Can intergenerational learning be delivered effectively online?

Denise Nicolson, 12/4/21

Definition of intergenerational learning:

Generations Working Together (GWT), is the nationally recognised centre of excellence supporting the development and integration of intergenerational work across Scotland. They define intergenerational learning as, ‘the way that people of all ages can learn together and from each other. It is an important part of Lifelong Learning, where the generations work together to gain skills, values and knowledge. Beyond the transfer of knowledge, it fosters reciprocal learning relationships between different generations and helps develop social capital and social cohesion in our ageing societies.

For my study, I chose to investigate intergenerational learning out with the family unit, where outcomes help build relationships that strengthen communities and help create a fairer society.

The strongest outcomes from intergenerational work are usually where there is a physical contact and close up interaction between partners, which prompted my research question, *Can intergenerational learning be delivered effectively online?* From the research I have read and conversations I have had, there are many projects that have not made the transition to online delivery and many that are connecting through use of the phone and newsletters, however there is significant evidence of intergenerational projects that are engaging effectively with creative use of technology. How effective these projects will prove in the long run has yet to be determined. Research is in early stages.

*Using Technology to Connect Generations*, focuses on 46 intergenerational learning programmes with a strong IT component. Benefits for older people participating in these programmes include having positive aging experiences, health and wellbeing benefits and maintenance of social connections. Benefits for young participants include gaining skills and knowledge that contribute to employability and gaining an understanding of issues relating to aging. Participants were enabled to participate in community activity such as preserving local history and, through IT connection, geographical barriers were removed enabling families to stay connected. Challenges include building relationships at a distance and addressing inequalities where there are limited IT skills, support and access. Key points to successful delivery include Appropriateness (age-friendly activities and tools), Comfort Levels (non-threatening, easy to use and understand IT), Access (to technology, adaptive technology, support), Flexibility and Creativity.

The Generations United resource, *Intergenerational Programmes and Physical Distancing: What do we do when we can’t be together?* shares ideas from intergenerational programmes on how to adapt and use technology to connect generations to deliver effectively online. Key messages are be creative, be responsive, be simple, be patient.

A Griffith University intergenerational project demonstrates the positive impact on participants. In his Presentation for the Australian Digital HealthcareSummit Greg Cronan explores the value of his Loneliness Reduction Programme involving school pupils and older residential care facility residents. Positive benefits for older people include reduction in loneliness, improved mental health, sleep quality, happiness and wellbeing. Young people learn from, with and about their elders, experience positive behaviour changes, improve communication and language skills and increase interpersonal skills needed for a workplace. Ageism is challenged from an early age. The main challenges relate to IT provision and the environment and managing the diverse range of abilities and behaviours. Key to success are effective facilitation, good planning, adequate preparation of both groups, simple to use technology which requires little or no intervention by participant, the ability to get close up views of participants (to observe facial expressions and for those with eyesight conditions) and reciprocal learning through enjoyable, purposeful and meaningful activity.

Winner of Generations Working Together Digital Innovation Award, Hen Power, a charity which uses hens to build bonds between the generations, is now bringing school pupils and care home residents together online. They participate in online craft activities and the pupils also take the hens along for virtual visits. Care Home staff report improved mental and physical health and describe the project as a type of therapy for the residents.

The Citadel Youth Centre and Pilmeny Development Project, New Spin, has successfully transitioned to online delivery after overcoming the challenge of digital exclusion. Provision of IT equipment and moving to an accessible platform has maintained intergenerational connections throughout the pandemic. Key messages are: Build positive relationships (the solid foundation), Include the Five Senses (interactive sensory activities with packs supplied in advance of the online session), Time makes all the difference (don’t underestimate the amount of time to prepare for successful digital intergenerational activities). Citadel’s project ‘Tea Time with Tom’ invites young people, families and older people participate in online cook along sessions with chef, Tom Kitchin. Ingredients are funded by Friends of the Citadel, delivered to participants by staff and are filmed by the Citadel manager, who states, ‘This project has made people feel special again’.

*Stronger Together? Intergenerational connection and Covid-19* applauds the creative ways to develop intergenerational activity using a virtual environment but raises concerns around maintaining real relationships and sustainability. He stated, ‘ What is still unknown is how far these newer community initiatives have reached the most isolated and lonely older people and younger people and engaged with them.’ He highlights the necessity for effective evaluation of new initiatives, and research into the experiences of all ages during lockdown, highlighting that this will take time.

Key points we need to think about to deliver effective intergenerational learning online are:

* Accept that technology can be ‘a barrier and an opportunity’ (*Using Technology to Connect Generations)*
* Look at examples of what is working well, learn from them and actively promote them to dispel the myths that intergenerational learning cannot be delivered effectively online.
* Explore alternative ways we can build meaningful relationships and create bonds online using creative methods and appropriate technology.
* Make plans to address inequalities including access to equipment, connectivity, support and to opportunities to connect with others. Do we know who is digitally excluded? Can we train young people to become digital champions?
* Be aware that one size doesn’t fit all. Intergenerational projects may involve young people from pre-school to teenagers (and older), various abilities and behaviours and older participants may include those who wish to support or mentor young people, those who are technologically able and those who are lonely or digitally disconnected. Also, people who live independently must be included as well as those who are in supported living or residential care.
* Don’t look on this as a temporary measure. Take what is successful and build on it, e.g. using intergenerational online projects to break down geographical barriers and reach those who are housebound or excluded through other barriers to participation.
* Share examples of what works well and what doesn’t work so well. Contribute to

research that has not yet been written.

Source material

Generations Working Together glossary of intergenerational terms: <https://generationsworkingtogether.org/about/intergenerational-practice>

‘Using Technology to Connect Generations’, A joint Penn State University – Generations United initiative.

<https://aese.psu.edu/outreach/intergenerational/program-areas/technology>

‘Intergenerational Programmes and Physical Distancing: What do we do when we can’t be together?’ , a Generations United resource:

[Intergenerational-Programs-and-Physical-Distancing.pdf (gu.org)](https://www.gu.org/app/uploads/2020/04/Intergenerational-Programs-and-Physical-Distancing.pdf)

Griffith University article, ‘GRIFFITH ALUMNUS MAINTAINS INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTIONS DURING LOCKDOWN’:

[Griffith alumnus maintains intergenerational connections during lockdown - BSI Connection](https://blogs.griffith.edu.au/bsi-connection/2020/04/27/griffith-alumnus-maintains-intergenerational-connections-during-lockdown/)

Intergenerational Learning Australia video: ‘Presentation for the Australian Digital HealthcareSummit’ :

<https://intergenerational-learning.com.au/videos>

The Gazette newspaper article, ‘Charity award: HenPower proves 'eggs-cellent':

<https://www.the-gazette.co.uk/news/19189694.charity-award-henpower-proves-eggs-cellent/>

Generations Working Together youtube video, ‘HenPower’:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOHIK8ebVj8>

Generations Working Together report, ‘How to turn your intergenerational project into a digital one’:

<https://generationsworkingtogether.org/news/new-spin-13-03-2021>

Edinburgh Evening News article, ‘Citadel Youth Centre cook-along with Michelin star chef Tom Kitchin’:

[Citadel Youth Centre cook-along with Michelin star chef Tom Kitchin | Edinburgh News (scotsman.com)](https://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/health/coronavirus/citadel-youth-centre-cook-along-with-michelin-star-chef-tom-kitchin-3176179)

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