

Andragogy of Hope and Learning Cities

Annalisa L. Raymer
Cornell University

Abstract: Addressing the worldwide challenges threatening humanity today, such as the global pandemic and climate change, requires learning and action at scales including and extending far beyond personal development. The concept of andragogy popularized by Malcolm Knowles focuses on the individual and does not attend to wider social contexts and collective learning. Achieving the necessary transformations to avert cascading collapses—and keeping up courage for the endeavor—necessitates a new conceptualization, an andragogy of hope. The Global Network of Learning Cities may be one of the best examples where key features of an andragogy of hope are already emerging.

Key words: andragogy of hope, learning cities, lifelong learning, sustainability

As soon as news of the corona virus began to circulate and communities started to organize local responses, the Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) took stock. A program of UNESCO's Institute of Lifelong Learning (UIL), the Global Network is a worldwide membership of localities who have made robust commitments to integrate lifelong learning for all into the infrastructure and life of the polis. To facilitate knowledge sharing and idea exchange among cities facing a common challenge, in March UIL launched "UNESCO learning cities' response to COVID-19," a series of webinars for interchange and problem-solving (2020). Through these sessions, participants not only practiced collective, lifelong learning for the common good, but in doing so, illustrated an andragogy of hope.

Background

In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Paulo Freire (1994) declares, "I am hopeful, not out of mere stubbornness, but out of an existential, concrete imperative" (p. 8). In this work, Freire revisits his more widely known *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and reflects on his earlier thinking. Placing hope front and center, Freire asserts that hope is key, but it is useful only when animated in action:

... hope, as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice. As an ontological need, hope needs practice to become historical concreteness. That is why there is no hope in sheer hopefulness. The hoped-for is not attained by dint of raw hoping. Just to hope is to hope in vain.

Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope, as an ontological need, dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness. And hopelessness can become tragic despair. Hence the need for a kind of education in hope. Hope, as it happens, is so important for our existence, individual and social, that we must take every care not to experience it in a mistaken form, and thereby allow it to slip toward hopelessness and despair. Hopelessness and despair are both the consequence and the cause of inaction or immobilism (p. 9).

Other educators have written compellingly on the necessity of hope with regard to teaching, learning and pedagogy, including Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade (2009) and Giroux and Giroux (2006). Yet where is the *andragogy of hope*?

With acknowledgement of the Google N-gram limitations, the tool is nonetheless useful for identifying broad patterns within discourses over time. Entering the parameters for books published in English in the period of 1975-2019, a general upward trend emerges for works on *pedagogy of hope*. I have run this broad-stroke corpus analysis multiple times over the past two years and have yet to see any titles retrieved for *andragogy of hope*.

Approach

The late environmental educator, systems analyst and sustainability expert, Donella Meadows, was someone whose clear-eyed modeling of the human overreach beyond earth's capacities did not dampen her hopefulness. Among several books she authored and co-authored are notable works numerically detailing how human systems are patently unsustainable. The first of these was *The Limits to Growth* (Meadowset al, 1972), followed twenty years later by *Beyond the Limits* (Meadowset al, 1992). Meadows is also noted for her monogram, *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System* (1999), which identified nodes in complex systems where interventions can render exponential impacts. At the time of her death in 2001, she and two of the original co-authors of *Limits to Growth*, Dennis Meadows and Jørgen Randers, were at work on a 30-year update; it was published a few years later (Meadowset al, 2004). In the preface, her colleagues remarked of her (using the name she favored, Dana):

Dana was the unceasing optimist. She was a caring, compassionate believer in humanity. She predicated her entire life's work on the assumption that if she put enough of the right information in people's hands, they would ultimately go for the wise, the farsighted, the humane solution—in this case, adopting the global policies that would avert overshoot (or, failing that, would ease the world back from the brink) (2004, p. xvi).

This determined combination of inquiry, learning and hope is central to our prospects for easing back from the brink. The concept of learning cities—or as those of us in more rural areas might say, *learning localities* (Raymer, 2018, p. 201), serves well as a vehicle to frame and facilitate saving ourselves from ourselves; or put another way, to encourage transformative learning for reorienting our patterns of living toward sustainability.

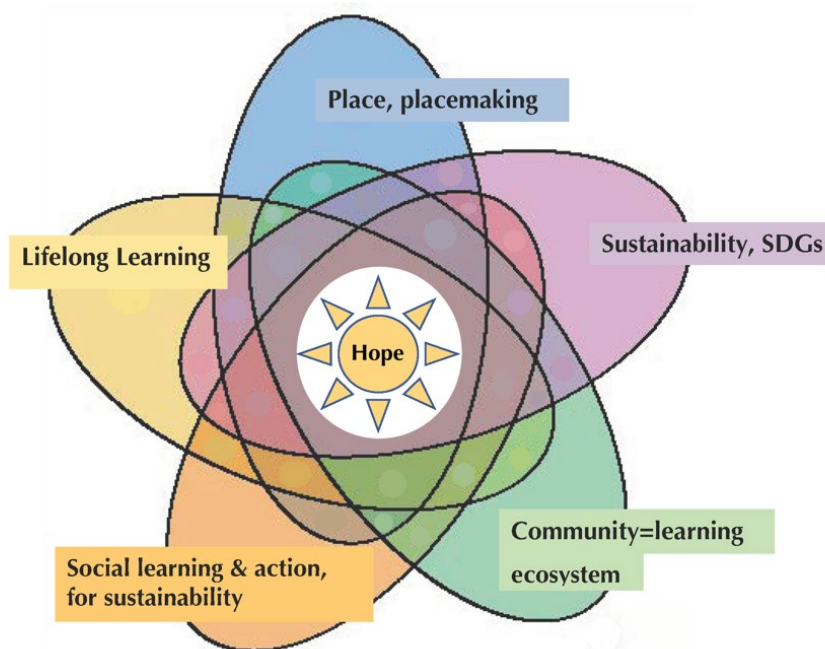
After visiting a number of learning cities and becoming acquainted with members of the Global Network, I was inspired to provide students with opportunities to become familiar with the concept and to interact with people in communities creating their own versions of how to be a learning city. In designing a college course on lifelong learning, sustainability and learning cities, I drew upon Meadows' ideas, together with work by educators writing about hope, to illustrate the interplay of actionable hope and system change. Now in a second run of the course, I have settled on a handful of key elements. As emergent mutual aid efforts at the local level, and city-to-city knowledge-sharing at the global level has shown, a network of affiliated learning ecosystems becomes a resource in itself; i.e. a ready means of mobilizing in the face of complex challenges such as a viral pandemic. In recognizing that zoonotic disease and climate change are

of a piece, individual learning cities and affiliated networks offer avenues for tackling complex matters at multiple scales.

Major Themes

With hope at the center, the Figure 1 represents the core concepts of the course.

Figure 1. Lifelong Learning for Just, Inclusive Sustainability



We start the semester with unlearning the circumscription most students bring to the course, that of equating learning with schooling. After unpacking the notion of unbounded learning in various forms and all venues, we begin turn our attention to the role of place in community and learning. We consider how the built environment is largely a product of an ongoing stream of decisions made at scales from the unexamined and incidental to the most deliberate and complex. As humans, our decision-making is grounded in values and objectives, whether consciously voiced or not, and our constructions and built environs reflect those aims and priorities. In a democratic society we might justifiably expect the value set informing design decisions to be one promoting human flourishing, sociability and civic life. We explore why this is too often not the case and review case studies illustrating how listening to diverse voices and more inclusive decision processes can yield better outcomes. Having accepted that place is amenable to human intent, we next apply that thinking and sense of agency to the project of more sustainable policies, practices and daily decisions at the local level. Key ideas here are Julian Agyeman’s “just sustainabilities” (2013) and the United Nations’ agenda for sustainable development (UN, 2015). Both of these move the concept of sustainability to a much more comprehensive frame than that of a solely environmentally green focus as well as purposeful awareness of international interdependencies. Next the course introduces UNESCO’s Global Network of Learning Cities, in which a learning city could be described a community avowing to a set of principles and

commitments more than following a model or prescription. All learning cities are unique expressions arising from their own multi-faceted identities, cultures, and geographies.

At first the connection between sustainability and learning cities is not apparent. The transformative thinking necessary to foster sustainable and resilient cities and communities relies upon equally transformative modes of thinking and interacting among citizens/denizens, governments, leaders, universities, and educators of every context and setting. A sustainable city will be best realized as an ecosystem, an interconnected web of learning opportunities for individuals, groups, and the locality as a whole, and nested within learning regions. Introducing students to nested networks is one of the joys of the course, as are the opportunities to hear from residents of learning cities who generously interact with us across time zones. For these reasons, the final segment of the course returns to a focus on lifelong learning but with a deliberate shift to social, collective learning with emphases on collaborative inquiry, innovation and the fun of working together on things that truly matter.

Discussion

As popularized by Malcolm Knowles (1970) the concept of andragogy is a bit of a paradox. Not really a theory, and often subject to critique (for example, Hartree, 1984), the idea nonetheless continues to serve pragmatic purposes. Primary among these, andragogy facilitates comparisons between teacher-centric education, i.e. what Freire called the banking model of education (2000, p. 73), and other approaches that recognize learners as complex humans replete with existing knowledge and experiences. Indeed, even the question that the notion of andragogy inevitably raises, namely—are the implications of andragogy applicable only to adults?—is in itself useful to anyone seeking to position learning as lifelong and not constricted to formal schooling. In some ways, it is perhaps unfortunate that it is Knowles' set of assumptions which gained prominence. As Norwegian educator Svein Loeng points out,

Knowles ignored the relationship between the individual and society. In that sense, he did not consider how privileges and suppression attached to race, gender, and class influenced learning. This presupposed that all humans and cultures valued ideals such as individualism, self-realisation, independence, and selfdirection. Finger and Asun (2001) claimed that Knowles's andragogy failed to critically examine society and organisations and that his view on adult learning did not challenge the status quo and the norms and values of the American middle class (2018, p. 5).

Prior to Knowles, various proponents of andragogy envisioned the idea differently. Loeng notes the robust Nordic traditions of *popular culture* encompassed and negated a need for another term (p. 8), and he points to the concept of andragogy advanced by German philosopher Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, that of “a new kind of teaching, aimed at solving social problems and moving towards a better future (quoted in Loeng, p. 2). This differs from an andragogy for self-realization.

Addressing global pandemics and climate change takes collective learning and action at group, community and societal scales, as well as, at the individual level. In their thirty-year update to the original *Limits to Growth*, Meadows and her co-authors discuss the difficulty of talking about love in anything but a tightly delineated romantic sense. Yet, the three of them, with their decades spent in data analysis and systems modeling, include *loving* in their chapter on “tools for the transition to sustainability,” along with visioning, networking, truth-telling and learning

(Meadowset al, 2005, p. 265-284). They write,

Individualism and shortsightedness are the greatest problems of the current social system, we think, and the deepest cause of unsustainability. Love and compassion institutionalized in collective solutions is the better alternative. A culture that does not believe in, discuss, and develop these better human qualities suffers from a tragic limitation in its options. “How good a society does human nature permit?” asked psychologist Abraham Maslow. “How good a human nature does society permit?” (p. 281).

This resonates strongly with what I have experienced in Learning Cities in Ireland and with people active in the Global Network of Learning Cities in multiple countries—a ethic of kindness, care and, in many instances, delight. Knowles’ concept of andragogy comprised a set of assumptions and following Knowles in shaping a set of assumptions or principles for an andragogy of *hope*, a principle of compassion tops my list.

Collaborators taking part in a transdisciplinary, future-focused process of dialog and discernment facilitated by UNESCO’s Institute of Lifelong Learning would agree; they write, “...learning must be a collective process that acknowledges the value of peer and intergenerational learning. This social dimension emphasizes learning to care for each other, for different communities and for the planet” (2020, p. 8). In their resulting publication, *Embracing a Culture of Lifelong Learning*, additional candidates for an andragogy of hope emerge (2020).

Conclusion

As a starting point and invitation for discussion, below is a proposed set of principles for an andragogy of hope. The first and last are inspired by Meadows, the second is self-evident, and the remaining items either reflect or paraphrase ideas from the report mentioned directly above (p. 9). An andragogy of hope

- practices an ethic of compassion and care
- values learning across the spectrum of formal, nonformal and informal contexts
- activates and supports the community as both an ecosystem of learning and a learning ecosystem
- expects schools and universities to become both avenues and facilitators of lifelong learning
- recognizes lifelong learning as a human right for all, regardless of age or status
- operates from an assumption of, and appreciation for, the social and collective nature of learning
- considers networks to be vehicles of learning and action

This week the second annual meeting of the North American Alliance of Learning Cities took place. Buoyed by the presidential election results, participants were encouraged for the improved prospects of the US re-joining UNESCO, and thus making membership in the Global Network of Learning Cities possible for American communities. Students in my course took part in the convening, and I was quite taken with a question from one who noted with appreciation the climate in learning cities of inclusivity, interaction, and engagement. Turning his gaze back onto formal education, he asked, “How do we create learning cities in our schools?”

May an andragogy of hope serve to transform our classrooms as we seek to transform our world.

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