

Intergenerational Learning: A Valuable Learning Experience for Higher Education Students

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Abstract

Problem Statement: This paper reports on the evaluation of a project rooted in the principles and practice of Intergenerational Learning. Intergenerational Learning is increasingly seen as a key strategy in providing learning opportunities for older people in societies where the profile of the population is ageing rapidly. No significant work has, however, been done on the outcomes for the younger participants in intergenerational learning and this research focuses on that issue. Almost five hundred students have, to-date, taken part in the intergenerational learning project in Dublin City University and provided an ideal opportunity to research this problem.

Purpose: This article aims to: Provide an explanation of Intergenerational Learning at both a conceptual and practical level. Explore stakeholder reactions—concentrating in particular on the cross generational experiences of the student participants point to some potential future directions for Intergenerational Learning initiatives.

Methods: A 'mixed method' design was used in which a participant survey was completed followed by in-depth interviews (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011, 90). In phase one of the research a large sample of the participants were surveyed to identify trends and generate a detailed profile of those taking part. There followed semi-structured interviews with a sample of both younger and older participants. The results of the survey are reported in Corrigan (2011) and this paper is limited to an analysis of the interviews conducted with the student volunteers who participated in the project. Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and report patterns within the data.

Results and Findings: The paper explores the benefits of engaging higher education students in intergenerational learning initiatives. Firstly the students found that they gained

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knowledge, competences and skills which contributed to both their personal and professional development. Secondly the process proved to be an excellent means to foster intercultural and intergenerational solidarity.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Intergenerational learning is an excellent methodology for enabling transformative education. The research confirms that people learn from one another through such processes as observational learning, imitation, and modelling. It argues that the development of intergenerational programmes creates significant learning opportunities and a transformation in attitudes between generations. Intergenerational and intercultural solidarity is also fostered. This paper advocates the development of similar initiatives in other higher education institutes as a means to promote engagement between older people and higher education students.

Key Words: Intergenerational learning, transformational learning, higher education, student learning, social capital.