, its principles speak to the use of resources, fulfillment of needs, and transmission of values within and across present and future generations. Further, it names youth as a protected class and articulates specific commitments to

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1 See Articles 43 and 135

2 See Section 5.22

3 See Agenda 21 section 6.18

4 See Agenda 21 section 6.34

5 See Agenda 21 section 7.4

6 See Earth Charter Principle 4, “Secure Earth’s bounty and beauty for present and future generations”; Principle 4.a, “Recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations” and Principle 4.b, “Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth’s human and ecological communities.”
“honor and support the young people of our communities” (ibid, 12.c), especially through “educational opportunities that empower [children and youth] to contribute actively to sustainable development” (ibid, 14.a). The Earth Charter also contains language on intergenerational equity, environmental justice, and transmission of non-Western, traditional, and indigenous knowledge. As progressive and as inclusive as the broad language of the Earth Charter is, it too does not specifically identify elders and older generations as stakeholders in sustainability.

Moving in the direction of intergenerational justice and intergenerational learning

The sustainable development movement is invested in meeting the needs of present and future generations and has several broad and specific declarations to take up the project of intergenerational dialogue and collaboration. Yet it is clear that the articulation of intergenerational concerns is not balanced in the current state of sustainable declarations; these discussions often privilege the contributions of rising generations over the “burdens” of aging generations. This is not to say these declarations and policy statements have intentionally excluded non-youth generations. However, the absence of specific, positive, and inclusive language that considers the role and wisdom of elder generations is clearly a gap in current thinking on sustainability policy.

Intergenerational relations have been most fully considered in the areas of intergenerational justice and intergenerational equity, where future generations are considered not as the generation of rising youth, but as “potential persons” (Rawls 1971, 2001; Parfit, 1982; Barry, 1977, 1999). On present generations, Rolston writes, “Our notions of justice have been finely honed around the concept of individual rights as these can be defended against the interests of others” (1989, p. 62). But, he continues, “When we move beyond our grandchildren, we falter; for future persons are indeterminate and remote, and one wonders how present persons have duties to such faceless nonentities” (ibid, p.62). Living generations clearly have rights, but what of non-living future generations?

A key tenet of intergenerational justice is the precautionary approach, where “present generations may be obligated by considerations of justice not to pursue policies that create benefits for themselves but impose costs on those who will live in the future” (Meyer, 2010). Another is that future generations have no agency; there is an asymmetrical relationship between the choices made by present generations and the effects felt by future generations: “we act as we do because we can get away with it: future generations do not vote, they have no political or financial power; they cannot challenge our decisions” (Our Common Future, A/42/427, annex, para. 25). Intergenerational justice in general, and within the sustainable development movement in particular, has grappled with the philosophical and moral responsibilities owed to future generations. How are we to act when the environmental and social impact of present choices may not immediately be felt, such as in the case of climate change and economic destabilization?

In a groundbreaking report (2012) on “Intergenerational solidarity and the needs of future,” and in response to input given by several nations and stakeholders to the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon proposed the establishment of a high commissioner for future generations to sit on equal standing as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Such a commissioner would be an advocate for intergenerational solidarity, undertake research and policy development to enhance intergenerational solidarity, and advise United Nations Member States and
affiliated UN entities on matters of intergenerational concern. Primary to this undertaking is recognition of the key role of education for sustainable development. The report states:

> Education is itself critical to intergenerational solidarity, as the means of transmitting accumulated or at least latest scientific and other knowledge to future generations. Concern for future generations rests on an open and critical engagement with moral and ethical choices, carried out by informed stakeholders, at all levels. Possible actions would involve strengthening civic education, education for sustainable development and leadership training to foster attitude changes advancing intergenerational solidarity and justice. In this context, the importance comes to the fore of promoting education for sustainable development. (UN 2012, Article 27)

If environmental education and education for sustainable development are primary in advancing intergenerational solidarity, how might we define intergenerational learning in environmental education and in communicating sustainability? Despite significant commitments to education, children, and youth in environmental education and education for sustainable development, there is little research on intergenerational learning. Indeed, Duvall and Zint (2007) show that researchers in environmental education have explored intergenerational learning strategies in only a small number of cases. This is an important and emerging area of inquiry in environmental communication and environmental education—and one that is not clearly defined. Intergenerational learning could arise in any range of contexts in which young people and elderly people come together in a shared activity and “take place within programs specifically designed to bring together young people and older people in shared meaningful activities” (Newman and Hatton-Yeo, 2008, pp. 32-33). Along these lines, intergenerational learning in education for sustainable development might entail:

- Different generations and different age groups learning together about each other, including experiences, values, and aspirations for sustainable futures;
- Different generations and different age groups learning together about ecological, social, cultural, and economic events relevant to them; and
- Different generations and different age groups learning through shared experiences and training activities designed to develop academic knowledge and skills for addressing the challenges of sustainability.

(Adapted from Brown and Ohsako, 2003, and Newman and Hatton-Yeo, 2008).

**Bridging divides across generations through participatory intergenerational learning**

The cases presented below demonstrate the possibility of intergenerational learning projects and practice in different educational contexts, showing adult and elder generations actively collaborating

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7 These examples come from an ongoing research project on intergenerational learning and transformative leadership for sustainable futures, described below. See *Intergenerational Learning and Transformative Leadership for Sustainable Futures*, Corcoran and Hollingshead, 2014.
with younger generations in reciprocal and mutually beneficial dialogue, education, and action. They are drawn from an ongoing international research project on “intergenerational learning and transformative leadership for sustainable futures,” the first research work of an international network of higher education research centers exploring the role of intergenerational learning and transformative leadership in the context of education for sustainable development and environmental education. The first example is intergenerational learning primarily from elder-to-younger generations through participatory research methodologies in indigenous Australian Aboriginal communities regarding traditional values of country and in a community mapping project in Ethiopia regarding identity and land use. The second is an intergenerational research program at a United States university in which students and faculty members form collaborative mentorships and partnerships in a leadership through service living-learning community.

**International, intergenerational research in higher education**

The concept for an international, intergenerational, informal network of centers in environmental and sustainability education emerged from discussions at the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies at University of Nairobi, and Center for Environmental and Sustainability Education at Florida Gulf Coast University in 2009. This led to establishing an informal network to collaborate and share experiences and expertise amongst university centers in sustainability. Higher education centers and institutes have long promoted the mainstreaming of sustainability in home institutions, in higher education, and in the larger culture of our time. One purpose of the network is to document and report how individual centers operate at the leading edge of sustainability—to showcase how centers practice sustainability in their home institutions and communities. Centers are able to develop programs for students, connect the university to other institutions, work with government, and involve industry. They are a platform for interdisciplinary knowledge creation. They feed ideas into a university that it may not able to produce on its own. Though centers do not replace traditional academic departments, they can move departments and disciplines in new directions.

A primary goal of the network is to engage students and junior colleagues as much as possible. The network’s first research project, *Intergenerational Learning and Transformative Leadership for Sustainable Futures* (Wageningen Academic Publishers 2014), represents the first collaborative research project of the network. One purpose of the book and of the network is to enhance the work already being done at specific centers and strengthen collaboration among like centers. The network exists to support centers in key areas of research, service, teaching, and praxis that could be mutually improved by collaboration with other centers. The network is a conduit for partnerships, rather than as a formalized institution. To research the cultural transformation role of centers in mainstreaming sustainability in higher education institutions. Goals of the network are to institutionalize strong sustainability in home institutions; to empower intergenerational collaboration with students and young scholars in scholarship, service, and teaching; to connect innovation hubs on campuses; and to share a collective voice for sustainability in higher education.

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8 See Corcoran and Hollingshead 2014
Intergenerational learning, indigenous wisdom, and traditional knowledge in Australia\(^9\) and Africa\(^10\)

Participatory research methodologies foster meaningful collaborations within communities and include diverse voices, knowledge, and “ways of knowing” in the generation of research and local change (Maclean and Woodward 2013). Two examples of participatory research are considered here: intergenerational learning through participatory visual methodologies in Aboriginal Australia and participatory community mapping in Ethiopia.

In an Australian intergenerational learning project (Maclean 2014), photovoice (Wang and Burris 1994) and participatory video (Kidd 1994; Kindon 2003) research methodologies were employed to support goals of environmental and sustainability education in “the co-production of knowledge, intergenerational and intragenerational learning, and capacity building for improved management of the biophysical environment” for communities of Aboriginal Australians (Maclean, 2014, p. 167). Through recording and imaging their culture and ways of living, the Kuku Nyungkal people recorded and transmitted their heritage and environmental knowledge to younger generations, particularly around the concept of “healthy country, healthy people.” In this tradition, “caring for country” includes customs of resource management, cultural customs, ecosystem health, personal health, protection of sacred sites and practice of sacred traditions, and recreation. Because Aboriginal Australian communities can live away from ancestray country, photography and video supported intergenerational knowledge sharing and learning from Elders-to-Youngers by alleviating some challenges of access (such as costs associated with travel, distance, and so on). The creation and discussion of photovoice and participatory video artifacts facilitated several opportunities for youngers to transmit aspirations for caring for country and for the future, for elders to share stories and cultural traditions, and for all to described and articulate shared values and cultural knowledge.

In the rural village of Telecho, Ethiopia, the methodology of participatory community mapping was employed to facilitate intergenerational exchanges and learning connected to the sustainability of environment, land use, agricultural practices, and traditional cultural customs (Belay 2014). Like much of rural Ethiopia, Telecho faces several environmental challenges, degradation of lands of agricultural and spiritual significance, ineffective governmental policies, and fragmentation of traditional knowledge concerning land management and husbandry. Participatory mapping methodology combines “participatory research with cognitive mapping, fusing spatial and environmental knowledge with technical understanding of geography” (Herlihy and Knapp, 2003, p. 203). In this context, participatory mapping provided a way for Telecho villagers to revive traditional ecological knowledge and support learning and innovation; create communication channels amongst participants of diverse genders, generations, and occupations; facilitate social cohesion and understanding of community challenges; and reaffirming connectedness among people and land, including renegotiating of identity and reaffirming of relationships (Belay 2014).

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\(^9\) See Maclean 2014

\(^10\) See Belay 2014
Intergenerational service-learning and community-engaged scholarship in a Florida university living-learning community

The underlying principle of Live-Learn Communities (LLC) in institutions of higher education is the integration of academic learning and community living. LLCs provide opportunities for students interested in a specific academic or professional theme to enroll in a common set of courses, tutorials, or seminars and live together in a designated residential setting. Effective LLCs seamlessly integrate curricular objectives with co-curricular experience and personal development opportunities. Live-Learn Community students enrolled in civically-based learning communities exhibit a stronger sense of civic engagement than students in other types of living-learning communities or traditional residential settings (Rowan-Kenyon et al 2007). Florida Gulf Coast University’s (FGCU) Leadership Through Service Live-Learning Community focuses on the intersection between serving others and assuming leadership in our communities. It offers students the opportunity to develop a close-knit community with full-time faculty and staff and with other students; to serve others through uniquely designed projects that connect student learning with civic education and leadership; and to engage campus leaders and be involved in leadership experiences that will allow them to develop their own leadership knowledge and skills that is consistent with the principles of community-engaged leadership, including reciprocity, mutual benefit, and an exchange of knowledge of resources (Preskill and Brookfield 2009).

Coursework includes the pedagogy of service-learning and community-engaged scholarship, in which students, professors, and student-mentors respond to local sustainability challenges. Students and faculty service-learning projects include the creation of an ongoing “Don’t Dump, Donate” program in university housing that collects furniture, clothing, electronics, and unused food items at the end of the term for a local charity and food pantry; the creation of an ongoing mentorship and tutoring program that partners university students with developmentally delayed high school students; and contributions to an intergenerational panther education program that brings local elementary school students to the university and a local nature preserve to learn about endangered species, habitat conservation, and local ecological systems. The success of these service-learning and community engaged scholarship projects depends upon intergenerational learning. Along with faculty engaging students in the classroom, the LLC includes a robust peer mentoring and teaching assistant model with upper-level undergraduate course assistants. The teaching assistants and peer mentors play a central role in the LLC as they are the individuals who most actively lead students outside the classroom.

Conclusion: Possibilities for future scholarship and practice in intergenerational research in higher education

The methodologies and examples presented in this chapter are connected to an emerging area of research in intergenerational learning and transformative leadership for sustainable futures. This includes different generations and different age groups learning together about each other, including experiences, values, and aspirations for sustainable futures; different generations and different age groups learning together about ecological, social, cultural, and economic events relevant to them; and different generations and different age groups learning through shared experiences and training.

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11 See Wohlpart et al 2014
activities designed to develop academic knowledge and skills for addressing the challenges of sustainability. Still, there is much work to be done in identifying appropriate theory, methods, and approaches to bridge the gap between generations in scholarship and in practice. What might such an intergenerational research and praxis agenda look like? How can scholars and practitioners capture the meaning(s) and process(es) of intergenerational learning and leadership that are grounded in theory and actionable in practice? How can communication and education for sustainability support agency for change? How can hopes and aspirations for sustainable futures engage with inquiry that is critical and analytical? What kinds of learning environments are necessary to facilitate multiple stakeholders, diverse groups, and diverse forms of knowledge to fully maximize intergenerational learning and leadership potential?
References


