Advancing the Field

Intergenerational Education: The Significance of Reciprocity and Place

GREG MANNION
University of Stirling, Stirling, Scotland

In this article, the case is made for greater clarity in the definition of intergenerational practice and intergenerational education. Theoretically, the effects of all-age reciprocity and the significance of attending to “place” are explored. Taken together, they help point to what is distinctive about the scope and purpose of intergenerational education. The author argues that any intergenerational practice must always involve an educative element that is focused, at least in part, on the ongoing, reciprocal production of new relations between generations through the ways challenges are purposefully responded to in some specific place.

KEYWORDS intergenerational practice, intergenerational education, reciprocity, reciprocal, learning, place, relations

INTRODUCTION

This article sets out to discern the purposes and scope of intergenerational education. This work is important because there is an identifiable gap in the literature in the field to date that has largely failed to take education as a key concern. After considering the existing literature and its lacunae, this author considers the importance of the concept of all-age reciprocity, a now widely accepted principle for intergenerational practice. First (after Sánchez et al., 2007), this author will identify that intergenerational practice is always an emplaced activity that advances a society for all ages through increasing reciprocal communication and exchanges of many kinds.
between people from any two generations for the benefit of individuals, communities, and places. Taking the arguments around reciprocity and place further, the following definition will be offered: intergenerational education (a) involves people from two or more generations participating in a common practice that happens in some place; (b) involves different interests across the generations and can be employed to address the betterment of individual, community, and ecological well-being through tackling some problem or challenge; (c) requires a willingness to reciprocally communicate across generational divides (through activities involving consensus, conflict, or cooperation) with the hope of generating and sharing new intergenerational meanings, practices, and places that are, to some degree, held in common; and (d) requires a willingness to be responsive to places and to one another in an ongoing manner. Alongside this definition, this paper will argue that the overarching purpose of intergenerational education is to improve intergenerational relations in ways that assist in the flourishing of communities and places, local and beyond.

Theorizing Intergenerational Practice: Beyond Descriptions and Outcomes

Commentators agree that the growth and development of the intergenerational field requires greater attention to be paid to definitions of and for practice. Springate, Atkinson, and Martin (2008) note that there is a need for greater clarity around the definition of intergenerational practice. They have also noted international differences in emphases with the UK field focusing more on school and community sites and less on older adults compared to the United States. On the ground, the project-based approaches of practitioners and communities have been described quite well, for example as “vehicles for the purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations for individual and social benefits” (Hatton-Yeo, 2006, p. 2). Kaplan (2002) has also usefully described possible scenarios for intergenerational practice while others have devised useful typologies for possible scenarios (e.g. Brown & Ohsako, 2003). However, with no agreed definition (beyond description and typologies of practice), there is a lack of clarity, which is a problem because it means we cannot discern easily what is distinctive about intergenerational practice or its derivative, intergenerational education.

Another approach has been to look at naming the wide array of outcomes that accrue to participants from intergenerational practices (see Springate et al., 2008; Martin, Springate, & Atkinson, 2010). Readers of this journal will be familiar with many of the espoused outcomes for intergenerational practice, including those related to health, well-being and social inclusion or social cohesion, urban renewal or regeneration, and participation of older people or children or their active citizenship. Useful
as they are, these outcomes do not serve as distinguishing purposes for intergenerational practice since, as outcomes, they may accrue to solely one generation and may or may not accrue in different contexts. Also, these outcomes may be distinctively influenced by participants’ ages, classes, incomes, and genders in various ways and be nongeneralizable.

Given this state of affairs, it appears we need a more nuanced approach to saying what is distinctive about intergenerational practice and, by implication, intergenerational education. A number of strands of literature can help us conceive of intergenerational education as more than a reiteration of claims about outcomes or the transfer of skills, money, or ideas (for example, Hoff, 2007) and take account of new ideas about education as a multigenerational, social practice across the life course that is located in a wide variety of places.

All-Age Reciprocity

On the one hand, given the increase in the numbers of older adults in developed country populations, it is, perhaps, no surprise that studies of intergenerational practices tend to be found in departments specializing in aging, in journals focusing on gerontology, and research on adults and older adults (Hatton-Yeo, 2006). Also noticeable is that early approaches to intergenerational practice focused on one-way exchanges and outcomes, such as efforts to get adults to educate the young or getting the young to support, serve, or assist older members of society. Now, however, most commentators recognize the importance of more reciprocal inputs and outputs of programs (Kaplan, 2002) involving all ages and two-way exchanges, perhaps more especially in intergenerational shared sites as places where young and old receive services at the same time and place (Jarrott, Gigliotti, & Smock, 2006; see also the special issue of this journal on the topic of shared sites, volume 9, issue 4, 2011).

VanderVen (1999, 2004) argues for a similar reciprocity but does so theoretically. She critiques the existing theoretical resource base by showing how phase or stage theorists such as Erikson are likely to be too linear and culturally biased. Instead she argues for an approach in which intergenerational practice is more dynamic (nonlinear), recursive, constructivist, socially situated, and informed by postmodern theories of power and other social identifiers such as gender. She argues that this approach would also imply that intergenerational programmers should allow for greater all-age participation in program design, implementation, and evaluation with reciprocal inputs and effects.

In tandem, in intergenerational policy statements, and in the field of practice we can see, too, a more reciprocal, relational, and multigenerational approach. In part it is due to calls for us all to realize a “society for all ages” (Sánchez et al., 2007). The following definition for intergenerational
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practice argues cogently for all-age reciprocity as a distinguishing feature (though limits participant groups to two generations when it could easily be multigenerational):

Activities or programmes that increase cooperation, interaction and exchange between people from any two generations. They share their knowledge and resources and provide mutual support in relations benefiting not only individuals but their community. These programs provide opportunities for people, families and communities to enjoy and benefit from a society for all ages. (Generations United, undated) (Sánchez et al., 2007, 35, italics in original)

Drawing on Sánchez and colleagues and VanderVen, I wish to show that multigenerational reciprocity is a key construct for understanding intergenerational practice, but I will also show that it can help us to name the scope and purposes of intergenerational education. Explicit in Sánchez and colleagues’ definition is that intergenerational practice involves purposefully moving toward the creation of a society for all ages. This provides a distinctive purpose for intergenerational education when compared to other forms of civic engagement and multi-age education. The notion of intergenerational solidarity (Jarrott, 2007), closely aligned to the idea of a “society for all ages,” is seen to be made up of positive intergenerational sentiment, shared values, intergenerational contact, and commitments to civic roles and obligations (Bengston, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990). Importantly, the goal of the creation of a society for all ages requires multigenerational inputs and outputs: the reciprocal participation of some kind by more than one generation in programming and, through this process, the creation of new, improved ways of being in relationships by these participants across generational divides. Without this reciprocal participation as a process and improved relations as a purpose, an intergenerational program could be the same as any form of community activism or formal provision involving more than one age group.

In educational research, too, we can find support for taking all-age reciprocity as a key driver for understanding contemporary educational practice. Hodkinson, Biesta, and James (2008) remind us that the workplace, family, school, community-based organizations, and other contexts are already providing sites for intergenerational learning of many kinds when education is viewed socioculturally. In much sociological research, despite generational markers and cohorts being identifiable, generational effects had been, in the past, often overlooked in favour of focusing on gender, class, and race. Field, Lynch, and Malcolm (2008) have made some headway in understanding learning socioculturally across the life course. They have shown that learning is truly lifelong and lifewide. The presence of older adults in greater numbers, the changing nature of identities, and the blurring of boundaries
between generations mean there is, potentially, more reciprocal relations between the generations (Jessel, 2009). However, in practice, there is also evidence of less contact between older and younger people with increasing generational niching as the norm (MacCallum et al., 2006).

There are other perspectives that support this argument of multigenerational reciprocity as a key purpose for intergenerational education. Researchers in childhood sociologies and in human geography (Vanderbeck, 2007) have used generational ordering (Alanen, 2001) and concepts such as generation, life course, and intergenerationality and age-related intersectionality (Hopkins & Pain, 2007) in theoretical and empirical research. Intersectional explanations of exclusion look to explore how categories of discrimination (race, gender, class, age) interact with one another on many levels, often at the same time. Hopkins and Pain (2007) suggest we take an intersectional and relational approach to researching multiple age groups/generations. The foundation for their argument is that people’s identities are produced through the intersection (or interaction) of identifiers including age but also race, class, and gender, for example. Pain (2005) reminds us that young people are embedded in intergenerational relations:

> Relations within one space (for example the home) also affect expectations, behaviour and relations within another (for example local public spaces). Intergenerational relations, then, form part of our identity or social make-up (and are an aspect which has been underplayed until recently). (Pain, 2005, p. 10)

Thus far, we have argued that intergenerational education will viably take reciprocal participation as a distinctive process and improved relations among the generations as a key purpose. Understanding intergenerational practice as an intersecting aspect of identity formation suggests we need to consider more widely the many locations and contexts for intergenerational practice. To do so, we will next explore the significance of place for intergenerational education.

**PLACE AS A PLAYER**

The locations for intergenerational learning and education need to be disclosed and understood for us to fully appreciate their roles. As we have seen, formally delivered intergenerational education and nonformal intergenerational learning are best seen as lifewide and lifelong. International commentators now question the presumption that it is solely individuals that engage in learning in formal ways in schools and universities. Instead, a future is envisioned where the social everyday places in which we live (including homes, workplaces, museums, and online environments,
for example) are recognized for their educative powers across generational divides (Facer & Sandford, 2010; Harper, 2009).

Empirical work linking intergenerational education or learning and place is sparse but interesting. Some useful work linking intergenerational practice and environmental education has been provided by Kaplan, Liu, and Steinig (2005). Payne (2010) has looked at how the household functions as an intimate intergenerational site forging opportunities for countercultural, ethical, environmental practices in everyday routines (such as recycling). Mannion, Adey, and Lynch (2010) studied examples of school-linked, place-based intergenerational practice. Mannion and colleagues (2010) argue that place-based education itself is a reciprocal intergenerational practice requiring the ongoing production of new relations between adult and young people through place-change processes. The corollary view, offered in this article, also holds: that intergenerational education is always a situated or emplaced activity and, therefore, offers the potential to be for improved ecological or social justice (though these may not necessarily result). Building our arguments thus far, we can say that intergenerational practice is an emplaced activity that advances a society for all ages through increasing reciprocal communication and exchanges of many kinds between people from any two generations for the benefit of individuals, communities, and places.

Theoretical support for the need to recognize the importance of place can be found in the writings of geographers and spatial theorists. The position often put forward is simple yet far-reaching in terms of its consequences: interpersonal relations are always located in a place. Massey (cited in Mannion, 2009) explains this concept well:

> It is important here to reflect on what notions of space I am working with. A less fixed view of space (Massey, 1994, 2005) suggests that it is more than a backdrop or a container for the action. Instead, spaces are part of the action, and very consequential in the forms of behaviour they afford and the emergence of the identities that inhabit them. Within this view, the self and space are intertwined in a co-emergent process. (Mannion, 2009, p. 333)

Massey (2004) invites us to see the changes in people and places as a linked two-way process. Places offer people pregiven, material, contextual opportunities or conditions within which some forms practice are possible and others are not. By this view, social relations are seen as being constituted through person-place enactments. As people engage in the world, the places they inhabit will also change, hence creating an ongoing connectivity between people and their contexts. By this view, place-change and intergenerational practice jointly emerge; put simply, all intergenerational relations are always given expression in times and places.
Following Massey (2005), place itself needs to be seen as a relational process, produced via interactions (material and nonmaterial, social, cultural, economic) that are always local yet global. Here, place is more like a pattern of crisscrossed flows and disconnections rather than a static, unconnected site. This theoretical position allows us to expand our view of what counts as intergenerational practice and education: an elder working on a community garden or a pupil turning off unnecessary lights in a teacher’s classroom can be seen as practices that produce different kinds of places and produce new expressions of intergenerational relations.

Interestingly, within this perspective, intergenerational practice can include activities when only one generation is physically present at a single time. Consider the relations that are created between generations when different age groups separately visit the same places at different times, such as through participation in a community allotment or participating in an asynchronous, online blog. In these cases, activities need not be concurrently shared to be viable intergenerational activities. The interesting finding here is that almost any place, such as a town, park, or online website, can be intergenerationally and reciprocally shared with or without physical, multigenerational copresence.

These ideas speak directly to those seeking to promote a society for all ages. Taking the place-sensitive perspective outlined here reminds us that child–adult relations are always located in places and are expressed through practices. Mannion (2007) looked at some online blog entries by adults who supported the view that some places in society should be child free. This analysis has shown that generational presences but also absences (as in “child free zones” both online and in housing infrastructure) can determine how intergenerational relations get expressed in places. Mannion (2007) uses this and other empirical examples to show that different generations reciprocally affect the places that social groups co-inhabit or inhabit separately.

In many cases of intergenerational practice, the place itself and the place-making that gives rise to it are more obviously the focus. Consider the creation of a local skate park. In this kind of case, young people will often need to work with adults to instigate changes and progress their plans. Mannion’s (2005) study of school grounds developments projects and Mannion and I’Anson’s (2004) study of the refurbishment of a children’s arts center have both shown that adults play important roles in gatekeeping and managing these so-called “children spaces.” These cases show that place is an important player in part because of how the generations participate in gatekeeping and place-based boundaries; inclusive and exclusive intergenerational practices affect membership and presence in place and, hence, the maintenance and changing of boundaries affect all participants’ growth and learning across generational divides. Not all intergenerational boundary work results in improved intergenerational solidarity or enhanced community and ecological well-being, which is one
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reason why intergenerational shared sites have currency (Jarrott et al., 2006) and why we need to know more about their management, enrollment, and the processes that go on there.

While further empirical research would be warranted, it is likely that viewing intergenerational practice as a place-based activity will allow us to see how new relationships between the generations are produced in/through/by new and different kinds of place because practices need locations for their performance and, through these performances, relationships can be changed. If intergenerational practice sets out to reconfigure intergenerational relationships, then it must include an aim of recognizing what reciprocal intergenerational responsibilities we may have for each other and for places. Again, theoretically at least, we can argue that it is through these place-based approaches to changing relations that we and our places are reciprocally constructed.

EXPANDING THE PURPOSES OF INTERGENERATIONAL EDUCATION

So far, this article has argued that we need to understand the links between processes of intergenerational practice and the how place allows the enactment of age relations. I have argued that intergenerational practice is viably based on the principle of all-age reciprocity with multidirectional inputs and outputs across generational divides. This practice can be understood as happening in many contexts: within and outside family homes, schools, when generations are copresent and even sometimes when they are not. We have seen that participation and place are interconnected aspects of the practice and that intergenerational education is a key component.

I have argued that intergenerational education’s purposes can, in part, be determined by considering all-age reciprocity as a necessary, distinctive process and improved relations among the generations as a key purpose. Intergenerational solidarity and the phrase “society for all ages” are, of course, suggestive of an educational aim to change intergenerational relations for the better in some way (see Springate et al., 2008; Martin et al., 2010). But we need to consider why we might want to do so. We cannot, for example, merely say that our aim should be to generate more mutual respect between the generations since it may be undesirable for some individual participants’ well-being or the flourishing of community or local places. (Consider, for example, the effects of different generations of community-based criminal gangs improving their intergenerational respect for one another and thereby sustaining community oppression.)

Pragmatist views on education may offer a way forward. John Dewey provides the basis for the centrality of problems and challenges for an educative experience and, hence, for all experiences that are
intergenerationally educative too. Drawing on pragmatism (Dewey, 1925; Biesta, 2008), we can argue that intergenerational education occurs when members of different generations try to cooperate and intervene in the world, responding to one another and to the places they inhabit (see also Mannion & Adéy, 2011). Biesta (2008) reminds us that educative experiences require others and a place wherein someone “comes into presence.” Biesta suggests that the process of “coming into presence” will be experienced as an interruption in the normal flow of affairs of that place. This view is founded on the idea that an educative experience is about responding to others and to questions found in the world to make a difference by encountering difference: “Coming into the world is not something individuals can do on their own. This is first of all for the obvious reason that in order to come into the world, one needs a world, and this world is a world inhabited by others who are not like us” (Biesta, 2008, p. 27).

For Dewey, it is people’s participation in communication that makes education possible. Through communication, the generations may share an activity in an interested, meaningful, and purposeful way and the results may be a shared outlook for all participants. From a Deweyan perspective, “All meanings originate in social relationships, in cooperative behaviour carried out for a purpose” (Garrison, 1997, p. 307).

In intergenerational communication, generationally different parties will communicate in relationships that create new meanings through cooperative behavior. Dewey (1925) notes that through communication, “No person remains unchanged and has the same future efficiencies, who shares in situations made possible by communication” (p. 204). By this view, in intergenerational education, members of different generations will dynamically transact with their environment, changing themselves and the environment at the same time. This idea of change and purposefulness takes us beyond the narrower view that intergenerational education is solely, or even mainly, “for” improved relations between the generations. The local problems and challenges that may help to get different generations engaged may be very place-specific and may not be, on the face of it, related to intergenerational relations per se (for example, the desire for an improved school garden). As we have seen, we need some place for intersubjective communication and activity to happen.

The pragmatist perspective does not demand that intergenerational practice be founded on or necessarily lead to a consensus view but merely that they share in purposeful activity and share in communication. By this view, the place in which intergenerational practice occurs needs to be shared (though not necessarily through copresence), this place need not be seen or understood in the same way by different generations. Intergenerational education will be achieved through work that at times may be contested. Taking a pragmatist position, we can suggest that when participants from more than one generation need to be involved and contribute to some
shared activity, they share the consequences of these actions. Through these communications and actions they will have the potential to re-create existing generational relations or to create new ones. But these are unpredictable and contingent outcomes that will, in part, be dependent on the participants’ actions and will be affected by the tasks at hand and the consequences enacted in a given place. Importantly, what is, in fact, shared is the work done to help intergenerational practice appear. Also, we should note that intergenerational programs might not start off with pregiven, fixed, shared ideas between the generations; the activities that ensue may be seen and understood differently by participants. Intergenerational education will be an ongoing, unfinished business where experiment and experience are closely tied and are “a way of moving the relational midst of the world” (McCormack, 2010, p. 205).

CONCLUSION

In this section, the arguments made are summarized and concluded with a commentary on the purpose and scope of intergenerational education. These arguments began with the realization of the need for a reciprocal and relational view of intergenerational practice and the need for greater attention to be paid to the role of place. By this view, the relations among the generations are not just interpersonal; they are caught up in the material and cultural processes that give rise to places. The arguments seek to move the debates forward on what counts as intergenerational practice and how it needs to have an educative role.

The review of the literature on intergenerational practice has been shown to focus on one-way exchanges between the generations. The overemphasis on the outcomes of intergenerational practice, while useful, has not helped us theorize any distinctive processes or purposes for intergenerational practice nor to notice its educative roles. However, as intergenerational reciprocity gains ground as a core principle and process for intergenerational practice, a distinctive purpose emerges: the need to work to change or improve relations within and between generations. As a result, all intergenerational practice requires an educative goal; participants need to learn new things, in various contexts, in order to change and improve intergenerational relations. Note that this position does not seek to name how and when the criteria for judging what counts as “improved relations” are formed. But the story of educational purpose does not end there.

We cannot say for all contexts what a particular learning focus might be; the point of attending to place reminds us that the focus is locally constituted, and found in some place. Indeed, this variance in place is why commentators have noted that intergenerational practice can have many and varied outcomes (improved health, new skills and so on). We can say,
however, that the changes sought by all forms of intergenerational practice are effects on people’s own senses of themselves as members of generational groups and effects on their views and expectations of others from other generations. Yet what precisely it is that needs to be learned by any one person or group in a given place is only determinable by understanding their contexts, which is why the place-based, material, and cultural location of intergenerational practice needs to be attended to.

Understanding intergenerational practice as being all-age, reciprocal and multigenerational allows us to see that there are many places where people are educated (and informally learn) about the process of changing relations within and between generations. This article argues, therefore, that the field needs to take a wider framing for intergenerational practice in order to recognize and support the many spaces and ages of participants currently engaging in intergenerational practice (and, by implication, intergenerational education). Theoretically, this article has argued how place plays a role. The argument is that different generations reciprocally affect the places that social groups coinhabit or inhabit separately. By this view, intergenerational practice is an emplaced practice that sets out to change relations, places, and identities. As the production of places and generational identifications are reciprocally linked, this position suggests that practitioners and participants need to attend to the role of place relations as much as interpersonal and intergenerational relations for their activities to be effective. As intergenerational practice is always an emplaced activity, it requires attention to be paid to place-related outcomes, too, for example improved ecological or social justice. Goals such as these are needed since intergenerational cohesion could, in some cases, have quite negative consequences. Taking our insights together, we can posit that intergenerational education is an emplaced, lifelong, relational, reciprocal, and participatory process of learning based on communications and actions designed to address problems and challenges that are found in places.

In terms of purposes, we can suggest that intergenerational education can be for improved intergenerational relations and be constituted through new forms of all-age reciprocity, but it must also have an attendant normative aim: that these changed relations assist in the flourishing of individuals, communities, and places, local and beyond. Intergenerational education’s overarching purpose, couched in general terms, is to improve intergenerational relations for the better of individual, community, and ecological well-being.

This article notes other implications. If intergenerational practice requires participants to change in how they relate to others, we can say that intergenerational education (however formal or informal) is a necessary component of any such practice, which means that learning is a key element for all intergenerational programming that is yet unrealized. Bringing this and other implications to bear on what the scope of intergenerational education might be, the following definition is offered (though has also
been, in part, empirically derived; see Mannion, Adey & Lynch, 2010): intergenerational education (a) involves people from two or more generations participating in a common practice that happens in some place; (b) involves different interests across the generations and can be employed to address the betterment of individual, community, and ecological well-being through tackling some problem or challenge; (c) requires a willingness to reciprocally communicate across generational divides (through activities involving consensus, conflict, or cooperation) with the hope of generating and sharing new intergenerational meanings, practices, and places that are to some degree held in common, and (d) requires a willingness to be responsive to places and one another in an ongoing manner.

These ideas about intergenerational practice and the attendant purpose and scope of intergenerational education are open to further empirical testing, theoretical challenge, and debate, but they may assist with the lack of clarity in the field of intergenerational practice that is fast changing. Noticing the role of place will help with recognizing intergenerational practices in the everyday domains in which we find them and with figuring out how we might best research and evaluate them. Further theorizing and empirical study are now needed for a fuller exploration of the implications for formal places of education (schools, further education colleges and universities), places of care for the elderly, places of employment, and informal places of learning (for example, online, or in places of leisure or consumption), all of which have the ability to exclude along lines of generational difference by being age-specified in various ways.

Drawing on pragmatism, I have argued that to “come into presence” requires place-based intergenerational action and communication. The generations, in effect, need each other for their generational differences to be sustained and changed as communities seek to develop in everyday places. This practice is risky and at the outset must have somewhat unknown outcomes in order to be educative since we are pushing forward into the limit zones of what we know and who we are becoming through experimenting with solving worldly issues and problems. New forms of intergenerational practice are needed among generationally overly niched strangers who, in fact, need one another for this task and who are likely to improve intergenerational solidarity and community cohesion along the way.

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