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Leveraging Hope and Experience: Towards an Integrated Model of Transformative Learning, Community and Leadership for Sustainability Action and Change

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This chapter is dedicated to the memory of our colleague and friend Dr. Jack Christian, a pioneer in sustainability teaching and practice at Manchester Met.

Abstract

How can we engage in futures-oriented ‘hope work’ in the face of extraordinary global challenges, and from within the confines of a commodified higher education system? This chapter traces the experience of a group of staff and students at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, who came together to explore this question through an experimental, emergent, and creative process of co-operative inquiry. This shared safe space enabled relations of trust, openness and enjoyment to emerge, which were conducive to learning, community-building, and shared leadership. Thus our shared experience enabled us to shed new and critical light on transformative learning, transformative community and transformative leadership. However, in place of three separate concepts, our findings lead us to a composite, integrated and mutually reinforcing model centred on a set of connecting

principles. These in turn are rooted in our subjective experiences of our practical cares and concerns, both individual and shared. Emerging from within an experiential ontology, then, this integrated model offers a reflexive alternative to the top-down approach to sustainability teaching and strategy that currently prevails in many higher education institutions. We share here our experience and the theoretical model it catalysed – along with suggestions for practical actions. In so doing, we hope that we might inspire others to experiment (in their own way) with more organic, less hierarchical, and potentially more enduring approaches to the pedagogy and practice of sustainability.

Key words: Positive institutional work, experiential surfacing, hope work, transformative learning, transformative community, transformative leadership, purposive action

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Introduction

How can we actively imagine and work towards a more liveable, ‘post-Covid’ future, even as we confront the scale of global challenges and navigate an increasingly accelerated and commodified higher education system? This chapter sets out how the ten co-authors and a group of twelve students/alumni explored this question together over a period of about twelve months at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School in the UK. Via a loosely structured, experimental, emergent and creative process of co-operative inquiry, we came

together to develop a shared understanding of what matters to us and how, in turn, these matters of concern (Sayer 2011) help guide our engagement with the natural and social worlds around us. The chapter focuses on two aspects of this shared experience. First, we sought to develop our own conceptual contribution, which – over time – became a call for a more experientially-situated and integrated model of transformative learning, community and leadership. Second, we reflected on the practical steps that we might take as a result, and how we might encourage and work with others wishing to embark on similar journeys themselves.

Context: Setting the Scene

A focus on teaching and learning about sustainability seems more necessary than ever. Alongside existing and deepening concerns about climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought other global challenges into sharp relief. Its deeply negative impact on health and well-being, employment levels and social inequality threatens the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals more broadly (UN, 2021). However, the pandemic also demonstrated the power of collaboration, as the drive to develop and roll out coronavirus vaccines led to unprecedented levels of local, national and international collaboration between government, industry and civil society actors (Guimon and Narula, 2020). Likewise, during extended lockdowns across the world, reported declines in pollution levels and viral social media posts of wild animals on deserted urban streets highlighted the speed with which nature can “resurge” when afforded the opportunity (Muhammad *et al.*, 2020; Searle *et al.*, 2021).

The pandemic, climate change and other global challenges thus offer us an opportunity to redefine our future and develop a more meaningful understanding of sustainability (Tsing 2017, p.51). As teachers and learners, we seek to explore how we might

balance economic wellbeing, social justice and environmental stewardship, and ask how we can weigh the needs of the present against the needs of the future. However, our understanding of sustainability is necessarily incomplete, fragmented and contradictory (Dymitrow and Halfacree, 2018). The sheer number of challenges – and potential points of intervention – make it hard to prioritise among them (Washington, 2015). More profoundly, by encompassing everything from protecting endangered species to reducing inequality and increasing participation, the very notion of sustainability risks exacerbating a paralysing sense of helplessness, which may prevent us from engaging with the concept altogether (Longo *et al.*, 2016; Murphy, 2012).

Within this challenging context, universities play a key role in advancing our thinking about how the world might be different and potentially better. Isabelle Stengers recalls the vision of Alfred North Whitehead more than eighty years ago:

The task of a university is the creation of the future, so far as rational thought, and civilised models of appreciation, can affect the issue. The future is big with every possibility of achievement and of tragedy (Whitehead 1938; 171).

Stengers finds it particularly compelling that Whitehead associates the future ‘neither with the advancement of knowledge nor with progress, but rather with radical uncertainty’ (2018, p. 110). However, she suggests that today this purpose is being compromised by ‘fast science.’ That is, market values and market reasoning increasingly reach into our teaching and research, making them subject to the laws of the market (Sandel, 2012). Economic rationalism, massification and internationalisation have radically reconstituted the sector in the UK and elsewhere, transforming universities into corporate enterprises (Lewis and Shore, 2019; Whelan *et al.*, 2013). This shift has increased conformism, competitiveness and

opportunism among institutions and the people who work and study there. From a sustainability perspective, this ongoing process has undermined the possibility of what Black *et al.* (2017) call ‘collective intelligence.’ That is, it limits our understanding of complex issues and hampers attempts to identify solutions. As teaching and learning become increasingly subject to targets and measurement, opportunities to articulate and engage with complex challenges in the world around us in meaningful and thoughtful ways become constrained (Black, 2018).

Our Approach to and Experience of Sustainability at Manchester Met Business School

This chapter asks how we – as university staff and students – might engage in a critical yet hopeful process of understanding and responding to local, national and global sustainability challenges, despite the constraints to which we are subject as individual, collective and institutional actors. We do not deal significantly with what is happening to the planet and the urgent need for action on biodiversity loss, social justice and the climate emergency, as this is covered extensively by others (e.g. Ceballos *et al.*, 2017; IPCC, 2021). Rather, we are concerned with how we – as academics, students and communities – can learn and then take action together in order to help make the world a better place. We believe teaching and learning can make a difference. All ten authors are committed to teaching these issues to our students to the very best of our ability, seeking at the same time to encourage them to reflect on their own behaviour and their professional lives.

Our institutional home, Manchester Metropolitan University (Manchester Met), has a long history of engaging with sustainability issues. We are (or were) all based within the Faculty of Business and Law, specifically within the Department of Strategy, Enterprise and Sustainability (SES). There have been two main phases in the faculty’s own sustainability

journey. From around 1992-2011, the roots of sustainability teaching and learning were established. Led by impassioned but lone champions (including two of the co-authors – see e.g. Christian and Walley, 2015), a range of innovative sustainability-related units was developed. Then, starting in 2012, we and others began to form a critical mass, self-identifying as researchers, teachers and professionals who undertake work that is shaped by sustainability cares and concerns. We and many others have also supported the university-wide embedding of sustainability into the curricular and extra-curricular experiences of students.

Today, Manchester Met in general – and our faculty and department in particular – are widely recognised as particularly active with regards to the sustainability agenda. Since 2013, the university has ranked in the top three of the People and Planet University League for its environmental and ethical performance. It continues to commit and make strong interventions around its Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy.¹ The Faculty of Business and Law has been a signatory to the United Nations' Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) since 2012. Consultations to shape the faculty's Sustainability Strategy for 2021-2030 revealed how teaching, learning and research link directly into the United Nations SDGs, including gender equality and reducing inequalities. The Department of Strategy, Enterprise and Sustainability has been key to university and faculty efforts regarding sustainability teaching and strategy throughout that time, as outlined above. For example, in 2020 its Young Enterprise programme was recognised with a Green Gown Award by the UK and Ireland Environmental Association of Universities and Colleges (EAUC).

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For further information, see <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/equality-and-diversity/Equality-and-Diversity-Annual-Report-2019-20.pdf>)

Our Aspirations for this Chapter

Our focus is exploring how our understanding of sustainability and its possibilities are grounded in our everyday experiences. That is, we are interested in the way sustainability translates into practical action through a host of different, time/place situated cares and concerns. We therefore lean on the ideas of many who have gone before us, including Taylor (2020) on ‘collective mattering,’ Sayer (2011) on ‘why things matter to people’ and Nilsson (2015) on the ‘experiential nature of normative social purpose.’ We also build on recent contributions from neo-institutionalist sociology, which uncover the significant role that both positive and negative emotions play in processes of institutional change (e.g. Friedland, 2018; Gill and Donoghue, 2016; Greenwood *et al.*, 2017; Wijaya and Heugens, 2018; Zifetsma and Toubiana, 2018).

We describe how we – the ten co-authors – worked together as co-participants in a loosely structured experimental, emergent and creative process of co-operative inquiry. Our data consists of recordings made during nine online meetings between members of the co-authoring team and a group that we constituted originally for the purpose of engaging in the inquiry. However, this student sustainability group took on a life of its own above and beyond the immediate study (student participants are named above). Throughout the chapter, we explore our shared experience and how this built trust, encouraged creativity and fostered a commitment to action among us all. In so doing, we draw on ideas about transformative learning (e.g. Southern, 2007; Wals, 2020), transformative community (e.g. Blay-Palmer *et al.*, 2013; Souza *et al.*, 2019) and transformative leadership (e.g. Astin and Astin, 2000; Haddock-Fraser *et al.*, 2018). In sharing our experience, we in turn offer up a more integrated

theoretical approach that brings these three aspects of transformation together in a way that we hope will inspire others to embark on their own such journeys.

Our chapter proceeds as follows. In the next section we summarise the conceptual anchors that ground the study and locate our co-operative inquiry. Following this we provide a brief review of the academic literature on the separate concepts of transformative learning, transformative community and transformative leadership, highlighting the common principles that transcend and connect the three. We then summarise the philosophical and methodological foundations of participatory action research within which co-operative inquiry sits, and outlines our experience of putting these into practice via our student sustainability group. This is followed by a section that presents and discusses the findings of the study and then posits our re-worked composite model of transformative learning, leadership and community, with implications for sustainability action. Finally, we offer up some tentative conclusions, along with concrete suggestions for action.

Theoretical Anchors

Our chapter provides a story of joy, hope and optimism. We say this because, as the co-operative inquiry which informed the chapter entered its final cycle, the participants were asked to describe the process they had experienced over the preceding weeks and they spoke of it using adjectives such as ‘enjoyable,’ ‘optimistic,’ ‘energetic,’ and ‘hopeful.’ This resonates with Clarke (2015) who describes the *work* of hoping as a constitutive and essential element in imagining and navigating alternative futures. It includes a view of the future(s) as being in a continuous state of *becoming* (Hernes, 2017), shaped by narratives and ideas created in the present (Wedlin and Sahlin, 2017). In our case, there was an additional teleological (means-end) focus to the inquiry. That is, we wanted to understand the objects of

our analysis – transformative learning, transformative community and transformative leadership – through an experiential lens focused on concepts of care, concern and collective mattering. We will now briefly outline these theoretical anchors and their relevance.

Our starting point is provided by Sayer's position that humans are sentient beings whose relation to the world is one of concern, which is experienced through practical everyday events, acts and moments of care and caring (Sayer, 2011; 2015). Like Nilsson (2015) and Foucault (1999), Sayer insists that the social sciences should pay (greater) attention to the inherently specific and contextual nature of human experience. Lived-in experiences are practical and take place in specific times and places. Unlike the abstract thinking that is the privilege of academic practice, the concrete things about which people care are situated in the everyday: Caring for a family member who is taken ill, a neighbour who is lonely, an animal found abandoned at the wayside, trees under threat of being felled to make way for a road, or a group of students impacted by COVID. Humans are sentient beings who care.

Writ-large, according to Sayer (2011; 2015), the relation of humans to the world is one of concern. Further, the variety of different things about which some people care becomes entwined with the things about which other people care. This leads to the formation of care-focused groups and organised collectives such as charities, social enterprises, residents' associations. Taylor (2020) expands upon this idea, highlighting how such collective mattering amplifies these specific cares and concerns, enabling people to collaborate and work together in ways of caring that are at once embodied, relational, material and interactive.

Nilsson (2015, p.371) suggests that as academics, then, we need to 'more fully engage with the experiential nature of normative social purpose.' That is, we should pay explicit attention to the responsive, evaluative, and values-based nature of what he calls 'positive institutional work.' Clark (2015) talks similarly of what she calls 'hope work.' That is,

teaching and learning can and should be explicitly grounded within social purposes like freedom, community, health and justice.

These theoretical anchors helped inform our study, and were in turn developed, amplified, illustrated and articulated throughout the process of our co-operative inquiry.

Literature review: Transformative Learning, Transformative Community, Transformative Leadership

Notwithstanding some important exceptions, transformative learning, transformative community and transformative leadership appear as three largely separate and separated concepts in the academic literature. We take a critical position on this separation, based on a combination of a brief review of the literature and the experience of our own co-operative inquiry. Taken together, this indicates that the three concepts are better understood as co-constitutive, with each element depending on, and mutually reinforcing, the other two. This is elaborated on later in this chapter. However, for the purpose of this section we will briefly review the concepts separately, while highlighting some common connecting principles across the three elements.

Transformative Learning

In common with the experiential, normative and positive institutional tenets of this chapter, transformative learning assumes a world where change is continuous. Learning involves negotiating, excavating and acting upon our own purposes, values and feelings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from the people around us (Mezirow and Associates, 2000). At the same time, Taylor (2008) argues that transformative learning also

acknowledges universal needs of subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, idleness, creation, identity and freedom. However, it is also *for* something, such as education *for* community and sense of place; education *for* communities of practice; education *for* civic culture, and education *for* the biosphere and bio-centric diversity. Southern (2007) suggests we therefore need to consider *who we are in relation to others* (Southern 2007, p.334). In highlighting its relational nature, she effectively creates a conceptual bridge from transformative learning to co-creating learning communities of care. In offering this relational model, Southern (2007) thereby invites us to appreciate that the creation of learning communities involves combined strategies of language (sense-making) and practical action, and notes the need to cultivate relations of trust, truth, shared values and shared understanding. Via a series of iterative learning cycles, she proposes the steps of invitation, participation, engagement, commitment and collaboration as the constituent conditions for creating a learning community.

In similar vein, Wals (2020) suggests we can turn our attention to caring about the future via a relational pedagogy of hope. The range of things and beings about whose futures we care include human and nonhuman species, and natural ecosystems. Bearing this in mind, Wals urges educators to teach through:

an ethic of care, solidarity, sharing, mindfulness, and sensitivity to the ‘other’ far away and unknown...establishing a pedagogy that is critical, and emancipatory...[and urging learners to ask]...bold and disruptive questions about why things are the way they are, to learn how things can be changed, but also what keeps them from changing (Wals 2020; 825) .

Wals insists that it is important not to fall into hopelessness, pessimism or apathy. Rather, by creating and activating possibilities to act through on-site engagement and learning, democracies of energy, water, food, green spaces, mobility and equitable sharing can be mobilised and come to the fore. Souza *et al.* (2019) advocate a similarly purposeful and action-oriented approach. In contrast to the more abstract reflection that may accompany learning environments in the classroom or online, they propose that educators should work with and within communities who are facing concrete in-situ sustainability problems. That is, we should address specific societal and sustainability problems or objectives that are located in direct experience. For example, we could ask how we might simultaneously help a self-organised group of citizens improve their livelihoods, while achieving ecological outcomes of improved quality of local water. Comprising a series of technical and learning-oriented actions, such an approach can bring about collective learning and improved sustainability practices.

Synthesising the above approaches to *transformative learning* into a set of common pedagogic and practical characteristics is not difficult since the sources are remarkably consistent. This is a point we will return to later in the chapter when we develop an integrated composite model of transformative learning, community and leadership rooted in concrete sustainability action.

Transformative Community

We can see from the short synthesis above that connections between transformative learning and transformative community are already developed in the educational literature. These connections emerge in pedagogies that bring about learning communities of care (Southern, 2007) and hope (Wals, 2020). However, Souza *et al.* (2019) advocate that we reach beyond

the classroom to work in particular places and with/within communities to address concrete problems of care. Specifically, they recommend that the focus of care should be that of achieving improvements for the people things, and situations. Transformative learning and the development of a learning community are thereby rendered a positive but ultimately indirect and secondary outcome associated with engaging communities directly in an organised systematic problem-centred teleological (means-end) process. It is the end result – an improvement in people’s lives – that remains the key outcome of such engagement.

Blay-Palmer *et al.* (2013) extend the scope of analysis to the wider arena of social practices. That is, they focus on how communities – of place and of interest (or what we are calling care) – can in turn evolve into democratic learning communities. They note that civic and economic interactions intrinsically link communities of place and communities of interest around a common concern. For example, communities of food are a spatially embedded nexus of social and material practices, involving faculty/activists, student/activists and communities of place/interest. These communities are effectively held together by a common critical position on the multiple harms caused by what Stirling (2019) calls the “socio-material incumbency” of industrial food production. Communities of food are thus connected by a shared concern to move food systems in a more transformative direction through the building of extended social networks to create sustainable food hubs. Moreover, Blay-Palmer *et al.* (2013) suggest that this kind of transformative work also involves creating democratic learning communities of inquiry and practice. Actively involved in social discourse, communities of interest themselves generate new knowledge, while at the same time critically examining this knowledge in relation to existing social practices.

Transformative Leadership

As shown above, the academic literature on transformative learning and transformative community shows evidence of cross-fertilisation. Similarly, but to a lesser extent, a smaller literature sits at the intersection of transformative learning and transformative leadership. This focuses on what transformative leadership means in the context of higher education. A small number of authors are particularly active in this space (e.g. Astin and Astin, 2000; Shields, 2011; 2017; 2020; Haddock-Fraser *et al.*, 2018). However, compared with the other two elements, the literature on transformative leadership – and its cognates such as responsible leadership, caring leadership and authentic leadership – is more wide-ranging. Reaching far beyond the immediate setting of education and higher education, this literature is found within the fields of business ethics, organisational studies, organisational institutionalism and change, and organisational learning among others.

Caring leadership, as articulated by Tomkins and Simpson (2015) is based on Heidegger's philosophy of care. Rejecting leadership based on the agency of heroic and charismatic individuals, caring leadership is collective. It encompasses a high tolerance of ambivalence and a rich sense of temporal trajectory. Authentic leadership is similarly values-based. Values, traits and virtues are personal, but also facilitate leaders in adopting an orientation to doing what is right for their constituency (Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Nilsson, 2015). That is, personal values can be mobilised into generative contributions to society (Roberts and Creary, 2012).

This focus on relationality and relationships is yet more pronounced within the literature on responsible leadership. In this case, ethical principles drive the choice and nature of relationships, with attention attuned to the building of positive relationships with the full range of the organisation's stakeholders (internal and external). By including those stakeholders who represent the interests of social and natural environments, this approach effectively 'weaves a web of inclusion' (Maak and Pless 2006, p.6). It is through this

relational interaction that change and improvement occurs. That is, both sides effectively raise each other to higher levels of motivation and commitment (Pless and Maak, 2011). Freeman and Auster (2011) understand this as a dynamic and creative process of ongoing inquiry, in which authenticity is effectively built through the range of relationships with communities.

Within literature focused specifically on higher education, transformative leadership is understood as fundamentally oriented to bringing about social change: This kind of leadership contrasts clearly with ideas about management, which is arguably about maintaining the status quo (Astin and Astin, 2000). Transformative leadership takes an intentionally critical and normative approach (Shields, 2011). That is, it begins with questions of justice and democracy, addresses both the private and public good, and critiques inequitable practices (Shields, 2020). Of particular interest here is Astin and Astin's (2000) emphasis on how leadership can be distributed across students as well as staff. Likewise, they underline how groups represent a positive force that can nurture collaboration, capitalise on members' diverse talents and support a shared purpose. Thus Shields (2017, p.i) suggests transformative leadership can create learning environments that are "academically excellent, equitable, inclusive and socially just even in the face of the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world of education."

Methodology

In order to explore how university teachers and learners can come together to engage in futures-oriented 'hope-work,' we decided to pursue an action research-inspired approach. This was a good philosophical fit with the responsive and values-based character of our inquiry into transformative learning, communities and leadership. First, we wanted to make

both a theoretical and practical contribution. Action research enabled us to do this, through its focus on ‘developing practical knowing... and [pursuing] practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people’ (Reason and Bradbury 2001, p.1). Second, as underlined throughout, we wanted to involve students’ actively within the research process. Action research is a participatory and democratic way of undertaking research (Bradbury, 2015). The specific form of action research we settled on was co-operative inquiry. This is concerned with both reframing our understanding of the world and transforming practice within it (Heron and Reason, 2001; Maughan and Reason, 2001; Riley and Reason, 2015). Co-operative inquiry brought us together as a group of learners of equal value and with an equal footing in this study. In particular, we drew on Heron’s ideas about extended ways of knowing. These include experiential (lived) knowing, presentational knowing, the knowing of art, story, music and expression, propositional knowing, the knowing of science, academia and policy and finally practical knowing which is the sum of all of the others and takes place out in the world (Heron 1996, pp.32-34; Heron and Reason, 2008). Our research journey began with the discussion of our stories and then centred on a series of meetings of our student sustainability group.

‘Our stories’

At the outset, the ten co-authors all committed to produce, share and discuss short pieces of reflective writing or visuals that would help us get to know each other better by stepping out from behind the veil of our professional personas. Through our stories we shared with each other how we have ended up with an academic and/or professional interest in sustainability issues, specifically by describing some of our formative life experiences and reflecting on the things about which we care. According to Nilsson (2015,p.376), this surfacing and sharing of

our inner experiences is a “key dimension of positive institutional work.” Our stories thus provided the foundations on which our cooperative inquiry was built, by bringing to light our lived experiences and helping us get to know each other better. As we reached out to our student body and asked them to get involved with our research, we therefore asked them to share their own such stories as a starting point in the meetings discussed below.

Student Sustainability Group

Most of our data comes from nine online meetings, which took place under Covid lockdown conditions in March-June 2021 (see Table 1). The co-authors convened the group to explore our shared ideas about transformative learning, communities and leadership. Three of the sessions were conceived as research meetings to directly facilitate this. Each lasted about two hours. In addition, there were three activity-based sessions with guest speakers and three socials where we watched films and chatted together. It was originally envisaged that the cooperative inquiry research sessions, and the activities/ social sessions would be fundamentally different in nature and focus. But in the event all nine meetings contributed to relationship-building within the group, developing members’ ideas about learning, community, and leadership. Of particular interest is the way the meetings became a reflective and social space, where traditional staff/student power relationships evaporated. For example, guest speakers for the activity-based sessions were students or former students themselves, sharing their experiences of working to challenge social inequality, or decolonise the curriculum for example. More detail about the meetings – particularly the research meetings – emerges in the findings below. In summary, they served as a way to bring us together, with the students learning about action research alongside us as part of the study itself. Thus rather than being

passive respondents, they were engaged co-participants within the project, contributing on an equal footing.

Table 1 The Student sustainability group programme (nine online sessions March-June 2021)

<u>Socials</u>	<u>Research</u>	<u>Activities</u>
Film Nights Occurred every 6 weeks as part of the SES film nights series	Online student group discussions towards our Bloomsbury Book Chapter on Sustainability in HE	Co-crafting and building the idea of a Faculty Student Sustainability Group/Society
Tues 2nd March	Thurs 18th March Introducing the research and first online student group discussion	Thurs 4th March “Welcome & Introductions: Initial programme and brainstorming future ideas”
Tues 27th April	Thurs 1st April Second online student group discussion	Thurs 24th March “Sustainability Student Group: Diversity, Inclusion, Voicing & Building Bridges”

Tues 8th June	Thurs 7th May	Thurs 13th May
	Third online student group discussion: Obtaining student feedback to our analysis/findings of the student group discussions and draft book chapter	“Circular Economy: Learning & discussing some of Manchester Met’s current EU-funded projects with colleagues currently working e.g. on the EU REDUCES and ECO-I projects”

Source: Authors

Findings

The student sustainability group brought the co-author team together with a group of students interested in both understanding and undertaking transformative learning, community-building and leadership. Our findings below highlight some of the many things we learnt from our interactions with these witty, wise and inspiring young people. While we have structured our findings according to our three underpinning concepts, from the outset the distinctions between transformative learning, communities and leadership begin to break down.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning assumes a world in which change is continuous and people are excavating and acting upon our own purposes, values and feelings rather than simply

absorbing those of people around us (Mezirow and Associates, 2000). This sense of critical thinking – sometimes even outrage – emerged clearly during meetings of the student sustainability group. This comes through in the reflections of one participant, who has been involved in Manchester Met’s Carbon Literacy initiative, which helps people understand and gain accreditation in understanding of the causes and impacts of our everyday carbon emissions. During a lively discussion towards the end of a later meeting, he recalls his frustration upon arriving at university:

It was almost like a slap in the face. It was like come on, wake up! There is something going on and there’s stuff to do. Stop being so blind and look at all those statistics and facts and the situation the climate is at the minute... If things go wrong, it is not going to be good.

This surprised the author team, as our sense was that over the years incoming undergraduates join Manchester Met with an ever deeper understanding of sustainability issues. However, another participant concurred, saying that she believed young people were not taught enough about issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss:

As soon as you're educated on it, then you can't unsee it... I didn't really ever learn about [sustainability] until university. I don't think it was really mentioned in college or high school.

Instead, it was family and community who played a primary role in developing the students’ ideas about the kinds of global challenges we have raised here. At various meetings, they

shared stories of long car journeys with inspirational podcasts playing in the background, and memories of meeting up with friends and neighbours to pick up litter on their estate.

However, even for those arriving with this early grounding, their time at university has been formative in shaping their thinking about sustainability. One participant noted that her combined experience of the Carbon Literacy programme, sustainability-focused units and the group meetings themselves was enabling her to connect ideas and issues in ways that she had not done previously:

I think it's really important to ensure we've got racial equity training at university. As the speaker mentioned last week, the effects of racial marginalisation really ties in with environmental sustainability. For example, the way that the West is so blind to the environmental problems it is causing in Africa...

Transformative learning depends upon and reinforces our relations with others, as we invite and engage with those around us (Southern, 2007). Participants talked about their awareness of how they and the university are embedded within local and wider communities. For example, one participant noted the possibilities for amplifying institutional and individual efforts through specific collaborative initiatives like carbon literacy and community outreach centred on the SDGs: 'Then everyone is going to get that kind of inspiration and then they'll sort it themselves.'

Finally, our meetings confirmed that rather than falling into hopelessness or apathy, students were creating possibilities to act upon specific problems with and within communities (Souza *et al.*, 2019; Wals, 2020). One participant shared his experience of working with a food bank every week, another is active in her local "friends of the park"

group, while another has set up a mentoring organisation that sends young motivational speakers into schools in deprived areas.

In summary, over the course of nine meetings, the student sustainability group helped inform our understanding of transformative learning, while also enabling us to experience it for ourselves. While most members came to the group with a comparatively high level of awareness about sustainability, this was enhanced by coming together as a group. This shared experience enabled us to recognise how the world is constantly changing, explore and question our own experiences and values, and recognise our ties to others. Perhaps most powerfully, it reinforced our individual and collective commitment to taking concrete action for change, to which we return below.

Transformative Community

The literature suggests that we must reach beyond the classroom to address concrete problems that matter to people. By so doing, learning is rendered an important but secondary outcome of a care-based approach to achieving improvements for people in specific communities (Souza *et al.*, 2019). This came out clearly in our discussions. For example, one participant explains how her commitment to tackling local challenges enabled her to overcome her reluctance to integrate into a new community upon arriving at Manchester Met:

I didn't have social media for a long time just because I didn't like it but when I moved to Manchester I joined [local Facebook group]...and it was kind of like 'is there anybody who wants to meet and plant some plants?!'

Most of the participating students had left home in order to attend university. This is usual in the UK context but more uncommon at Manchester Met, where about 50 percent of Business School students live at home^[1]. In particular, about half our undergraduates are the first in their family to go to university and many of them come from areas that are disadvantaged in terms of issues like pollution, health and employment prospects. This has contributed to the Business School developing a strategic focus on transforming communities. The location of the campus – which borders some comparatively poor neighbourhoods – has also shaped the students' awareness of the need for community action, particularly among those who may come from more affluent areas themselves:

I do a lot of work with a food bank... We collect surplus food from supermarkets in the local area...and part-time, I'm on the community team at [large supermarket chain] and I find small charities... at the moment we're focusing on young families, and we are going around these charities and kind of seeing what and how we can help them.

As indicated by this example, the students all had their own interests and cares, many of which tied them into communities of place but also more spatially dispersed communities of interest that condense around a common concern (Blay-Palmer, 2013). For this particular student, his concern was sustainable food. At a later meeting, he talked passionately about how Manchester Met might support urban agriculture both on its own land and through outreach within local communities. But he also talked about the need to transform global food systems more widely, drawing on other aspects of his lived experience to articulate the extent to which this represents a shared endeavour:

We need to include the actual invisible cost of food. Everything from biodiversity, loss of freshwater, pollution and even chronic disease. So I'm trying to have an impact at the moment. I've just had a couple of meetings with [large supermarket chain] and all this stuff that's been sent to landfill is now going to be used by a non-profit organisation that I volunteer with, and other non-profits.

As suggested in the literature, then, the students themselves recognise the overlap between transformative community and transformative learning. Another member of the group, at various meetings returned to his belief in the power of education, and the link between education, action and inter-personal relations:

Education is the most powerful tool to shape how people think. For me is all about two things. It is all about turning visual spectators into active participants and getting them to act. And it is also about turning values into actions. The problem is that most people now are visual spectators and a lot of them [are not turning their values into action]... It's all about...bridging that reality.

Transformative Leadership

Our experience with the student sustainability group supported Astin and Astin's (2000) view that transformative leadership within an HE context is fundamentally oriented to bringing about social change. The students suggested that this change was one of both attitude and behaviour, or perhaps values and actions. Our shared encounters provided plenty of evidence of the former. For example, at our wide-ranging and warm-hearted final meeting, one of the participants said simply 'we just need to be more compassionate and kinder.'

Likewise, at an earlier meeting, another student suggested that ‘we have an obligation and duty of care and we should do the right thing.’ However, our interactions also uncovered illustrations of how students helped encourage changes in behaviour too. Here we note the particular influence of the placement experience, though which many business students spend the third year of their four-year course working in industry. While the institutional rhetoric emphasises the value to the students of undertaking a placement in terms of academic attainment and career progression, what emerged in our conversations was the students’ excitement upon realising that the impact went both ways:

I went into placement year thinking about waste and our carbon impact and the role that I was in. And I just couldn't stop thinking about it really and I put a business case together because I was quite appalled about... [what we were doing regarding] waste, transport, the lack of recycling at minor level. And it got accepted by the commercial manager. It was the first eye opener that I could persuade someone to take environmental impact in a multinational company.

Another student undertook her placement in a multinational company with an established reputation for sustainability. She talked about how her day-to-day role actively contributed to efforts to embed the principles of circular economy across the business. Thus, some of the students reflected the process described by Pless and Maak (2011), in which responsible business leaders weave a web that includes multiple stakeholders: Both sides potentially raise each other to higher levels of motivation and commitment. The interesting thing for us is that this kind of mutual influence exerts itself very early on in a young person’s career; in this case, before they even graduate. Thus, while our findings support Astin and Astin’s (2000)

contention that leadership can be distributed across students as well as staff, this happens not only within the university but outside too.

The students themselves are clearly aware of the intergenerational possibilities of transformative leadership, exhibiting what Tomkins and Simpson (2015) describe as a rich sense of temporal trajectory. First, this led to a desire to advocate for change on behalf of future generations. For example, one participant talked eloquently about wanting ‘younger generations to be able to see what we see’ such as parks and nature all around us. In a later session, the student with a special interest in sustainable food put forward a similar view, suggesting that the key is to educate the young kids by bringing gardens back to schools and supporting initiatives to encourage more people to cook at home.

Second, as a group, the students effectively model academic excellence, inclusivity and collaboration to people younger (and older!) than themselves. For example, one of the students shared her experience of volunteering with a social enterprise that supports children and disadvantaged young people. This process is sometimes conscious, as when a participant describes how we might bring about the combined approach to transformative learning and communities discussed above:

Merging the gap that currently exists with communities and university students... can then create a visible mission on what students can do within the community.

But sometimes this process of influencing and inspiring others may be undertaken unconsciously, as when the students act as a vector for more sustainable habits as they go back and forth between their homes and university halls of residence. Students also frequently spoke about their personal consumption levels and rejection of fast fashion, for

example, without realising just how much these changes in their own behaviour might be picked up and replicated by those around them (McNeill and Moore, 2015).

In summary, the student sustainability group emerges as a shared safe space, in which relations of trust, openness and enjoyment emerged. This was conducive to both carrying out transformative learning, community-building and leadership, and to shaping our ideas about these same concepts. In both theory and practice, what comes through very clearly is their strongly interrelated character. The wide-ranging stories we tell above would suggest that what holds the three concepts together is a set of underlying and interconnected principles including a focus on values, relationships and action. These principles underpin the composite, integrated and mutually-reinforcing theoretical model that we set out in the next section.

Discussion: Proposing a Composite Model of Transformational Learning, Community and Leadership

The findings of our co-operative inquiry, as outlined above, illuminate how transformative learning, transformative community and transformative leadership overlap in multiple and significant ways. We will briefly explore three key reflections this opens up with regard to existing scholarship, before presenting and explaining our composite model.

Our first reflection is that a focus on mattering reveals the wide diversity of cares and concerns among teachers and learners. By inviting participants to share what matters to them and why, we opened up the discussion to a wider range of issues that we might normally discuss in the classroom. Care for young people, especially pursuing social justice for disadvantaged young people, was a common concern across the group. But other concerns

raised included everything from food banks, to racism and biodiversity loss. On the one hand, this confirms the extent to which the notion of sustainability encompasses a dizzying range of challenges (Longo *et al.*, 2016; Murphy, 2012). On the other, the organic and discursive approach adopted in our meetings enabled students themselves to identify and reflect on the linkages between those complex challenges. Perhaps most significantly, our emphasis on their own lived experiences meant they were constantly reflecting on how they and others were dealing with them, thereby encouraging an understanding that was galvanising rather than fatalistic.

In summary, while the actual situated cares differed between participants, the notion of cares and concerns *sui-generis* held the group together. This in turn opens up the possibility of scaling up this kind of hope work. That is, anyone can contribute to and benefit from a similar initiative, as long as they are open to it. Or, to use language drawn from our business school setting, this kind of initiative has very low barriers to entry and is therefore scalable across different kinds of institutional settings and student populations.

Our second reflection is that the process of co-operative inquiry, in and of itself, brought unanticipated benefits. By sharing our experiences and stories about the things that matter to us during regular meetings over the course of four months, as a group we came to know each other better and differently. We all stepped out from behind the veil of our professional/student personas. For Nilsson (2015, p.376), surfacing and sharing our inner experiences is a key dimension of positive institutional work. That is, transformational change depends on the high quality connections that emerge in large part from “routinised experiential surfacing...marked by a high emotional carrying capacity.” In our case, the positive emotional response that the inquiry engendered became a central finding, rather than a supplementary side-show. That is, interrogating and sharing our lived experiences made it clear that our original objective needed to change. We were no longer aiming to develop our

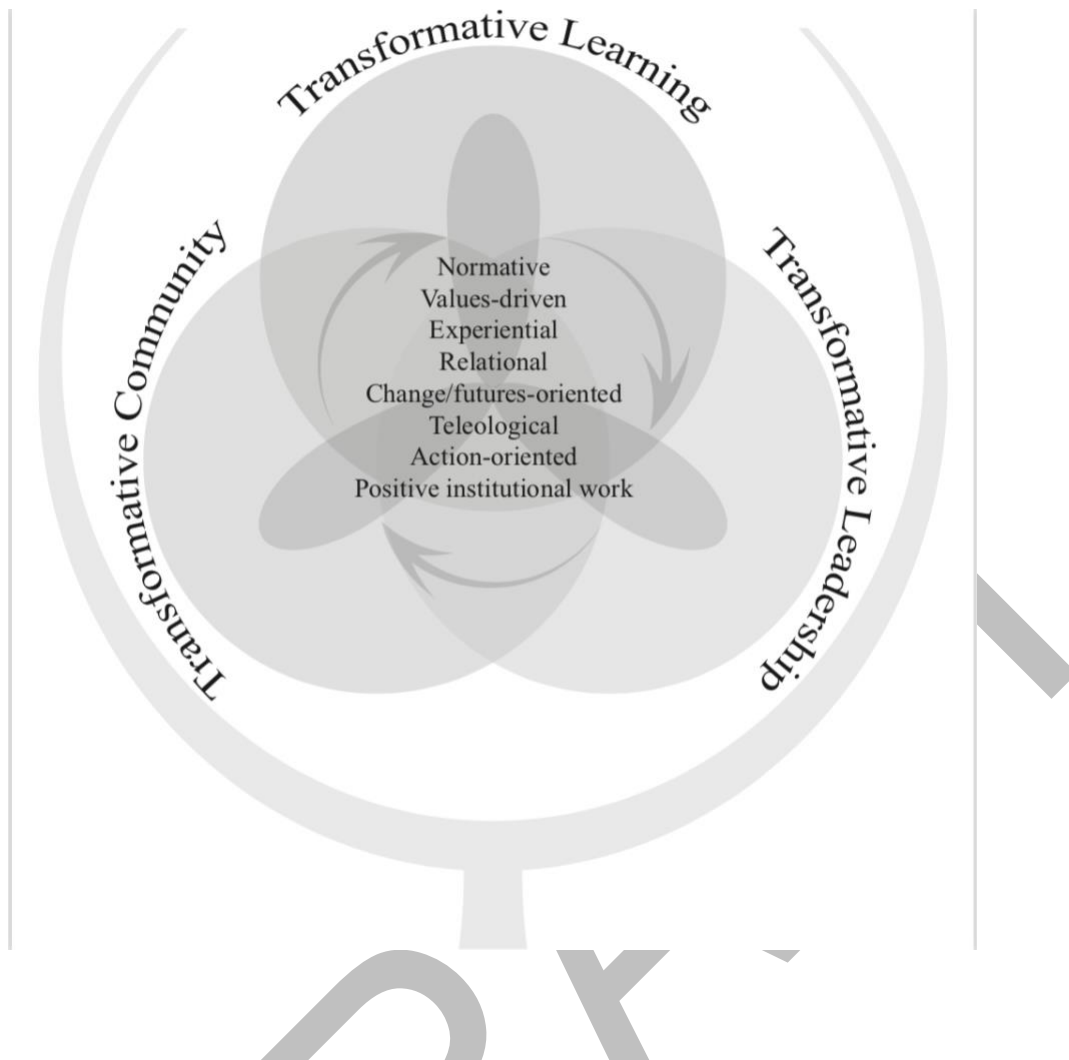
own theoretical stance on the concepts of transformative learning, transformative community, and transformative leadership. Instead, we found ourselves developing a more integrated, composite, simultaneous and mutually-reinforcing model of all three concepts, centred on a common set of connecting principles and rooted in subjective experiences of practical cares and concerns. This reminds us of Heidegger's invocation that we should relinquish our habitual, purposeful and goal-oriented approach in favour of a more thoughtful (but not passive) form of attunement to others, or what he calls a kind of "letting be" (Heidegger, 1968; Trakakis, 2018). Perhaps particularly in the context of such a complex field as sustainability, the journey is as important as the destination

Our third reflection is that this slow, experientially-focused experiment points to the possibility of embedding a more bottom-up approach to sustainability, even as we acknowledge the competitive regime that drives higher education around the world. What Clarke (2015) calls "hope work" emerged as a central feature of the study, arising in a multitude of small but significant ways. It was there in the unscheduled recounting of small everyday examples of care and caring, before, during and after our meetings. And in the respectful and gentle way the co-participants of the group treated each other. Thus a hopeful disposition became an encultured and symbolic feature of the group. Our study thus bears witness to patches and moments of positive institutional work experienced all the time across the university. These appeared to buck, repel, resist, and exist within the often-problematic forces to which we are all subject as actors both within an increasingly competitive higher education sector and the post-Covid world beyond. Large organisations such as universities, are pluralistic and inherently political entities, where the often contradictory and shifting nature of institutional logics appears to close-down opportunities to address normative positive social purposes. In fact, on the contrary, these shifting sands open spaces for positive institutional work to operate within and across the gaps that open up (Greenwood *et al.*, 2017;

Hampel *et al.*, 2017; Kratz and Block, 2017). We need to think about how we can effectively translate our shared and emergent cares and concerns into a language that the organisational hierarchy recognises, in a way that is still fully compatible with the normative anchors of this chapter.

In summary, these three reflections suggest that a focus on mattering, cares and concerns enables a bottom-up approach to sustainability teaching and strategy. This approach enables us to learn from each other, build community and trust, and share leadership across a potentially wide and diverse group. Together with our review of the literature and the process of co-operative inquiry itself, this leads us to offer a reworked model of the three concepts of transformative learning, transformative community and transformative leadership. That is, we see them not as three separate entities, but as a single composite, integrated and mutually-reinforcing model. Figure 1 sets out our model, which presents three interlocking and mutually supportive concepts that are in turn based on eight common undergirding features.

Figure 1: A composite and integrated model of transformational learning, community and leadership



Eight principles that underlie transformative learning, transformative community and transformative leadership

Normative: Oriented to addressing specific cares, concerns and mattering

Values-driven: Oriented to an ethical stance involving commitment freedom, community, health and justice

Experiential: Rooted in lived experiences that are located in particular times and places

Relational: Involves building and nurturing relationships of trust and compassion with both people and nonhuman species who are close to us and further away

Change/futures-oriented: Imagines alternative futures where the things, beings and environments about which we care are faring better

Teleological: Maps out alternative scenarios and means/ends for bringing about the imagined transformations including the institutional conditions holding systemic and structural incumbency in place

Action-oriented: Advocates for visible and practical action

Positive institutional work: Surfaces and names the institutional work needed to bring about the changes such as hope work, anticipation work, creative and collective leadership work)

Source: Authors

Rooted in an experiential ontology, an important implication of our experience, as set out in the chapter so far, is that the model is not to be imposed as an objective tick-box exercise. Rather, we acknowledge that its outputs also will be a product of further experiential surfacing. The model thus represents a reflexive tool and we present here with this in mind: That is, we hope it will help others in cultivating their own such experiences, in specific time/space care-focussed situations, and with the participative and inclusive involvement of those who will be impacted by the changes situated at the heart of the model itself.

Tentative Conclusions and an Invitation to Action

We have made the case above that transformative learning, communities and leadership are overlapping and mutually supportive concepts. Together, they play a key role in hope work.

This makes possible the optimistic, agency-centred perspective – with its experiential ontology and emancipatory hopefulness – that has permeated this chapter. Recognising the strategic and political nature of this kind of positive institutional work, we have hinted that the matters of concern arising within informal and participatory processes like the one outlined here might be brought into conversation with – and potentially help shape – more formal, institutional objectives. Here we set out some ideas for action and invite others to build on our experience in their own way, as together we seek to envision and enjoy a more liveable future for our shared planet.

Our First Invitation: Embrace the Power of the Group

We are painfully aware of the potential (in)compatibility between an experiential transformative pedagogy rooted in cares and mattering and structural questions of scale that are unavoidable at vast modern universities like Manchester Met. Considering the question of organisational scale, an important lesson and message of our experience has been an appreciation that staff and student experiences of cares and concerns take place at, and are facilitated through, multiple levels within and beyond the university. When done effectively, experiential opportunities do not occur in siloes but arise and unfold at multiple levels throughout the organisation, arising both bottom-up and top-down. But an important addition to this multi-level organisational perspective highlighted in the chapter is the need to acknowledge the importance of the lower scale of the group, where meaningful and trusting relationships can be developed at a human scale, and experiential surfacing can be enabled in an authentic way.

Suggested action points for institutions: Support, nurture and resource staff who are committed to student and community development

For staff: Create opportunities for students to meet up in cooperative learning sessions, even if only once or twice a year. Better still, invite people from the local area and further afield to join in

For students: Reach out to fellow students and see if you can share ideas and take action together. Tell your lecturers about what you are doing!

Our Second Invitation: Embrace the Power of Slow

We are also aware that in addition to the challenges of size, a second structural pressure is the potential conflict of temporal scales. Relational, reflective and experiential models rooted in care and caring celebrate “slow.” By contrast, the rapid spinning of the accelerated academy represents its antithesis (Honore, 2004; Stengers, 2018; Taylor, 2020). The integrated model of transformative learning, community and leadership proposed in this chapter takes time, as participants engage in and reflect on immersive experiences within specific contexts of care and caring. To borrow from Burboles (2020), how can we foster an approach to sustainability teaching and strategy that is similarly careful, deliberate and perspicacious?

Suggested action points for institutions: Foster the understanding and use of more participative methodologies so that the focus of our research is more closely aligned to what really matters to people

For staff: Keep on keeping on over the years, even if the gains seem small – over decades they will add up.

For students: See if you can link into the communities you live in and help them – invite your lecturers to come with you! This will also help your CV and employability.

We recognise that the above ideas require a change in perspective. We would no longer be asking “how quickly can we get this done?” but rather “how deeply does the change resonate and how enduring will it be?” We think the time is ripe for such a shift: The accelerated ever-expanding model of academia risks overloading its staff, depleting the student experience and undermining public confidence in the whole enterprise of higher education. The students and staff involved in this chapter have been committed together to bringing about such a change in perspective in our own institution. We invite you to join us.

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[1] This compares to a figure of 20 percent among the UK student population as a whole (Whyte 2019).