1. Introduction

This short report outlines the details of a [shared learning project](https://www.u3a.org.uk/resources/subjects/393-shared-learning-projects) between the Exeter branch of the University of Third Age (U3A) and students and researchers at the University of Exeter (UoE). With the planned completion time in September 2020, this project will have lasted twelve months, an extension to the original plan due to the COVID-19 crisis. We describe here the background and the origins of the project, outline its nature and course, and emphasise benefits to the participants that were reported in the (ongoing) evaluation, hoping to provide a model for similar modes of engagement between universities and community organisations, or third-age-facing organisations and other institutions with a research and education agenda (such as libraries, museums, and other heritage organisations; schools and colleges; and local councils), aimed atproviding *lifelong learning* opportunities and increasing *wellbeing through purposeful engagement*, for its members.

1. Project description

‘Happiness across the Ages’ is a collaborative, inter-disciplinary, inter-generational project co-ordinated by two academics from the University of Exeter, Dr Gabriele Galluzzo (Senior Lecturer in Ancient Philosophy) and Dr Sanja Djerasimovic (Impact Research Fellow). In its conception, we drew on the model of [shared learning projects](https://www.u3a.org.uk/resources/subjects/393-shared-learning-projects) usually developed between U3As and local organisations, emphasising, in our case, learning through research and through intergenerational engagement, and aiming to increase the knowledge of participants in 1) classical ancient philosophy, and 2) social science research, as well as provide an opportunity for the development of cross-generational conversations and relationships around a universal topic – chosen by the participants themselves.

Building on three hugely successful lectures and workshops on aspects of ancient philosophy delivered by Galluzzo to the members of U3A in 2018 and 2019, we created a research-learning team made up of six U3A members and nine students (three post-graduate and six undergraduate) and set out to explore the validity of ancient approaches to happiness in the context of contemporary experiences, across different generations.

In order to achieve that, we collectively designed a qualitative interview based research project; participants/researchers were equipped with key readings in ancient philosophical approaches to happiness (Stoic, Epicurean, and Aristotelian) and trained in qualitative, interview-based study design (from developing research questions to designing methods), the conduct and the analysis of semi-structured interviews. Two phases of the project were envisioned: in the first phase, the participants/researchers would interview each other, ensuring a cross-generational interviewee-interviewer experience (project co-ordinators participated in this as well and interviewed, and were interviewed by, undergraduate students). The second phase, sadly postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, included recruitment of further interviewees across the generational boundaries.

By March 2020, 18 interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed, and after an initial delay to the project due to the crisis, eight participants from the original group (three U3A members and five students) decided to continue with the analysis and write-up of the project online, meeting at least on a fortnightly basis, from May 2020 onwards. This has enabled the team to receive training in, and subsequently conduct, the analysis of the interviews, and work collaboratively on the planned outputs for the project, including a toolkit for an intergenerational research-learning project, and an article communicating the outcomes of the analysis.

1. Project delivery

The project started in autumn 2019, with the initial scoping of interest and recruitment of participants among the U3A group who had previously attended Galluzzo’s lectures. After an initial session in which the co-ordinators presented the rough outline for the project, stressing its research component (our project differed from the usual research engagement between U3A and universities, in which U3A members are often participants, but not researchers engaging in completely equal collaboration with the academics) and outlining envisioned time commitment, the core group of six members signed up, with others wishing to stay in touch about the project processes and outcomes and, where appropriate, participate in data gathering. The second session, in which topic for research was workshopped and basics of social research introduced, the U3A researchers/participants strongly expressed a preference for student involvement (students were involved in the delivery of the final workshop on ancient philosophy that preceded the project), and following recruitment among the undergraduate and post-graduate student body, nine students (eight in Classics and one in Liberal Arts) joined the project. The team met in its entirety in early November 2019, and subsequently participated in four monthly two-hour workshops in which we: i) developed research questions; ii) designed and planned our interview-based study; iii) developed a protocol for semi-structured interviews; and iv) discussed interviewing experiences and developed plans for the second stage of the project. All sessions were preceded by the co-ordinators’ sending agendas and suggested readings, and succeeded by sending notes and actions for the next meeting.

Just as we began recruiting interviewees for the second stage, however, the pandemic changed our plans. By this time, 18 interviews were conducted, with each member of the team participating as an interviewee and an interviewer (with two different members) in a cross-generational interview. All interviews were conducted on campus and careful planning by a member of the university administrative support who has been with the project from the beginning and acted as a point of contact between its participants, sending out information about interviewing pairs to everyone individually, and receiving anonymised interview recordings that were stored on a university cloud service, and sent out for professional transcription.

From May 2020 it was decided that the eight team members (plus two co-ordinators) who continued the project delivery online (via Zoom meetings) would conduct the analysis of the existing interviews, and write both about the results of the analysis in a jointly-produced article, and about the project process and outcomes in a booklet that might assist other organisations deliver similar projects in the future. The process of the analysis is currently in its second half, with team working in two smaller groups and communicating via email on an almost daily basis, with the whole team meeting fortnightly to exchange experiences and plan next steps. The first online session in late May provided a two-hour workshop in qualitative interview analysis, and the project co-ordinators have been on hand to guide others with the analysis as needed, as well as conduct analysis themselves. The workload distribution again ensured that individual team members would not end up analysing the interview where they acted either as an interviewee or an interviewer.

Concurrently with data analysis, a smaller team (two U3A members, four students, and project co-ordinators) have been meeting on a monthly basis to discuss output production and distribution.

1. Benefits of the project

Our intention, in setting up the project, was for it to deliver two-fold benefits: on the one hand to increase knowledge of ancient philosophy and teach research skills, and on the other hand, to increase a sense of wellbeing through active cross-generational involvement in a collective learning environment, which all coincided with the U3A members to participate, who, apart from content knowledge and increase in skills, also wished to be active, to contribute to, and have a wider sense of involvement with the community that includes multiple generations. Similarly, students were excited at the prospect of learning in an intergenerational space, and being given the opportunity to exercise and improve their knowledge of ancient philosophy in an unfamiliar context, and also one free from assessment constraints. While these expectations were, following our evaluation of the project, met and exceeded in most cases, there were often new and unanticipated benefits to this process of collective learning. In the words of one student: ‘I did not expect that I would have become as personally engaged as I did. I think that the group has developed a good flow and chemistry that makes intergenerational and same age members feel more excited about the project.’ Similarly, a U3A member commented that ‘[e]xpectations are being exceeded. This has been a genuinely productive and fruitful experience, not only for me but evidently for the group as a whole too. The interviews have been particularly rewarding and positive.’

While we are still looking to conduct end-of-project evaluation, we can classify the benefits so far reported by the participant/researchers as:

1. **Intellectual and professional**

This includes gaining or increasing the knowledge of ancient philosophy, and the knowledge of, and skills in, social science research approaches and processes. As testified by a U3A member ‘I was aware that it is important to engage in mentally and intellectually stimulating activities in later life and the SLP seemed to fit that bill, offering an opportunity to learn more about ancient philosophy and some new research and analysis skills. […] Unlike my experience of education at school, and most subsequent professional learning and training environments, the SLP experience has been consistently positive. Apart from the value of meeting and interacting with new people, both students and U3A members, I have appreciated the opportunity to learn about ancient ideas of happiness and, in particular, the different approaches to research and analysis compared with those I have used in the past, both in scientific research and as a management consultant. Flowing from that, I have recognised that there are different, but equally valuable and effective, ways of approaching problems, which has been a useful eye-opener.’

Meanwhile, a student reports that ‘[o]ne of the benefits that I have gained in this project is the research skill, and the skill to analyze transcripts in great detail. It is a skill that I am yet to perfect and will be incredibly useful in my further studies.’

Or, simply, in another U3A member’s experience, the project afforded the benefit of ‘open and stimulating discussions and a feeling of welcome from all contributors.’

1. **Social and interpersonal**

Even more so than content- and skills-based knowledge, and this is something that we really wish to stress in the event of adapting our model to a non-university type of partnership, what all participants found to be the most significant benefit of their participation is the sense of connection, sharing, meaningful engagement, and a collective pursuit (‘being able to participate in something more than just myself or my circle’ according to a student) in which, as one U3A member describes, there is not ‘any sense of “us and them” between the academics and everyone else, since it demonstrates that we are all equal as learners. This is a unique feature of the SLP.’

The cross-generational element was important, as participants cited the value of meeting and learning from people of different ages and backgrounds, and people with whom some of them would not normally have plenty of opportunity for engagement, and in a welcoming and safe environment. As one U3A member stresses, ‘It was really good to have such discussions with such interesting and lovely people.’ A student highlights that even though they ‘I speak to my relatives a lot […] the topics that we speak about are mostly trivial, and it's safe to say that I never really got their perspective on 'deeper' subjects like happiness, the way they see things and the way they treat the passing of time. Ageing is a taboo subject, so I really never got a chance to speak about it. However, this project, especially the part when we interview each other, has given me the rare opportunity to speak to people of different generations, to understand their viewpoints and their perspectives. After listening to theirs, I feel like I have a better sense of what happiness is, and how it is 'formulated', so I am certain that is one of the benefits of this project.’

The topic itself, then, and one in the exploration of which participant/researchers got to learn about each other’s lives and significant experiences, and reflect on their own (‘the project helped to crystallise some of my thoughts and views around happiness’ – U3A member) proved hugely beneficial; participating in the interview, both as an interviewee and an interviewer was ubiquitously cited as a significant benefit.

‘The interview scripts I reviewed uncovered for me (via the structured interview protocol decided by the whole group led by Gabriele and Sanja) the lives of other u3a members, older and retired. I was able to discover how different our lives are both in the life experiences that shaped it, our attitudes and natures. […] My interview of, and in turn, interview by a participating University classics student was a joy in both cases. […] The mix of old and young alert and involved people in meetings led to a different emotional feel to the encounters and flow of the work.’ (U3A member)

‘I always relish learning from others’ experiences and engaging with people on various aspects of philosophy and to be able to do this with a community which I would not ordinarily interact with (U3A) has been fantastic. I was able to take part in being both interviewee and interviewer and this enabled me to have a great perspective on the project overall and it was a thoroughly enjoyable experience.’ (student)

‘I wanted to engage with a group of mixed age backgrounds, skills and experiences, focused on a joint project in a mutually supportive environment and this is how it feels.’ (U3A member)

‘This project has allowed me to gain a wider perspective, not just on happiness, but on life itself. We have often championed the idea of being life-long learners, but the idea of intergenerational learning is extremely attractive as it is an opportunity to bridge the gap between various generations, learn and appreciate each other views. More importantly, it has been an opportunity for us to understand each other and on a larger scale, it is a step forward towards eliminating the negative ideas of ageism.’ (student)

1. **Collective**

For some participants/researchers, it was not just the feeling of sharing with, and learning, from others, but also a sense of working together, towards a common goal, that was cited as a distinct benefit. Some named this as ‘being part of an important, worthy project’ (student), while others brought up the value of team work:

‘All the participants throughout the project were extremely understanding, polite, focused and team oriented.’ (U3A member)

‘One of the aspects of my old work which I especially used to value, and which I miss in retirement, is participating in a close-knit team working on a joint project with the excitement of exchanging, evaluating and developing ideas to achieve a common goal. But in a work context, this ideal is often glossed with all kinds of pressures around time and cost, as well as overt or hidden competition and personality conflicts. So one of the main pleasures of the SLP has been the very real sense that everyone in the group is sharing ideas, knowledge and experience which are equally valued whatever their source, and that everyone is learning.’ (U3A members)

-----

Lastly, one should not omit benefits experienced by the project’s two academic co-ordinators. From our perspective, the project has been enormously rewarding on professional as well as a personal level. For both of us, it has extended the boundaries of our knowledge and our research and teaching skills, through the experience of managing a collaborative, interdisciplinary, truly engaged project involving a large number of researchers with different backgrounds, skill sets, and modes of working, who also needed, most of them for the first time, training in qualitative interview-based research and data analysis using a number of different techniques. We have both also gained a better understanding of each other’s respective disciplines. On a personal level, as well, and this is something echoed by many of the project participants, we were both surprised at the level of personal involvement, satisfaction, and joy, that we felt as the project progressed, especially acute during the pandemic – the thrill of a joint pursuit, and collective commitment exhibited by all throughout.

*Sanja Djerasimovic and Gabriele Galluzzo*

*July 2020*