

TLIC PAPER

Creating Positive Perceptions of Aged Communities by Combining Creative Practice and Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This paper represents work in progress with aged communities, on a project to promote positive attributes of experience, wisdom, and leadership to counterbalance the perceived challenges of aging by changing negative perceptions of aged societies. We aimed to encourage positive ageing by harnessing the collaborative creative potential of this demographic through the introduction of concepts around the notion of deliberate creative practice. We wanted to make a case for how these communities are empowered to participate in identifying issues and challenges over a wide spectrum of social and community applications affecting their lifestyles and wellbeing, then generating new ideas to be disseminated through social media platforms.

KEYWORDS

ageing population, creative thinking, social media

1 THE PERCEPTION OF AGED COMMUNITIES AS A BURDEN ON SOCIETY

A significant observable aspect of twenty first century communities worldwide, and especially in industrialised countries, is that they are increasingly being faced with a growing aged population. In Australia, one in seven adults are aged 65 and over and life expectancy is on average 20 years longer today than in the 1960s [46]. Our constant drive to improve the quality of human life at all levels has resulted in people living longer, living better through advances in preventative medicine and the promotion of healthy lifestyles [4], [28].

A result of this positive outcome is the creation of a potential growing burden or threat, rather than an opportunity when it comes to the question of how we accommodate, in all manner of ways, people living longer, and the extra demands placed on society [25].

Elderly people have been marginalised, institutionalised, and stripped of responsibility, power, and, ultimately, their dignity [3], [4]. That the elderly cannot

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provide any new social, economic or surplus value in forms such as products, services and influence on society, is leading to an age discrimination or age-ism prejudice [8], [51] and the likely growth of inter-generational conflict [53], [29]. This can undermine older people's motivation to stay engaged with their lives, to improve themselves, and take more responsibility for their own future [48], posing a major challenge to healthy ageing [43].

Western society is moving away from the notion of the extended family, and this is becoming especially pronounced with an increasing emphasis on the nuclear family seen as narrow, harmful, and diminishing much of family life [47]. The responsibility of state provided care for the elderly in the form of pensions, accommodation, mobility, and health has resulted in politicians and others predicting the economic Armageddon and negative consequences that a growing ageing population will present to younger generations having to generate the income to provide this support [19], [24].

1.1 Changing perceptions of aged societies

Despite these negative perceptions, the ageing phenomena, according to Jaakola, Ekstrom and Guiland [23], is taking on new meanings because of its role as a change agent in society. The perception and definition of being senior is undergoing change from negative preconceptions of previous generations, to now being described as healthier, living longer, better educated and more engaged in a range of interests beyond senility in a retirement village. Perspectives are shifting from a 'burden' view of diminished value in being old, to a more positive position where experience, wisdom and leadership are the positive attributes to offset the perceived negative challenges of ageing.

Ray, Suar and Mukhopadhyay [41] contend that senior citizens have a preference to stay active for as long as they can and to do this support must be forthcoming from the general community to harness their abilities and reverse adverse perceptions about them. Valuable contributions of elderly individuals in terms of their knowledge, work experience, culture, and their role as a resource within the workforce, rather than as a burden, needs to be acknowledged [51]. Links between creativity and wisdom, particularly in terms of the capacity of older minds for creative output are being recognised. This is especially important for acknowledging the creativity of older individuals as a change agent in society rather than just the 'keepers of the culture' [12], [42]. There is increasing evidence that creativity can deal with aged challenges by enhancing cognitive performance, greater sense of personal influence and integrity, physical functioning and social skills, through a more confident and motivated form of creative expression [3], [50].

1.2 Positive ageing

Active Ageing, Creative Ageing, Reframing Age, Embrace Age, #ilookmyage and positive images of old age [17] are among a range of initiatives that are being embraced by communities, to counter the perception that a growing ageing population will present serious challenges to society in accommodating a section of the population that is no longer seen to be productive. The ability to contribute to society overall should not be the domain of only particular sectors of the community. As a solution, our ongoing work has been aligned to the adaptation of an ageing policy around the

concept of ‘Creative Capital’ introduced by Florida [16], tapping into the creativity of older people. If we can presume that the general population has a potential for creative capacity [9] then this should also translate to the elderly, and with that the potential to make adaptations and transformations to their lives and environment based on imaginative cognitive modelling [40].

There is merit in exploring how the wisdom of the aged can continue to contribute to the economic wellbeing of a community, by being engaged in active work and a range of support, mentoring and teaching roles [1].

Levy and Langer [27] highlight factors such as openness to new ideas, a questioning attitude and a tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty that can stimulate creativity at all stages of life and especially in the promotion of positive ageing. Our methodologies aimed to promote these qualities building confidence, assertiveness and focusing attention to issues people identified as important to them and the community. As well, we focused on the elimination of stereotypes around ageism and the skills necessary in exercising these choices in a supportive creative environment.

Our contention is that new models of thinking to deal with future scenarios that cannot always be confidently dealt with using traditional thinking, are challenges for all community sectors. Building a case that excludes the aged is to ignore the potential contribution they can make to the overall challenge. Our work supports giving aged communities the opportunity to eliminate stereotypes on ageism, and provide an environment to be creative, and identifying issues of concern to them and the broader community and then take deliberate action in presenting and disseminating solutions that will make a difference.

1.3 Social media concepts and approaches and aged communities

In attempting to build a creative dimension as a skill set and advocacy tool for aged communities, we explored the impact of social media and ways we could encourage older people to participate and engage in identifying and sharing new ideas. That Facebook can act as a catalyst for increasing social capital and the implication of “awareness” is promoted by Erikson [15] as a new dimension. This was an aspect we wanted to explore in our workshops, negating the perception that social media is something not commonly embraced by the older generation, often being perceived as a younger person’s domain.

The use of social media, in particular blogging, and online professional forums such as LinkedIn, is growing across all age sectors as online communities are providing and receiving social support for difficult life situations, including a contribution to older people’s wellbeing [45]. Further positive consequences are overcoming loneliness, relieving stress, and raising feelings of control and self-efficacy [35]. Increased participation in social networks can also empower older people by providing a sense of connectedness and greater control [10], [26].

The Active Seniors Association Helsinki, Finland, is a prime example of aged communities actively co-designing practices through a social collective, willing to challenge established modes, traditions, and attitudes in proposing creative alternate ways to grow old. New design tools were developed as well as the skill and confidence to embrace new technologies and social media platforms, in not only presenting new ideas but the advocacy for change [6].

In general, we witnessed social media as providing opportunities for older adults to participate in discussions and stay contacted with the broader community through a medium that enables them to express themselves.

1.4 Introducing a creative dimension

To facilitate the skill in identifying unmet needs in the aged community, the authors initiated and conducted a series of workshops and a project, to introduce creative practice and idea generation methods, structured in a way to gain understandings of the nature of creativity, and where ideas could be developed and applied. We felt it was important to look at challenges in new and insightful ways beginning with establishing an understanding of what is meant by creativity and creative thinking and demystifying its relevance to human behavior.

Creativity carries many misconceptions and assumptions not only about what it is but how it works [44]. It is traditionally considered to be personal, inborn, and individual, specialised and about inventing something, however it is also acknowledged to be collaborative, learnable, community based, cross or multi-disciplinary and about ideas and making connections [31]. Unsurprisingly, this reflects the way most of us work best [40].

Our own take is that creativity involves the ability to make a perception shift enabling the process of reconceptualising new interpretations from existing bodies of knowledge and scenarios [21].

Relevant to the importance of socialising in aged communities is the notion that creativity has been found to be community based [16], transferable across disciplines, collaborative [11] and about communication, sharing ideas and making connections, and finally, it can be taught [31]. These understandings that creativity is an inherent human and social attribute we believed would have a big influence on how we structured experiences to nurture and take advantage of an inclusive creative way of engaging the elderly with their communities, through their extensive experience and wisdom.

We encouraged co-production to facilitate problem solving through an organic growth of ideas and strategies for implementation [30], [32], where according to Ottoman and Laragy [37] better outcomes are realized, rather than the traditional unilateral decision making of largely government bodies and aged care institutions.

Cropley [13] contends that creative output is perfectly possible in older people who can exhibit the attributes of creative behaviours such as sensitivity to issues, openness to new and novel approaches that may challenge conventions, willingness to take risks and the ability to work collaboratively. Levy and Langer [27] argue that creativity at all stages of life can be stimulated and helps to foster successful ageing.

Attributes such as openness to new ideas, a questioning attitude, a tolerance for ambiguity, unorthodoxy, intuitive, being playful and flexible, and the ability to see opportunities can contribute to supporting creative activities and the elimination of stereotypes on ageing if given the right environment.

Cohen [12] argues for the promotion of creativity in aged communities as something that is a part of all human activity and that can have specific value beyond a group that is just seen as the “keepers of the culture” to one that can play a role in changing a society and culture. Healthy older persons are deemed to have a cognitive reserve facilitating active ageing and thus able to think as divergently as younger people [18].

1.5 Introducing creativity processes and approaches

Ageing communities, like all age groups are not immune to the concept of ‘Future Shock’ [52] and the challenges presented through the rate and scale of enormous change and disruptions that can be overwhelming.

Challenges that the elderly have seen evolve in their lifetimes, that were not critical in the past, now potentially are threatening our very existence and needing urgent attention. Our world today is confronted with grand challenges around the core issues that have always occupied humans—e.g., food, water, shelter, health, protection, mobility and population, especially an ageing one ‘*living longer*’, presenting us with challenges never imagined [2].

This can cause disconnection and uncertainty in people’s desire for stability and security, and perhaps even more so for elders when desiring to retreat from the pressures of work and life in general. Kilmczuk [25] argues that in this environment, affecting all of society, it is unreasonable to consider the ageing population only in negative consequences and ignore the multi-level, cross disciplinary challenges facing all of society and the positive change that creativity can provide (inclusive of the aged).

What the group concluded was that the complexity of these issues, was a challenge to our traditional models of problem solving and resolution and with that the fundamental question of problem definition. Discussion centered around the notion of ‘Wicked Problems’ [7] and the fact that there are not always logical and linear way of defining, much less solving them, as they tend to change and mutate as we engage with them, leaving us with elements of confusion and uncertainty as to how we resolve the challenges [38].

Creative thinking and the notion of problem-based learning and design thinking [5] have been promoted as strategies that will provide the flexibility and agility to deal with these unique types of problems. Ways of working that are not too prescriptive but insightful enough to provide effective and unique ways around the complexity that these challenges present. In other words, they allow us to see the issue in other than predetermined, fixed ways, identifying and challenging many assumptions that often block us from gaining new insights into an issue.

The group acknowledged that, for many, past educational experience and the pressures of conformity, compliance and predetermined structures of workplace culture and society, negate our ‘natural’ ability to look at things other than the expected and acceptable. In fact, it is argued that we have developed a conformity bias that does not encourage us to challenge or see things differently [39]. As a result, some would argue we are somewhat inhibited in dealing with these new challenges because our models of thinking are rooted in old, outdated conventions.

Edward DeBono [14] states that ‘you can’t dig a new hole by digging the same hole deeper’ and this analogy relates well to the case for modifying our thinking behavior by introducing and practicing creative thinking to give us the ability to solve a new generation of problems. It was with these insights that the group set about the task of creatively looking at issues to do with ageing.

Our workshops incorporated a range of specific creative thinking approaches, structured in a way which demonstrated understandings of the nature of creativity and where ideas could be developed and applied. People seldom work in isolation due do the social nature of humans [20], [49], so we established a collaborative, learning environment based on an unstructured group discussion encouraging egalitarian cross disciplinary teamwork. We recognised the key learning attributes were to identify ways of working, which then allowed participants to collectively build knowledge through a process of enquiry, reliant on identifying key questions and hypotheses on ageing issues and unmet needs, then sourcing information and using it creatively.

Fluent thinking encouraged the group to generate lots of ideas without critique and by withholding the judgment sense, no matter how seemingly silly or inappropriate, thus allowing all ideas an opportunity to be considered no matter how irrelevant they may have initially appeared. We built confidence by removing the fear of

making mistakes, the need to be right, peer acceptance, the need to have an expected answer, the need to follow a predetermined process, the expectation that a process needs to lead to a solution, and the need to follow a set routine using only logical, analytical, routine, or judgmental thinking.

Flexible thinking encouraged lots of different ideas, reinterpreting ideas and then restructuring these into new configurations by comparing or substituting things with similar qualities. Taking an existing idea from one situation, discipline or application and applying it to a different one, considering the opposite or negative of an idea, etc. [22].

Elaborative thinking encouraged originality, personal interpretations, playfulness, having fun, risk taking, humour and absurdity. As well using analogies and metaphors and reworking things that didn't work to change thinking or ways of looking at the problem by using 'wrong' ideas or 'errors' as a springboard for the generation of new possibilities [36].

We placed emphasis on unblocking the associational, cultural, professional, emotional, social, language and other impediments to creative thinking (often developed over a lifetime of habitual process) by challenging ingrained assumptions or preconceived ideas.

Using our experience of teaching creativity in university programs we began with small steps to develop confidence, provide positive experience of the process and model effective ways of working before slowly adding complexity as participants' capabilities and self-assurance developed for the appropriate level. Using design thinking methods enhanced the group's ability to create new knowledge and ideas based on a process of prototyping, experimenting and exploration.

Participants were challenged to think reflectively and externalize their skills in the process of understanding the '*thinking behind the thinking*.' They learnt the art of structuring an argument to elaborate their thinking process, thinking critically and objectively about ideas and approaches, and avoiding impulsive narrow responses based on emotion and possible biases.

1.6 The project

A focus group of volunteers came together in workshop settings, each representing this age demographic and worked collaboratively to explore the concept of positive ageing, using creative practice and social media. Participants were given the opportunity to each present and share ideas building the confidence to explore new initiatives on several topics they had identified as being important for promoting positive ageing. Discussions centered on the exploration of what our life might look like as valued members of the community wanting to contribute to society in retirement years. Initially the conversation gravitated towards issues that were of a personal concern, rather than in a broader context and these were explored as possible creative ideas (or creative process). It was agreed this casual conversation provided an opportunity to have a voice. Social media facilitated and extended these conversations.

1.7 The ideas

There were several topics discussed and from these the following were highlighted: *Co-housing communities and community-supported ageing*: we discussed the share housing scenarios by observing and challenging the broader community trend

towards separation and isolation of aged demographics. For example, the concept for individuals or families of various aged groups to cohabit with their own private living space as well as shared common areas would allow all to have their own independence while the elderly are still being able to receive support and socialisation from their younger occupants. While it is acknowledged there are similar schemes, the workshop group felt there was scope for further creative observations and interpretations of extended family, such as how networks of volunteers and/or paid caregivers come together to support older individuals who wish to continue living in their own homes.

Combining facilities: we discussed and challenged the trend towards separate isolated specialist environments and people interaction based on convenience and ease of management, by looking at the combination of existing services and facilities. For example, aged care homes could be combined with schools, kindergartens, medical centers, social facilities, sporting complexes, retail and small business etc. It was felt the possibilities of greater interaction, in a village environment (for example), would benefit their wellbeing and reduce the aged stigma and isolation.

Intergenerational co-home ownership: we discussed that at a time of unprecedented lack of housing affordability, younger people might buy into the housing market from elderly owners with an arrangement that allows for co-habitation. The elderly person would receive care in return for financial incentive to the younger buyers to purchase their home over time.

Elder foster care or adoption coined #adoptionflip: we discussed a model like foster care, by challenging the notion of traditional adoption (adults adopting children). The project explored the reversing of the adoption, so the younger person is now adopting and looking after the older person (coined 'adoption flip').

Expanding educational experiences: we discussed enhancing the school curriculum, by formally integrating older people as teachers and mentors in the classroom using a range of their lifelong skills, knowledge, and wisdom to reinforce social skills and cultural values in young students. The elderly become another reference for young students with "Work with the Wizard," "Phone an old friend," "Gray Google" and "Seniors in Schools" being some of the terms offered.

Aged consultancy coined #lifeflip: we discussed people in various disciplines, trades, occupations etc., as a business model, referencing elderly experts, for a fee. Our workshop group expressed an overwhelming desire "to give something back" feeling they had something positive to offer having us reflect on why this wasn't more common practice where they are seen as valuable (coined 'life flip').

Some of these ideas are now being taken onboard by teams within the group, with consideration to being further expanded and articulated for possible support and implementation through a range of government and private bodies.

2 CONCLUSION

The project emanated from the desire to combine creative practice and social media to the aged debate, by encouraging the positive promotion in changing existing perceptions of ageing being a burden on communities. Witnessing the initial enthusiasm, originality of ideas and the empowerment and belief in initiating change provides a great incentive to formalise our findings in ways that can have a greater impact and provide support at many levels for ideas to be disseminated and implemented. The project is very much work in progress, but initial outcomes and ideas are encouraging, thus demonstrating that both communication and connection

through social media, and the ability to articulate ideas using creative thinking, can positively impact the wellbeing of elderly people in determining their future.

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