Intergenerational Encounters: a Service-Learning Module for Postgraduate University Students

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the setting up and the delivery of a service-learning module designed to promote wellbeing at King's College London during the academic year 2020–21, whereby postgraduate students engaged with a local community of older adults within a pensioner centre. Students and the community partners were conceived as active co-creators of knowledge, working together towards reducing loneliness. During lectures, students were exposed to a theoretical input grounded on positive psychology, intercultural studies, language & intercultural awareness and qualitative methodologies of narrative and auto-biographical research, while interacting with the older adults through telephone

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conversations. The module was delivered in the context of COVID-19, which demanded a reshaping of its original format, which was grounded on in-person creative workshops with the community around the themes of reminiscence and memory. The COVID-19 lockdown regulations imposed a different, distance-learning format which was co-designed with the community partners. Nevertheless, the phone conversations allowed space for bio-digital encounters and for unexpected intra-actions to emerge. The module's assessment included a self-reflective e-Portfolio and a Digital Project, where students represented their own voices and the stories of the older adults they engaged with. The paper concludes with a reflection on the value of transformative learning for all project participants, within and outside the academic context, and argues for the value of intergenerational encounters to tackle contemporary social issues, such as loneliness and mental health problems.

Introduction

In this paper, we describe the development and implementation of an innovative service-learning module at King's College London (United Kingdom) during the academic year 2020–21. The module connected students in an MSc Programme in Mental Health Studies at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology, and Neuroscience with older adults in a pensioner centre in the south of London. We explore and

discuss both the practicalities of setting up the module and the impact it had on everybody who was involved in its implementation and delivery, including students as co-partners. The module involved encounters and intra-actions (Barad, 2007) between academic disciplines in the university, across generations via pairing students with older adults, and between academic and non-academic communities. Karen Barad (2007), a posthuman scholar, describes intra-actions as encounters beyond the interpersonal towards a different understanding of *human-material-other-than-human* relationships, like the ones that took place within the context of the module we outline in this paper. Posthumanism places the agency not only on human encounters, but also on material objects and artefacts, such as technology and digital tools, which played an important role throughout the setting and delivery of the Self-Identity, Intergenerational, and Intercultural Learning module. The term 'intra-action' implies a deep, transformative and generative intra-connectedness between and across all participants, considered as equal actors in terms of their agency and impact on each other. We also refer to intra-actions in describing the inter/trans-disciplinary encounters across the academics who collaborated towards this project and their related disciplines, as well as in relation to the community outside academia we intra-acted with. Although not fully grounded on posthuman theories, this paper is broadly influenced by some aspects of posthumanism (Barad, 2007) and new materialism (Bennet, 2010) in relation to the use of digital and art-based methodologies as part of the assessment, and by nomadic theory (Braidotti, 2011) in relation to intercultural theories.

Setting the scene

The design and implementation of the module, named 'Self-Identity, Intergenerational and Intercultural Learning' (SIIL), was a response to a broader call for curriculum innovation at King's College London in 2018 as part of King's Vision 2029[1], when the college will celebrate its 200th anniversary. Interdisciplinarity and service are at the core of this strategic vision and our service-learning module provided a creative proposal in terms of its structure, delivery, and assessment patterns.

Service-learning (SL), sometimes referred to as community-engaged learning, is often considered integral to the third mission of universities, that is, to contribute to society (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). Universities across the globe are

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[1] https://www.kcl.ac.uk/about/assets/pdf/Kings-strategic-vision-2029.pdf

urged to act in response to major social issues and to play a central role in the education of future responsible citizens, guided by the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). Usually, SL is positioned within the context of global citizenship as an active and engaged action towards the needs of local communities (Aramburuzabala et al., 2019; Battistoni et al., 2009). The number of European institutions adopting service-learning as part of their pedagogical interventions is vastly growing, whereby service-learning is becoming gradually embedded within curricular practices and clearly visible within institutional mission statements, as in the case of King's College London, where our module is positioned.

The SIIL module was developed as an interdisciplinary collaboration between two faculties: the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology, & Neuroscience (IOPPN), where the module was hosted as part of an MSc Programme in Mental Health Studies, and the Modern Language Centre (MLC) within the Faculty of Arts & Humanities. The IOPPN contributed to the main theoretical framework of the module based on positive psychology and mental health in relation to ageism, while the MLC provided a theoretical contribution grounded on intercultural studies, posthuman theories (Bennet, 2010; Braidotti, 2011; Piller, 2017), and narrative and auto-/biographical methodologies (Adams et al., 2015; Merrill & West, 2009).

One of the main aims of the module was to introduce postgraduate students in Mental Health Studies to ways to apply positive psychology (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011; Seligman, 2012) and Intercultural Awareness (Byram et al., 2001; Martin & Nakayama, 2018) to their own lives within and beyond their university experience, by engaging and supporting older adults in the community, according to the key principles of a socially engaged education. Positive psychology is interested in understanding the factors and processes that contribute to optimal psychological human functioning at the level of individuals, groups, and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005). There is growing evidence supporting the learning and application of positive psychology-based exercises to improve the wellbeing of both students (Hood et al., 2021) and older adults (Ho, et al., 2014). Considering this, one of the aims of the module was to support the learning of wellbeing-enhancing skills as a way of facilitating the promotion of wellbeing and positive mental health in both groups. Another educational aim of this module was the intercultural component supported by a guided and gradual awareness and reflectivity of students' own perceptions of what it means to be 'other' in terms of age, cultural, and social differences. Finally, a substantial aim of the module was represented

by the support to the community of older adults towards tackling loneliness and isolation (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). At the same time, we expected a decrease in ageism among the students, that is, the stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of age (Bytheway, 2005). Interestingly, research shows that life expectancy is significantly shorter for individuals with ageist attitudes compared to those with higher self-perceptions of ageing (Levy et al., 2002) and that interventions such as education and intergenerational contact are effective in reducing ageism related to understanding, comfort, and attitudes towards the older population (Burnes et al., 2019).

Originally, we planned to physically visit the community centre and run with them a series of creative and art-based reminiscence workshops where we would involve the older adults to share their memories, personal narratives, pictures, and artefacts with students in order to co-create a digital bank of stories to be shared, at a later stage, with the wider community. Students would also contribute with their stories and learning experiences within the context of the creative workshop. In this way, students would be conceived both as facilitators and co-producers of knowledge within a service-learning framework that supports and encourages reflectivity at the core of its process (Furco & Norvell, 2019). We expected that this intergenerational exchange intervention would benefit both generations by facilitating a sense of belonging and enhanced levels of wellbeing (Gardner & Alegre, 2019). At the end of this module, we envisaged students would be able to understand how to use positive psychology and intercultural self-reflections to address issues in their own lives as well as those around them. We expected they would also develop empathy (Jeffrey & Downie, 2016) by exploring and achieving a better understanding of ageism and its negative effects on society and using their experiences and understandings to promote positive interactions with older adults (Lee & Kim, 2017). Finally, postgraduate students registered in taught programmes might only spend a year in London, and many come from overseas, therefore, we expected they would also develop a greater understanding of and involvement in their local London community as a result of participating in this module. The involvement with local communities is considered to contribute towards developing a democratic, caring, and socially engaged mind, one that is interested in taking civic responsibility and social action to tackle further local and potentially global challenges (Bringle & Clayton, 2012, Bringle et al., 2015).

The module was implemented and run for the first time in the spring term of the academic year 2020–21, therefore in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, our original plan had to be drastically changed to conform to the

local lockdown rules and regulations that prevented physical contact between individuals, particularly between those subjects considered to be vulnerable, like the community of older adults and potentially some individuals among the cohort of students and/or tutors. In a very short time framework, we adapted our initially planned activities, like the reminiscence workshops, and transformed them into digital, non-in-person activities that had to be meaningful and ethically sustainable from all parts. The re-shaping of the module was discussed and acted upon in intra-actions with the manager and with some members of the community centre, and together, following the key principles of service-learning with a focus on serving the community and their needs rather than imposing an already set framework of activities, we re-designed our current module. The community centre proposed phone conversations as a valuable alternative to the in-person workshops and suggested structuring these conversations around a project they were already working on, of which we were not aware when we started our collaboration with them. We followed their lead in respect to this, and subsequently we actively engaged with the existing *Living Stories Project* the community had already started by collecting the lived experiences of older adults in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. We adapted the original structure of our module while keeping the assessment structure, as it will be outlined in following sections. Students filled in ethical forms provided by the community centre and asked for formal consent from the older adults who took part in the project. The academic staff provided structure and support to students in carrying out these ethical and administrative tasks, which represent a core element of a service-learning approach. The module structure also provided workshops and tutorials on the service-learning component in addition to theoretical lectures, including topics such as communication strategies and interviewing skills, in order to better equip students participating in the phone encounters with the older adults.

The change in format and delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic allowed us to re-imagine the student-teacher encounters and the encounters with the community members, thereby creating room for new possibilities to emerge within the bio-digital dimension of the online teaching (Barad, 2007). It allowed us to be more creative, authentic, and possibly also fragile within a new teaching context that reduced hierarchies and offered a reciprocal and supportive learning environment between the virtual and the real. We supported each other, we inquired, we listened, we took care of each other, and we discussed through different media and across borders and countries as we had students from different nationalities. We probably paid more attention to the context, our teaching-

learning spaces, than we ordinarily would have done, which allowed for more possibilities of real encounters to emerge within the hybridity of the bio-digital material space. We paid attention to being with each other within our physical and virtual rooms, pushing the boundaries of an academic community of practice into a community of care (Jandrić & McLaren, 2021; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

Our paper focuses on three key aspects:

1. Service-learning as co-creation and as a form of academic activism
2. Intergenerational narratives
3. Innovative assessment.

Service-learning as co-creation and as a form of academic activism

As introduced above, we conceived and developed the SIIL module based on the key principles of service-learning in higher education (Furco & Norvell, 2019), considered as an educational approach that enhances students' civic engagement and brings them closer to different social realities while allowing them to work in a real environment. Service-learning is a relatively new education method in European higher education institutions, which developed as an active educational response to the challenges of our contemporary society and to the higher education institutions' increasing civic commitment to serve society. One of the key pillars of service-learning is to improve students' sense of engagement and social responsibility in relation to the growing challenges of a contemporary global world. Research on service-learning gives evidence of its contribution to students' cognitive and intellectual development and to their psycho-social engagement with civic issues (Aramburuzabala et al, 2019; Battistoni et al., 2009; Bringle et al., 1999; Bringle & Clayton, 2012; Bringle et al., 2015; Ma et al., 2016; Meijs et al, 2019).

Based on these assumptions we developed our module as a form of academic activism (Freire, 1998; hooks, 2012) across institutions, disciplines, academic and non-academic communities of practice. One of our main objectives was the active promotion of a sense of students' role in contemporary society by equipping them to become engaged and active citizens, both within and outside their university life. We also aimed at providing an example of good practice that could be exported and used in other contexts and that we hoped could be inspirational to other practitioners both within and outside academia (Ma & Chan, 2013; Ma et al., 2016). What distinguishes service-learning from other forms of academic engagement, for example from an internship or a volunteering activity, is the fact that a service-learning educational experience is fully embedded within

the curriculum and included as part of the assessment framework. While in an internship the focus is on the service and the primary intended beneficiary is the recipient, and in volunteering the focus usually lies on the practical skills learned through the experience, in service-learning the focus resides on the students' learning, as well as on their reflections and engagement with the community's real needs. The primary intended beneficiary is the student, together with the community (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Bringle et al., 2019; Furco & Norvell, 2019). Learning is therefore fully reciprocal, fully embedded in the curriculum with students at its core, who are conceived as active co-creators of knowledge, not just as passive consumers. Bringle (2019) identifies three main categories at the core of service-learning educational interventions distinguishing them from other forms of volunteering or of social actions. The three categories that he refers to are identity, the educational experience, and the community experience; it is the intersection of these three areas of development that according to him constitutes what he defines the 'civic-minded graduate'. Building on these themes, he identifies civic engagement through service-learning as a type of identity shift that integrates both the educational, the personal, and the community domains. In line with Bringle's considerations of the civic-minded graduate, we believe that service-learning interventions, like the SIIL module, could provide excellent opportunities to influence the developing civic identity of students, as well as their understanding of how education can enhance their sense of civic responsibility, contributing to their future life.

We had the ambition that a deep engagement in social issues through our module, like ageism and loneliness across the community of older adults, might bring real change into society as a form of activism (hooks, 2012). Our sessions focused not only on developing students' intellectual and cognitive skills in relation to the theory they were exposed to, but also on fostering a growing sense of responsibility and of empathy towards issues affecting contemporary society. With students, we discussed the fact that social issues always grow and develop within historical and cultural contexts and that the response to those issues is always culturally bounded and set within a time-space framework while at the same time having a global resonance. With this in mind, we conceived and delivered the intercultural sessions as a space to explore notion of 'otherness', exposing students to the assumption that culture is fluid, never fixed, and non-binary, and that the meeting with the older adults would represent an intercultural encounter in terms of age, gender, social class, language, and possibly also, but not only, race. We discussed the notion that culture is not only connected to a physical place defined by national boundaries, but that

it is something more complex related to an internal representation of the self and that belonging is more than a material representation, but a community related one (Braidotti, 2011; Ferri, 2020; hooks, 2009).

We sensibilised students' perception of marginalisation, discrimination, and inequality, among other current social injustices, by focusing our attention on the community of older adults we engaged with. Older people's voices are often silenced and marginalised within society, particularly within the urban context of a metropolitan environment like London, where neoliberal productivity seems to be the dominant driving force of society. Moreover, as a consequence of discriminatory ageism, social exclusion has been mostly overlooked and unexplored as a potential cause of chronic stress impacting negatively on the physical and mental health of those experiencing it (Allen, 2016). Through our service-learning project, we therefore aimed at giving voice and agency to those marginalised communities, fostering at the same time a sense of agency and belonging among the community of postgraduate students.

As mentioned, a key aim of service-learning is the active engagement with a community outside academia where the *service* should be directed towards the real needs of that community, rather than imposing a predetermined academic framework. Aligning our theoretical service-learning framework and our methodological and pedagogical actions with Bringle (2019), we met several times with the pensioner centre we collaborated with, adapting our learning objectives to their real social demands. Bringle clearly defines service-learning as a working *with* a community rather than *for* a community, stating that it is the integration of pedagogical actions and community-engaged activities with a dual purpose: to fulfil curriculum criteria and learning goals and to benefit real needs in the community. Consequently, our module syllabus with its aims, objectives, and assessment practices was co-constructed and re-designed with the community at its centre.

Intergenerational narratives

Based on the principles described above, we run our module as a 15-credit optional one, corresponding to 150 learning hours over 11 weeks during the spring term, where students were exposed to a theoretical input grounded on positive psychology, intercultural studies, language & intercultural awareness, and qualitative methodologies focusing on narrative and auto-biographical research, as outlined in previous sections.

Nine students registered and completed the module in all its components; two older adults were assigned to each student, who carried out three phone

conversations with each participant. Students agreed the format of the conversations with the older adults; as a result, some conducted them by phone, while others conversed via video call. Students were trained, guided, and supported by both the academic tutors and a reference figure within the community while contacting the older adults and carrying out their three phone conversations around the theme of COVID-19. Each conversation was around 50 minutes long, although we left some freedom to students in respect to the suggested length. Students were instructed to be guided by the older adults in terms of their needs, including asking about their preferred time of the day as well as their desired duration and frequency of the phone calls. We openly taught students to be respectful, flexible, and to always adjust to older people's needs. We dedicated time during each session to check on students' progress and on their emotional response to the community component of the module. Students recorded the conversations so that they were available for transcription and analysis in the future. In this way, the module introduced some research skills, as we asked students to take notes, rather than fully transcribe the phone conversations and to work on the main themes emerging from those notes, knowing that the full recordings of the conversations would be given back to the community centre for their full thematic analysis as part of their already existing Living Stories Project. Students were asked to compile a self-reflective e-portfolio to report, share, and process their emotions. This qualitative, self-reflective model was new to many students since most of them came from a more scientific-oriented background grounded mainly on clinical psychology. For a couple of students, this represented a challenge, while to the majority it was an exciting experience to engage with new methodologies (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013), as we can see from the following student's reflection:

> I really like the self-diary where we can share our opinion about our reflection piece. This has offered us opportunity to support each other in ways I could not imagine.

We supported students with methodological and language awareness sessions where we explored the role of language as a cultural, material, and historical force that shapes our identities, and we questioned the notion of research as something objective and quantifiable, challenging the role of the student-researcher as a figure outside the subjective and emotional domain (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). By asking students to keep a reflective journal, we wanted to emphasise the role of emotions (Britzman, 2009) in conducting research, particularly with vulnerable subjects, like the older adults they engaged with during a pandemic

context. We also encouraged them to reflect on their agency both as students and as citizens, aiming to generate new ways of knowledge co-production across disciplines and different communities. The following students' quotes provide evidence of the emotional and personal impact the module had on them beyond academic boundaries:

> I believe in the therapeutic benefits of engagement, which is often why I am happy to provide my comments, turn my camera on, and discuss. I think I have been so willing to do so also because I did not expect the year I decided to take a Master's degree would be so isolating.!

> The most positive aspect of this module was that so many fields and organisations came together, so although not explicitly taught it actually helped me understand how different fields collaborate, which is relevant to real world research and application.

The impact the module had on students, tutors, and the community of older adults was remarkable, particularly in relation to its emotional impact. The narratives that we collected are still in the process of being fully analysed since the students' role, given the short duration of the course, was only to inductively extract the main emerging themes from the phone conversations and not to work on deep data analysis. The full textual analysis through NVivo will be carried out by other doctoral students who have been assigned to this role outside our module. Nevertheless, the extracts from the phone conversations, together with students' e-portfolios, give evidence of the deep and transformative impact the participation in this project had both on students' lives beyond academia and on the older adults who took part in the project.

As part of the module, we collected a final evaluation of the overall experience; the module scored very high results and excellent student feedback, receiving almost 5/5 on all categories of our university Likert's evaluation scale. Students emphasised the uniqueness, creativity, and emotional impact the module had on their wellbeing and on their overall learning experience. The following extracts captured very explicitly the nature of the module and the impact it had on students' identities:

> Through the SIIL module, I was able to reflect on myself and on the relationships around me, as well as made me think of ways to improve as a person. Every Thursday, we were able to learn, appreciate, and listen to each other's stories and I think that is really unique for a university course. Having done all the conversations with the older people, I feel like

it was a unique experience that I would definitely want to experience again. Not only it was personally rewarding, but also it felt nice connecting to an older person who was so resilient throughout this challenging year. I now look forward to work on my portfolio and poster where I hopefully can reflect my thoughts and feelings in a creative and warm way."

I cannot believe this module is over so soon. This is such a wonderful journey for me. Applying positive psychology in daily life could improve my sense of wellbeing.

Contacting older adults is a great experience. Thus talking with older adults is a new experience for me, although I was very worried and anxious. However, overcoming those fears was also a step forward for me.

Coming into the module I did not know what to expect. Having said this, I was apprehensive on how to engage in a way that the older adults would find useful for themselves. Through the programme I have learned that any engagement is positive engagement, and I should not have been so worried! I have thoroughly enjoyed the aspects of positive psychology we have learned, including how to apply them to our everyday life. This has been something very beneficial for myself and I hope I can continue to engage in.

Innovative assessment

The SILL assessment component was innovative, creative, and *different* from more traditional assessment interventions. For some students, this represented a real challenge, while for others, it stood out as one of the most attractive components of the module, which they engaged with at a deep and transformative level beyond academic quantifiable results. The following student's reflection clearly supports this idea:

Therefore, I really enjoy the process of making digital projects such as music production, painting, photography, etc. In addition, everyone who shared their thoughts and stories in this group was fascinating! I love to listen to others' ideas, which inspired me to some extent. It makes me happy when I found that I have resonances with others, which is why I was willing to share my thoughts in the chat.

At the beginning of this article, we outlined that the module was part of King's College Curriculum Innovation project aiming at introducing new ways of teaching, learning, assessment, and integrating research in more creative ways

within module structures. Consequently, we were asked to develop alternative ways of assessing students paving the way for a more flexible, interdisciplinary, and creative programme structure that would support and enhance alternative forms of assessment. We wanted to emphasise the importance of digital forms of narrative and multimedia representation beyond the essay model, aligning our module within a service-learning framework (Bringle et al., 2019). We also chose a digital format to give voice and reach across boundaries, potentially creating new initiatives and platforms for activist and engaged work outside academia.

Students were required to complete two assignments for the final summative assessment of the module: a Digital Project (50%), in which they could choose whether to create a poster, blog, video, podcast, or visual work of art; and a Reflective Report (50%; 2,000 words), where they were asked to describe the rationale beyond their Digital Project by linking it to the theoretical and experiential framework of the module and to the emerging themes of the phone conversations with the older adults. This structure was supported throughout the whole duration of the module by a self-reflective component (Adams et al., 2015; Bringle et al., 2019) that would encourage students to reflect both on their academic and learning experience, as well as on themselves in the context of service-learning and beyond. Every week students were given some specific tasks to complete in relation to the e-portfolio, providing a scaffolding structure for self-reflection. These represented the base for their final Reflective Report.

Students were guided through this part of the module with lectures on art-based, auto-ethnography, and narrative methodologies (Adams et al., 2015) to engage with alternative forms of representation and particularly with the first-person narrative within assessment. Students were very committed and proud of their Digital Projects (Figure 1), empowered by sharing their final projects with peers, tutors, and the community of older adults they engaged with. The following student's reflection outlines the creative engagement with alternative forms of assessment:

> This module is a creative journey. I did research on students' creativity and learning abilities in my undergraduate thesis. I believe that creativity may be very important in every country and company in recent years. I'm not sure what my job is, but I know I'll be doing some psychological work, using art and media to help others, like autistic children, students, companies, etc.

In June 2021, when the lockdown rules eased, we were able to visit in-person the community centre (Figure 2) and we co-organised a day of celebration where
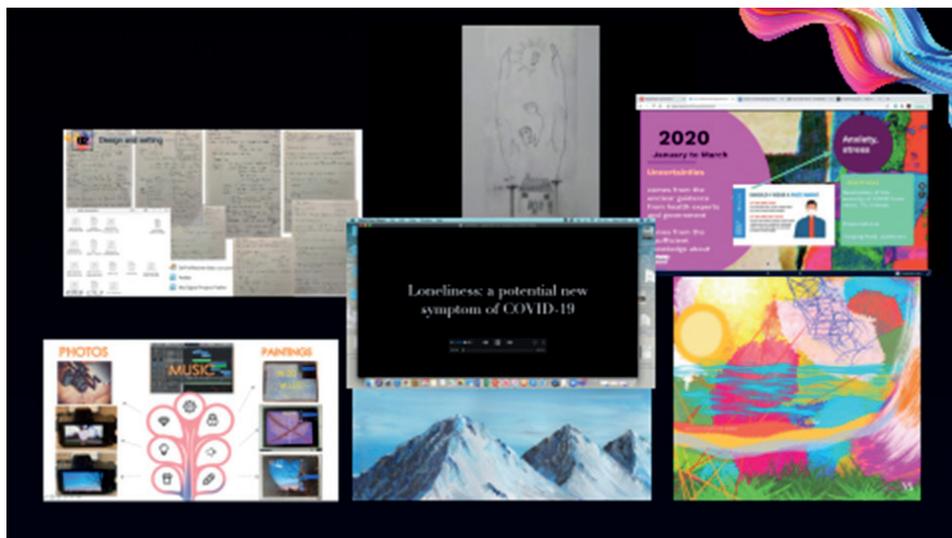
Figure 1. Some of the Digital Projects produced by the students

we shared with the older adults the stories that had been collected and the Digital Projects that students created as a result of their conversations. The impact of that day was very tangible both on the students, who were able to physically meet the older adults they interacted with on the phone for the first time, on us as tutors who witnessed the power of service-learning in action, and on the wider community of older adults who were deeply moved by seeing their stories beautifully and creatively represented in a digital format on a large screen.

As part of a service-learning theoretical and methodological framework, the outcome of the module was beyond quantifiable and measurable academic results. The assessment pattern of the module has been grounded on the notions of deep and transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000), on the concept of *warm data* (Bateson, 2016), and above all, on the potential real impact students' engagement with the core concepts of the module could have on society (Bringle et al., 2019). We are aiming to collect, together with the pensioner centre, all the stories shared with students and digitally represented through their assessment in a *Bank of Living Stories* around COVID-19 that will be donated to the British Library as part of their repository of oral histories. We aim to organise an exhibition within and outside academia to share students' Digital Projects to sensibilise the wider community towards the silenced voices of older adults, particularly during the challenging times of a global pandemic.

Figure 2. Sharing experiences with the older adults at the community centre

Conclusion

The experience of running the Self-Identity, Intergenerational and Intercultural Learning module, now in its second year, has been a rewarding and fulfilling journey, both on an academic and personal level. Our respective backgrounds are multidisciplinary, coming as we do from different faculties, departments, and disciplines, but we share a deep passion for learning and teaching beyond academia and for lifelong meaningful experiences of growth and transformation through education. This allowed us to embrace the many challenges we encountered while setting up and delivering the module, particularly from an organisational level, and to engage our students at a deep level of learning, beyond academia.

We can say without any hesitation that the most outstanding outcome of the module is the change in student-teacher dynamics. Throughout the course, we considered and engaged with the students as co-partners and as co-producers of knowledge in their intra-actions with older adults, in their self-reflective tasks and finally through their assessment, which goes well-beyond academic accomplishment. We also encouraged students to engage with new ways of doing research and inquiry and, therefore, with new ways of seeing themselves within the world as active citizens and producers of knowledge where their voice and their subjectivity are acknowledged and matter (Battistoni et al., 2009; Bringle et al., 2012, 2015).

While introducing them to the key concepts of positive psychology, we aimed to provide students with the theoretical underpinning of the interventions they might apply to their lives and to the lives of people they encounter both within

and outside their future professional life. We also aimed at encouraging them to develop a better understanding of empathy and respect towards marginalised realities recognising their own and others' mental health issues and reflecting at the same time on their own identity and intercultural experiences of being perceived as 'other' within society. As part of the module, training on communication skills, with a specific focus on older adults, allowed students to prepare for potential inconveniences they could encounter which were addressed successfully. For some students, interacting closely with older adults could have represented, to some extent, a challenging experience in the face of the unknown. In order to address this, during teaching sessions students had the opportunity to express their feelings, and open discussions on possible scenarios and how to navigate these successfully were also offered using role play techniques. Introducing students to the concept of ageism was also a helpful strategy aiming to empower students in advance to their exchange with their older peers. All the positive psychology and mental health topics have been approached considering the role that language and cultural identity play in society and how it shapes and is manifested in people's mental health and wellbeing beyond academia.

Despite the many positives of this experience as expressed by all parties involved – students, community partners organisers, older adults in the community, and the teaching team – the challenges of delivering this format of educational experience should not be understated. The successful run of the module required months of preparation in advance. This included, among others: 1) liaising with community partners months ahead of module launch to understand their needs and willingness/availability to engage with the project, 2) ensuring that DBS checks were in place for students and 3) ensuring that communications around expectations for this module were clearly detailed so that students could make an informed decision about choosing it among the other optional modules on offer. Another challenge we faced was the adaptation of the module for online delivery. The use of technology imposed its own challenges, considering the added difficulties in building trust and rapport over the phone when compared with face-to-face encounters. On the other hand, once this initial stage was overcome, phone conversations offered a much more flexible and convenient approach where both students and older adults could work around each other's schedule. It also allowed one of the students, based on their country of origin in East Asia during the pandemic, to connect with a local older adult in their mother tongue. This added authenticity and even richer and more diverse perspectives to in-class discussions. Finally, towards the end of the module, when

COVID restrictions were lifted and it became safer for in-person meetings to take place, a meeting with all participants was organised and earlier connections between community partners, organisers, older adults, students, and the teaching team were consolidated.

We also hope to have fostered a passion for interdisciplinary education (Bringle et al., 2019; Gruenwald, 2014), considered as learning that goes beyond the boundaries of disciplines and beyond academia. We believe we achieved this through our co-teaching, through different ways of *doing education* and through new ways of evaluating students' performance beyond traditional assessment criteria. We decided to conclude our article with a quote from one of the community centre participants who supported us in the co-organisation of the service-learning component and who actively liaised with our students, guiding them throughout their experiential part of the module. We believe this quote fully encapsulates what service-learning is:

> For me the experience of seeing the germ of an idea growing outwards to such rich autonomy, reflection, mutual service and learning is profoundly moving. The impact on our pensioners was palpable. It was powerful. It has so much potential because it was real.

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