

The Role of Intergenerational Learning in Adult Education

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1. What is Intergenerational Learning?

Intergenerational learning (IL) is where people of all ages can learn together and from each other, classically common within families where knowledge is shared down the generations. More recently however it is seen as being facilitated with wider social groups outside the family circle. Academics, including [Kaplan \(2002\)](#) and [Vanderbeck & Worth \(2015\)](#) suggest the newer model contributes to the socialisation of the young and focuses on relationships. Kaplan, Sanchez & Hoffman, in their 2017 book [Intergenerational Pathways to a Sustainable Society](#), suggest that intergenerational relationships are instruments for the development and support of a sense of trust, in times where trust and social capital are eroding rapidly.

The European Map of Intergenerational Learning (a collaborative learning network on the role and status of intergenerational learning, ended in 2018) defines IL as a way that people of all ages can learn together and from each other. Thus, IL is an important part of Lifelong Learning, where the **generations work together to gain skills, values and knowledge**. Beyond the transfer of knowledge, IL fosters reciprocal learning relationships between different generations and helps to develop social capital and social cohesion in our ageing societies.

The [European Network of Intergenerational Learning](#) defines it as a learning partnership based on **reciprocity and mutuality** involving people of different ages where the generations work together to gain skills values and knowledge.

Intergenerational learning has an important purpose which requires further exploring and embedding in our education systems (both formal, non-formal and informal) so that all members of our societies can benefit from learning across the life span.





2. Why is it important?

Intergenerational learning can take place in a variety of social settings and through different programmes or projects which assist to strengthen social capital and bonds creating **social cohesion** in our communities.

It works well to **combat stereotypes** such as ageism (targeted towards young and old) and can assist to address demographic changes and bring solidarity across the life cycle, breaking down barriers and working towards an intergenerational world.

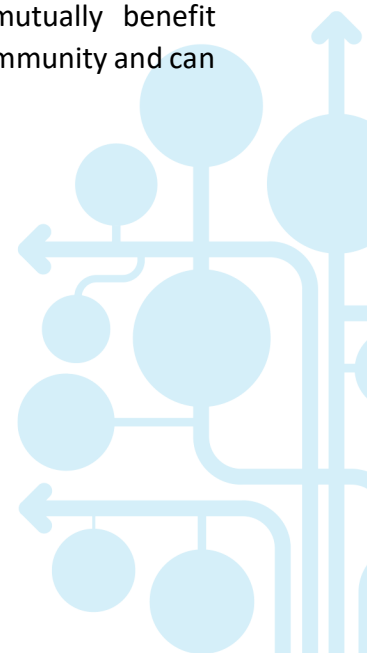
In our changing world, society has gone through changes, with a break down in family and geographic mobility – with generations being separated, particularly younger and older people. Negative stereotyping and lack of contact between these groups has led or can lead to a deterioration in social cohesion in our communities. Both groups have resources that are valued, through intergenerational learning they can share their skills and worth with each other. Both groups are marginalised in decision making and have more in common than they realise.

IL can strengthen communities to become more age-friendly by breaking down barriers between ages and stereotypes by one age group toward another to promote understanding, respect and trust whilst sharing ideas, skills, knowledge and experience.

With the current COVID-19 pandemic, intergenerational relationships are more important than ever. We are witnessing a new height in the level of negative headlines from the media. On a regular basis they pit the generations off each other using frightening headlines such as [The cull of the elderly](#) or [Teenage job hopes ruined by negative media stereotypes](#). One radio show called their afternoon chat section “Are young people killing older people”, with a more recent newspaper article writing “youngsters hit back at being made COVID-19 scapegoats” in an article titled [It’s not our fault](#). This form of media reporting is distancing the generations even further in a time when we should be helping and supporting each other.

Intergenerational programmes are more than “feel good activities”: they mutually benefit participants, as well as volunteers, staff, family members, organisations and the community and can address major concerns and issues in the local community such as:

- building active and safer communities;
- reducing inequality;
- reducing social isolation and loneliness;
- building relationships in communities;
- improving health and mental wellbeing;
- increasing digital connectivity;
- contributing to improve climate challenge.





3. What are the challenges and how do you overcome them?

The challenges in our communities and in our learning institutions and how we treat IL are imbedded in our current system of learning, and in our policy. Some challenges can derive from:

- social policy constraints;
- rigid institutional structures and conventions;
- lack of industry knowledge and organisational capacity;
- staff reluctance and lack of training;
- lack of an intergenerational learning curriculum;
- limited funding and resources.

To overcome challenges, it is wise to hold **separate meetings with the different age groups involved** before bringing everyone together; this will assist in discovering what the challenges may be, from an individual and organisational perspective. Some questions worth considering in these meetings include:

- fears, concerns and similarities of each generation;
- what are the differing needs and support;
- find a mutually agreeable time and suitable venue to meet;
- explore access to venue's or online platforms;
- identify mixed abilities between the groups;
- address and challenge pre-conceived assumptions about each other in a friendly manner;
- recognise different styles in communications between the different age groups.

4. What are the practical steps required to make a successful intergenerational learning programme?

Timings for getting to know your audience and building relationships will vary according to the level of communication that the participants offer each other. This will be different dependant on the age group, for example: nursery children and older people meeting in a respite dementia space; retired volunteers acting as mentors supporting students through their exams and on finding a place at university; young adults and older people learning together on a college course or a recreational class such as photography; older volunteers supporting primary school children with their literacy or numeracy.

When drafting a plan for your intergenerational programme consider getting on board **a partner who can represent the younger and older people** (even better if you can get potential participants involved in the planning) and any **specialist help** who may be able to provide additional help or training – for example a dementia specialist. Here are some questions you should consider:

- Who are your partners? Who will be on your planning group?
- How will you recruit younger and older participants, from which generation? How many participants?

- What is our aim and outcomes? What are the priority areas?
- What age groups are you programming for, what gender, what are their hobbies and past occupations (if appropriate).
- What types of activities do you think might work for the priority areas? Having knowledge about participants will give you a better idea of what they will be happy to take part in.
- Where will the programme/activities take place? Are there any costs/transport requirements? If so, how can you work around them?
- What are the main benefits you want to achieve? Think wider than participants: what about staff, parents, the organisation and community?
- What barriers might the programme face?
- How will you evaluate, measure and capture the true impact of the intergenerational learning and relationships built? Remember that evaluation is something that we must plan efficiently even before the project commences.
- How will you celebrate success and the new relationships and how do you sustain the relationships?

It is important for you **to evaluate your intergenerational programme** to see how well it is progressing. This provides an opportunity to reflect and identify any barriers or challenges and highlights success. As such, the planning of your programme is vitally important, it will guide your team when developing sustainability and future programmes. The difference that the activity/project has made is often referred to as the social impact. In short, evaluation will measure:

- the impact of your activity on the participants;
- whether that is learning, building relationships, or changing attitudes (it's up to you).

When you start to plan, there may be some **unexpected challenges and outcomes**. It is important to recognise what these could be, and then you can either limit them or be prepared to address/celebrate them. Here are some things for you to consider:

- holidays (term time, Easter, Christmas, Summer);
- getting groups connected;
- building relationships with possible partners;
- benefits for people and groups outside your immediate circle.

The projects below offer **resources and ideas for you to ponder**:

[Old's Cool Toolkit](#) The Citadel Youth Centre's Old's Cool Intergenerational Project aimed to train and support young people at risk of disengaging from school, to facilitate intergenerational activity with older people, and to present a record of their work to the wider community. As part of the project, this toolkit was created in order to share the Old's Cool model of Intergenerational Practice and to highlight best practice when working in partnership with schools.

[Intergenerational learning: exchanges between young and old – Jurriën Mentink](#): Watch this film about the creation of an intergenerational learning model which has had incredible effects on its participants. By offering students free housing in nursing homes in exchange for time spent with its



residents, this solution proposed by a Dutch student has stimulated one of the most beautiful and effective intergenerational learning models in the Netherlands. This shows you another way that links generations through reciprocal activities that benefit both groups.

[Apples and Honey Nightingale House](#) is an intergenerational nursery collocated in the ground of a care home.

[Designing an intergenerational City](#) - Ageing societies are prompting cities to rethink how they are structured and operate, both physically and socially.

5. Is training necessary and what elements should it cover?

Training is a critical component in the development of good intergenerational practice. People from all levels of work – strategists, senior management, supervisors, volunteers, family members and individuals – require sound knowledge of what intergenerational practice actually is and what the benefits are for those involved. With knowledge then comes the confidence to successfully design, facilitate, measure and evaluate the impact of the intergenerational initiative.

Television programmes such as [Older People's Homes for 4 Year Olds](#) created an explosion of interest in intergenerational learning and led to many projects being created across early years which in fact resulted in negative impact for the older people due to lack of planning and good partnership working. To build this work effectively, partnerships need to build trust and respect sharing and delivering the planning and evaluation together.

Intergenerational training for practitioners and planners should involve activities and resources which will assist your project in the bringing together of the different generations which an end result of building strong intergenerational relationships.

There are some key features to consider when developing training to run intergenerational programmes:

- what intergenerational learning actually is, which would include the principles in intergenerational practice and levels of intergenerational contact;
- tips and techniques for bringing groups together;
- tips and techniques for tackling concerns, negative stereotypes, attitudes towards ageing;
- planning an intergenerational activity/programme;
- evaluating and measuring the impact of the intergenerational relationships built.

Here are some **organisations who share resources and deliver training courses**:

Together Old and Young (TOY): the international [TOY Programme](#) promote intergenerational learning and create new possibilities for older adults and young children to learn together and benefit from each other's company. TOY deliver an [online course](#) about intergenerational practice



with young children (0 – 8 years old) and older adults (65+ years old) and share practical ways to create opportunities for good quality and sustainable intergenerational learning activities.

Generations Working Together deliver a range of accredited training opportunities including the one-day course, [Intergenerational Training for Trainers and Practitioners](#) and the seven-week course run in partnership with the University of Granada, Spain [International Diploma in Intergenerational Learning](#). For members, there are a series of short free online training available at an introductory level.

Generations United improves the lives of children, youth and older adults through intergenerational programmes, policies and strategies. The website is full of tools and resources such as their [Intergenerational-evaluation-toolkit](#) which is incredibly helpful when planning your evaluation and for measuring the impact of intergenerational relationships.

[Linking Generations Northern Ireland](#) specialises in the promotion of intergenerational practice. They create opportunities in all sorts of places and for all sorts of reasons for different generations to learn from, support, meet and enjoy each other.

Penn State University [Intergenerational Leadership Institute](#) is a certificate-training programme for older adults seeking new lifelong learning experiences, skills and volunteer opportunities to contribute to innovation and change in their communities.

Further reading

[Age Platform Europe Manifesto for an Age-Friendly European Union by 2020](#) calls for access to lifelong learning and intergenerational learning to acquire new skills and knowledge at any age.

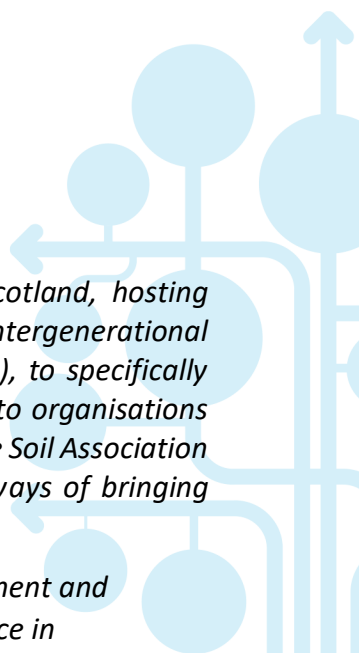
The [Manifesto "Intergenerationality Adds Up Lives"](#) was launched on the 29th April 2020, the European Day of Solidarity and Cooperation between Generations, by Dr Mariano Sanchez and colleagues from Spain.

About the authors

Alison Clyde is the CEO of Generations Working Together

Bella Kerr works with intergenerational networks across the West Coast of Scotland, hosting network meetings and delivering training. She has been responsible for developing intergenerational initiatives within St Clare's Primary School in Glasgow (on hold due to COVID 19), to specifically address literacy and numeracy, recruiting older volunteers and providing support to organisations that are keen to connect and grow their intergenerational work. Bella works with the Soil Association Sharing Food For Life Get Togethers Project in training and exploring different ways of bringing generations together through growing, cooking, or sharing food.

[Generations Working Together](#) in Scotland is a key partner to the Scottish Government and contributes to national strategies and priorities providing expert advice and guidance in





intergenerational practice. As a result, intergenerational approaches are embedded within national strategies including; [Scotland's Framework for Older People](#), [A Connected Scotland](#) and [Housing & Ageing report](#).

