

The following report provides a snapshot account of the *Generations 3* project, based on the researcher's attendance at two workshops, the final sharing event and insights gleaned in four interviews, two with older participants and two with students. It describes the process of the workshops – suggesting how and why they work in the ways that they do, with a focus on the role of improvisation and game playing. The ways in which the workshops facilitate intergenerational interactions are discussed and connected with this, the extent to which the workshops help to challenge stereotypes associated with ageing and later life. Finally, the ways that the workshops affect wellbeing for both arts students and older participants are examined. The report opens with some wider contextual background to *Generations 3* including the role of the arts for health, the ubiquitous concept of wellbeing and recent scholarship on co-creativity. The main body of the report comprises observations drawn from the workshops, the sharing event and interviews. The title of the report was inspired by a comment from one of the students who remarked that the workshops served the function of opening the door between generations.

Introduction: The wider context

Arts, Wellbeing and Co-Creativity

There has been a growing body of evidence in support of the value of the arts for health in the US, Japan, Europe and the UK. As noted in the recent WHO report:

... the overall evidence base shows a robust impact of the arts on both mental and physical health. (2019:52)

In particular, the beneficial role of the arts for all older people is increasingly accepted (Camic, Zeilig and Crutch, 2018). Importantly, the arts also offer unique opportunities for older people, including those with dementia, to interact with others (Renshaw, 2013, Zeilig et al, 2014) and provide possibilities for creative expression for all (Cutler, 2020). Arts activities that aim to improve participants' health and wellbeing, have consequently flourished, including initiatives as diverse as singing and music making¹, drama, visual art, dance, photography, clowning and puppetry to name a few. Thus, research is steadily mounting that confirms the potential of the arts to impact positively on everyone's physical and mental health and well-being (APPG, 2017, Cutler, 2020, WHO, 2019).

Indeed, a major concern for the *Generation 3* project concerns its impact on participant wellbeing, a concept which pervades contemporary life. As a phrase, wellbeing has become ubiquitous, a portmanteau term encapsulating a range of complex physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual factors. However, a shared understanding and definitions of what it is, are elusive. Indeed, despite the development of numerous scales and questionnaires, there is no consensus on how to measure wellbeing or even how to conceptualise it (Algar et al, 2014, Zeilig et al, 2019). Nonetheless, the imperative to improve wellbeing guides much public health and social policy and, as noted, there has been increasing interest in evidencing the possible ways in which arts projects can positively affect participants' wellbeing.

Ideas and definitions of wellbeing are many, but include:

“a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”

WHO constitution, signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States and entered into force on 7 April 1948

“the state of being comfortable, healthy or happy”

Oxford English Dictionary

“Wellbeing is more than just happiness. As well as feeling satisfied and happy, wellbeing means developing as a person, being fulfilled, and making a contribution to the community” (Shah and Marks, 2004).

Increasingly, we are encouraged as individuals to take care of our own wellbeing. The “Five Ways to Wellbeing” put forward by the New Economics Foundation² include:

- connect - with the people around you, family, friends, colleagues and neighbours
- be active - go for a walk or a run, garden, play a game
- take notice - be curious and aware of the world around you
- keep learning - try a new recipe, learn a new language, set yourself a challenge
- give - do something nice for somebody, volunteer, join a community group.

Recent scholarship arising from co-creative arts projects with people with dementia suggest that adopting a more nuanced, relational, fluid and dynamic approach to understanding the pervasive concept of wellbeing – rather than seeing it as a completed state that can be achieved, might be more useful (Dodge et al, 2012, Zeilig, West, van der Byl Williams, 2018, Zeilig et al 2019). This then, is the wider sociocultural context – one in which the associations between arts for health and wellbeing are increasingly emphasised, within which the *Generations 3* project is situated. This is connected with the socio-political context of the arts in health that relies on empirically evidenced medical models of health (White, 2014).

However, it is also important to note that the *Generations 3* workshops are based on a ‘yes and’ model of improvisation, this lends them a co-creative character which is distinct from other more instrumental participative arts projects which have a specific endpoint. As noted elsewhere (Zeilig et al, 2018, 2019) co-creativity is about the possibility of using the arts together with people to enable a self-making process and the unexpected insights that this may prompt. There is also an ability within the co-creative arts for people to take risks and to explore emotional experiences which are often not accessed within more structured arts activities. Co-creativity generates relational interactions which are not a means to an end (such as to increase cognitive ability or physical agility) rather the process itself is the point (see Matarasso, 2017). Co-creativity using the arts extends an invitation to participate in a shared and playful pursuit that allows unique opportunities for communication, expression and glimpses into people's interior worlds. These may have therapeutic potential but this is not the goal. Co-creativity is inherently inclusive and welcomes the unexpected – these are all elements that are central to the *Generations 3* workshops and that distinguish them from more traditional, structured participative arts projects.

¹There is probably more evidence regarding the beneficial effects of making music and singing on mood and wellbeing than any other art form (as noted by Cutler in *Creatively Minded*, 2020 p.30).

² https://issuu.com/neweconomicsfoundation/docs/five_ways_to_well-being?viewMode=presentation
Accessed 23rd February 2020

Generations is a collaboration between All Change, a locally-based community arts organisation, and CSM PDP courses. It began in the 2018/19 academic year, with *Improbable* (a theatre company developing forms of socially-engaged practice through 'Impro.') as consultants. The 2019/20 project, *Generations 3* resulted in a sharing event in the Studio Theatre, CSM Kings Cross, in March 2020.

This short film made during *Generations 2*, describes the project:
<https://vimeo.com/342063129>

The project facilitates a dialogue between CSM students and a group of local elderly people with no previous experience of the arts. A series of workshops at CSM invite the participants to explore improvised performance - a form which provides a level playing field, in order to express individual creativity and promote a community of practice. The aim is to enhance personal well-being rather than an emphasis on the quality of the 'final' outcome (the sharing event). The following account comprises observations from the two workshops that I attended, with an emphasis on outlining how these work - the processes and some of the challenges underlying these. Finally, 4 interviews were conducted with workshop participants and the salient findings from these are outlined.



Observations from *Generations 3* Workshops & Sharing Event

i) 31st January 2020

I entered the studio at 12.30 (it had been running since 9.45am). At first I sat on a bench along which were placed a varied array of objects including a gnome, a flag with the words 'follow me' inscribed on it, a curtain cord, and a baby's cardigan (to name a few). I later moved to another corner of the room to ensure that I observed as much as possible.



The studio was occupied by 4 small discussion groups consisting of 5 people including both older people and students and the facilitators. I was immediately struck by the noise – this is because people were talking about objects and creating narratives about these, it contrasted with my experience of co-creativity (with people with dementia) which involved very little verbal communication. I also noticed that people were mostly sitting very closely together (one of the groups seemed so close that their heads were almost touching) and were intently occupied with their objects and associated stories. At one point, a student asked whether everyone was 'done' and whether the group could go on to improvise with objects. Throughout the part of the session that I observed, I noticed that there was quite a lot of guidance – that the workshop although based on improvisation had a clear framework and strong sense of direction, of moving forwards and on to the next exercise. Again, this contrasts with the co-creative workshops at Wellcome (2017), which were not structured around distinct exercises beginning and then ending.

People went to find new objects and then began to improvise with these, I noticed one older woman dancing with a shaker, gradually becoming more involved with the dance that she was creating until she was asked by another member of the group if she 'needed' to stand up. She was being gently encouraged and supported by the group to elaborate upon her improvisation. The possibilities inherent in improvisation for creating group cohesion were evident here, where older people and students were imagining together.

In another group, in the corner of the studio a student was playing with a glass jelly mould – he used it as a hat (a crown?) and then imagined a wobbly jelly inside it, in another group an older man was appreciating a small antique book (a bible or prayer book?) holding it reverently and flicking through its fine paper pages, later in the same group a female student used the

curtain cord as an elephant's trunk – challenging the group to guess what she was being.

One older man stood up, rang a bell and intoned loudly 'Come back, come back your time is up', there was a sense that he was summoning the dead. The whole room stopped for a moment and someone wondered out loud 'was that meant for all of us?'. This was like an unintentional and unexpected intervention that momentarily brought the whole room together, before people returned to their smaller groups. The impression that the workshop could encompass the unexpected and surprising was evident at this moment – there was space for real inventiveness and the whole group were open to this. I was curious about how the objects provoked memories for some of participants, especially the older people (at one point I overheard an older woman confirm 'That's a true story') a form of reminiscence but not the intentional, goal focussed reminiscence often done with older people. Rather, stories and recollections emerged spontaneously, they were part of the present and were generously shared and were not the explicit purpose of the exercise.

Throughout the room at all times, there was a great deal of activity, at different levels – people were sitting, creeping on the floor and standing, there was also a hum of lively conversation and above all a sense of play.



As discussed cogently by Sennett (2018) the basis of play for children is imagining an object differently than it has been ascribed – an activity that was at the heart of this exercise. Thus, one student mimed catching and swallowing huge gulps of air from a bellow – fishlike. The importance of play for children is well evidenced and increasingly it is recognised as something that is valuable for all others too. As noted by Whitebread (2012)

The value of play is increasingly recognised, by researchers and within the policy arena, for adults as well as children, as the evidence mounts of its relationship with intellectual achievement and emotional well-being.

There is a close association between play and improvisation. Play encourages a state of freedom within which risks can be taken and it was clear that these object based exercises were building trust between participants, as people shared personal stories and enjoyed one another's imaginative engagement. As discussed elsewhere (Zeilig et al, 2018) play is an activity that has no directed or practical purpose and exists between imagination and the external world. Play has been described as opening up a space of trust and relaxation which then enables a "creative reaching out" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 75), thus play and the sort of creativity it evokes arises from both openness and formlessness. As eloquently noted by the writer Ben Okri (1997):

Creativity ...should be approached in the spirit of play, of foreplay, of dalliance, doodling and messing around – and then, bit by bit, you get deeper into the matter.

Okri's emphasis on 'messing around' is particularly pertinent here. The workshop allowed the students and older participants the space to mess around together, without any pressure on a final outcome. Play has been cogently theorised as essential for emotional and psychological well-being and the maintenance of a sense of self (Winnicott, 1971). In this sense then, through their insistent emphasis on 'play' the *Generations 3* workshops are invaluable for participant well-being.

My overall impression was that everyone was fully and intently engaged in what was happening, in the moment³. I wonder if this is one of the distinguishing features of improvisation: that because it draws on an individual's resources, abilities and imagination it has a unique capacity for keeping people engaged, including such a diverse range of people (disparate in age, ethnicity, gender) as take part in *Generations 3*. In addition, the informality of improvisation (nothing needs to be learnt or prepared in advance) facilitates an equality among participants – there were certain guidelines to each exercise but no distinct right or wrong way to approach it. It was notable that the workshop was characterised by regular opportunities to reflect upon activities. Following the object exercises, one student commented '*I learnt so much*' and there was general agreement that the generations had

mutually learnt from one another, that there had been an ability to explore emotions together and forge stronger links with one another.

The final exercise of the workshop, led by a student, was a movement session. I was struck by how willingly and swiftly everyone took part (the ethos of yes and seemed tangible!). People began dancing to tunes by Michael Jackson and ABBA echoing each other's movements. The impression that everyone was keen to join in was most evident as one older lady who had been having trouble walking, sat on a chair and devised a routine with her legs and feet that



I enjoyed watching the way in which movement can spread through a group and the unselfconscious fun that infected everyone. A final debrief followed, allowing everyone present to comment on and question the workshop session. Several of the older people mentioned that they would like to lead exercises in future (this was something that I had been curious about – as the part of the workshop that I attended seemed to be dominated by the facilitators and students, prompting me to consider the possible imbalance in power relations between the older people and the 'others'). In general, there was agreement amongst the group that the object based exercises had been valuable and the ways in which these had allowed for a sharing of experiences amongst the group. It is relevant to note that the value of object handling has been noted in other contexts (Camic et al 2017 etc.) in particular its relationship with increasing subjective wellbeing. One female student made the clear point that for her the sessions were calming, providing some respite from the tribulations of her everyday life. One possible reason for this might be connected with the failure free, safety of the space created by the *Generations 3* project.

³ This in the moment engagement is one of the reasons that improvisation (which doesn't necessarily rely on memory) is so effective with people with dementia and also is experienced as enabling by others.

ii) 21st February 2020

I arrived early for this workshop (at 9am) and so had time to observe the setting up of tea, coffee and biscuits and the gradual arrival of students and older participants. The studio was arranged with chairs in a big circle and a place to hang coats to one side. There was a quiet hum of conversation as people got themselves and others drinks. I had the sense that everyone was mutually welcoming one another into the session – indeed, I (an outsider) was also welcomed by an older woman and by a student. The sense of a group caring for one another was palpable. I noticed one student embracing an older participant and the introduction of another older woman as an ‘expert improviser’. The importance of refreshments in arts projects has been noted elsewhere (Roe et al, 2016) and was evident here, providing a safe (neutral) segue way from the ‘outside’ world into the space of the workshop and demarcating the beginning of something other. Similarly, our co-creative workshops at Wellcome (Zeilig et al, 2018, 2019) included time for refreshments and this provided an important opportunity for everyone to arrive and settle within the session. Some of the students talked about their recent trip to Italy and I noticed the interest shown by the older participants – the sense that a certain sharing had already begun and that everyone was entering a familiar community. One student mentioned that she had woken late but rushed to get to the workshop, she was determined to be there noting ‘*I couldn’t miss the workshop*’ and another participant enthusiastically told me ‘*I’m coming to all the workshops, I’m committed*’ he went on to elaborate that for him the sessions are ‘*life affirming, full of joy*’ and the ‘*highlight*’ of his week. Indeed, the impression that the workshops fulfil an important role for all who take part in them was apparent and that everyone was committed to attending and fully participating.



People gradually and calmly took their places within the big circle, there was no sense of rush or hurry to do this and conversations started taking place across the circle, interspersed with a lot of laughter. I noted that there were 18 people present in total, 8 older people ranging in age from their 70s – 94 years of age, 8 students, 1 member from Camden People’s Theatre and Michael. Later an older man joined the group.



Michael S made announcements and formally welcomed everyone into the workshop – signalling a more formal beginning to the session. The ‘sharing event’ was mentioned and it was stressed that the audience may join in with this and that as it will be based on improvisation, it can’t go ‘wrong’. I noticed that there was a distinction in how people were referred to: ‘participants’ (referring to the older people) and ‘students’, thus although there is no sense of hierarchy, there is a difference in role. Michael then handed over to a student (E) who quietly and calmly led the first exercise in which everyone said their name and had this repeated back by the group and then led a brief mindfulness exercise. These exercises were both validating and quietening – enabling the group to enter the moment of the workshop and serving to cohere everyone present. When E during the mindfulness exercise encouraged everyone to close their eyes and imagine that they were a tree, one older woman asserted that she was ‘*a tree from Jamaica*’ another older woman said she was a ‘*strong tree*’ and another affirmed that she was ‘*a coconut tree with lots of coconuts!*’. I was impressed by how quickly and effortlessly everyone engaged with these exercises and how ready people were to start playing and imagining. The mindfulness exercise ended with some movement and the invitation to imagine that participants were catching an insect with their fingers, introducing an element of playfulness into the session.

Another exercise was then introduced (by a student) – ‘The Invisible Object Game’ in which a few members of the group (a student and two older men) started by imagining and playing with an object and were slowly but steadily joined by the rest of the group who stretched, tasted, balanced and bounced the invisible object together. The object was created by everyone who joined in, there was permission to imagine it change shape and colour. I noticed the group intertwining with one another, the lively conversation – in contrast to the quieter conversations when people arrived. Once this game had come to an end by mutual consensus that the object should be ‘let go’ I overheard older participants agreeing ‘*That was fabulous*’ and that it had been ‘*freeing*’. The group quickly moved on to another, object based, game in which everyone was invited to say something prompted by a small wooden ruler. This was handed around the big circle and people shared personal stories provoked by this object. Some of these were quite involved, for instance – one older woman who recalled how she left school without know exactly what to do and then in her first job was renamed, a number of people recalled being hit with a cane or ruler at school, one older man talked of having been a strong chess player but not being good at maths and then appearing in a newspaper article where he was described as one of the strangest and most erotic players in England. It was noticeable that the group were listening with avid attention and that there was a sense of validation for all participants in being listened to and heard in this way. I was also conscious that regardless of age, this object game was provoking memories for everyone! The somewhat clichéd stereotype that older people are most interested in reminiscence was therefore challenged through this exercise. In the ensuing reflections, everyone was intrigued by how much they found out about each other – ‘*things you wouldn’t otherwise hear*’.



The next game consisted of role play – where an older participant was the child and a student the parent. Each ‘child’ was given a scenario in which they had to reveal something to their ‘parent’ (who had no prior knowledge about what this would be). The studio was reconfigured so that it became almost stage like – those who were not role playing become the audience. This provided an opportunity for performance which was welcomed by some of the participants. In the first scenario, an older woman as the daughter had to announce her pregnancy to her mother, her mother (played by a student) was preoccupied with the cooking. Together – through improvisation, they created a convincing story that was later described as ‘moving’ by one of those watching. In the next scenario, a child (an older woman) revealed that she wanted to move to Fiji and in the final scene, an older woman spoke to her father (a student) about her lesbian relationship. The intense enjoyment of creating stories together was evident, as was the rapt encouragement of the group. There was then a tea-break. I spent this time talking to an older participant about her experiences of the project (see quotes below)

Generations 3 Workshop Comments **from an informal interview with an older participant:**

This is stimulating!

It helps develop my creativity

I can see the evolution of young people who are really shy at the beginning and can now speak up.

This workshop helps me switch off from other things – I feel to be very much into the present.

The workshop is a way of discovering people – by a word, a body language, how they react to something.

It’s a game we play and over time a community has developed.

This older woman did also point out that ‘*There is a tendency for students to talk together*’ during the tea break, although this was not a criticism as much as an observation. It seems that the improvisatory games are the times when generational differences are least in evidence. Following the tea-break an older man introduced the next game on status, this started with us all saying our name and developed into a role play in which the whole group were interacting according to different levels of status that they had been accorded. This allowed people to move about and mingle with one another, to play together. After a time, the group returned to their chairs and everyone guessed each other’s status, Michael emphasised that it ‘*doesn’t matter if we get it wrong*’ thus stressing the failure free environment and helping encourage everyone present to participate. This provoked conversation and debate within the group – *what is considered high status? If someone ignores you what does this imply about their status?* This then moved into further role play, in which two people created a scenario without knowing one another’s status.

The first was an interview, the second a rich person with their servant, the third at a diner with a waitress and the fourth two pilots. In all scenarios, there was a sense that the 'actors' and the audience were completely engaged in the moment and were present in the activity. There was also a great deal of humour, for instance: with the servant blowing his nose on his mistresses' clothing, and the pilots clearly playing for laughs as one noted *'The passengers love an exciting journey!'*

The workshop ended with time for a reflective debrief, in which everyone was encouraged to comment honestly on the preceding workshop. People remarked on how much they had enjoyed getting to know one another using the ruler as a prompt, how the morning had gone quickly. One older woman noted that she enjoyed seeing the students become more and more assertive and able to participate and there were a number of queries (mostly from older participants) about the status game and role play *'it was a bit sterile'* and the *'least satisfactory'* part of the workshop. One of the students noted that there had been *'too much conversation'* and that perhaps there should be more emphasis on movement and gesture.

iii) 6th March Sharing Event 6pm-7.30pm

I arrived early and was surprised at how many students and older participants, were already present- carefully setting up the space in the studio theatre and simultaneously preparing themselves for the event. A group of students were playing in the theatre space, pretending to be birds and expressing an excited anticipation at what the evening may entail. The tables at the back were already replete with refreshments and the usual impression of welcome and mutual caring was evident. Three students and I talked about how the improvisation in *Generations 3* workshops had been important to their individual practices, how enriching the experience had been.

I had time to speak briefly with Stephen, one of the older participants, who mentioned that he *'enjoyed the mixture of generations'* that he liked finding out *'what we have in common as people'* and marking the differences and similarities between the generations. Scott, also an older participant noted *'I love the energy of younger people and have also enjoyed getting to know the Chinese students who were, at first, so reserved!'* As the theatre gradually filled with older participants and with students the buzz of conversation grew louder and an atmosphere of nervous excitement was palpable.

Michael gathered the group together to discuss how the event would be structured, with seating arranged to encourage the audience to join in and mentioning that *'whoever comes are the right people'*, that the project has *'already been successful'* and that there would be an attempt to do *'as many exercises as possible without rushing it'*.

These statements seemed to encapsulate the positive ethos and modus operandi of the whole project! Francesca then led a series of warm up exercises in which the group were encouraged to move around each other making eye contact, to stand together in powerful poses, to share positive imaginary objects with one another. These accentuated a feeling of group cohesion, sharing and validation, as she observed: *'we're all looking after each other, so we can say yes - we're safe in this space!'* The powerful sense of community that had formed amongst the group was evident and was later communicated to the audience, many of whom felt able to take part in the activities. As the audience started to arrive, I overheard satisfied comments that so many people had come. From the beginning, the workshop members interacted with and welcomed the audience. Thus, the usual distinctions between 'audience' and 'performers' were blurred from the outset as the newcomers were invited to become part of the workshop experience.

The event was introduced by an older woman and a student, emphasising the intergenerational and inclusive nature of the workshops and everyone present took part in the name exercise which created a sense of group participation. Tony, an older participant, next explained the 'yes and' principle: *'never block anyone or their offer'* and then activity 1 'phone conversations' was introduced by Jessica (an older participant). To the obvious enjoyment of the audience, Jessica spent a little time remembering telephones in her youth and how 'smart phones' - which can see you, hear you and even tell you off, are perhaps not so smart. Throughout the evening, there were regular invitations to all those present to 'make a phone call' and a number of different scenarios emerged. The audience undoubtedly welcomed the chance to play. This was clear in activity 2 'Stephen's machine' in which audience members and workshop participants alike enjoyed being parts of a bigger machine, using their bodies, making noises and movements together.



In activity 3 –introduced by a student, the audience were encouraged to imagine scenarios (such as being on board a coronavirus cruise ship, at a restaurant, on a dinghy) and using only one word people were then invited to join the scene. People let their imaginations take hold and props and costumes were used, participants found ways to communicate that relied more on intonation, eye contact and gesture than language. Although it wasn't always easy to follow these scenes, which lacked a guiding narrative and were frequently quite surreal, participants were fully engaged in them and there was a sense of great enjoyment and fun. As the evening continued, the audience became increasingly involved and I was struck by the generous space that had been created by the *Generation 3* workshop members and the uninhibited enthusiasm with which audience members participated.



Activity 4 used music to prompt improvised scenarios and people made ample use of costumes. Finally, 'presence in silence' involved two older women standing in silence on the stage before being joined by others (workshop members and audience alike). Following the activity that the previous exercises had entailed - their movement and noise, this silence was powerful. The steady gaze of one older woman in particular was confronting and also moving. As people gathered and sat, stood, leant on each other in silence - this vision of a markedly diverse group of people separately together creating a space, seemed a fitting finale to the *Generations 3* project.



Overall thoughts about workshops & sharing event and how they work:

- **Flexible Framework:** The workshops were evidently carefully structured - each had been planned in sessions earlier in the week, taking into account the comments from previous workshops. In addition, the role of refreshments at the beginning and half way through provided a shape to the session and also an opportunity for relaxed interactions between the students and older participants – helping to cohere the group. There was a pace and direction to each session - a sense of onward movement in which one game or exercise would follow the next. However, within this quite tight framework there was also a sense of time, participants were not hurried and games could play themselves out. There was consequently an important sense of leisure leading to a feeling that creative exploration could take place, as no particular endpoint or goal was in sight. This was mirrored in the sharing event, which had a clearly defined and planned structure. For instance, specific exercises had been chosen and decisions made about which students / participants would lead these. However, this was a flexible framework, the exercises were not rushed, audience members were invited to participate and therefore the event itself had an unpredictable quality.

- **Reflexive Questioning:** One of the refreshing and novel aspects of *Generations 3* workshops attended was that questioning was conspicuously encouraged (no-one was ever silenced when they expressed doubt). The structure of the workshops involved regular reflective sessions following each exercise and at the end of the session. In this way, a reflexivity about the processes and the ability to express hesitancy was nurtured. This was one of the central strands of the model that has been created by the *Generations 3* team and I think has enabled the students and also the older people to take creative risks and to risk themselves. Indeed, this sense of safe risk taking pervaded both workshops.

- **Improvisation & play:** The importance of improvisation (the *yes and* ethos) and closely associated with this – play, was evident throughout the two workshops (NB* observations on 31st January workshop). As noted elsewhere (Zeilig et al, 2018) improvisation can be broadly understood as a means of using bodies, space, imagination, objects and instruments in response to the immediate stimuli of one's environment, without preconceptions (Frost and Yarrow, 2016, p. xv). The central role of improvisation as allowing in the moment creation, was clear for all the participants (students and older people alike). In addition, the improvisatory nature of the workshops created a failure free environment that was experienced as enabling. The use of a variety of eclectic objects and costumes gave the participants licence to play within the framework of specific games such as 'the object game' and role play. This prompted an infectious playfulness and encouraged the participants' self-expression. Indeed, playfulness was a hallmark of the workshops and also the sharing event. Playing and a sense of play also gives a certain liberation to most people which also encouraged humour and laughter. The freedom involved in improvisation was succinctly outlined by Stephen (an older participant) during the shared event: '*You're allowed to break the rules even when you're hardly given any!*'

- **The role of games:** In addition, the games (and the playing they stimulated) helped create a certain equality – this is because the game provides a framework and structure for interacting that is not based on age, gender, occupation or experience. The fundamental importance of game-playing was outlined by Dutch historian Johan Huizinga who viewed games as an essential aspect of life. As long ago as 1938, he observed that, next to "homo faber" (man the maker), there is also the concept of "homo ludens" (man the player). Further, Huizinga states that play is an important meaning-making activity. The *Generations 3* workshops, which are based on games and play therefore present a unique experience where participants can engage in a free and meaningful activity, carried out for its own sake – without any extrinsic or instrumental purpose, which is spatially and temporally separated from the demands of everyday life.

- **Fun:** Linked to improvisation and play – the workshops were clearly fun for all involved, an opportunity to shed mundane concerns and engage imaginatively in the moment and also to do something different. As Francesca urged the group (during the warm up for the Sharing Event) '*have fun and be brave!*' The *Generations 3* project provided a rare opportunity for all involved to prioritise fun and this in turn created a relaxed, open atmosphere where participants and students alike felt able to share experiences and learn from one another. Both students and older participants were clearly enthusiastic about engaging with different generations and the insights that this has led to.

- **Collaborative creativity:** The *Generations 3* workshops generated a collaborative creativity between older participants and students. As noted by the older woman quoted above (workshop on 21st February), the workshops were experienced as stimulating and as a means of developing personal creativity. In line with Tronick's (2003) thesis the workshops facilitated co-creativity as evidenced in the relationships that were generated between all participants:

'Co-creativity implies neither a set of steps nor an end state. Rather, it implies that when two individuals mutually engage in a communicative exchange, how they will be together, their dynamics and direction are unknown and can only emerge from their mutual regulation.' (Tronick, 2003:476).

This emphasis on the unknown also led to an honesty and authenticity of interaction.

- **Intergenerational connections:** Perhaps the most important (and essentially unquantifiable) aspect of the participative and co-creative arts is that they can encourage people to connect: with the art, the moment, with other people and above all with themselves?

As explicated by Buber (1923) perhaps art allows and encourages 'I-thou' relationships⁴; this was certainly evident throughout the *Generations 3* workshops that I attended, in which older participants and students alike were inspired to draw on their own resources and past experiences – thus connecting with themselves and simultaneously with others. In addition, as a result of their improvisatory character (and closely linked with this the emphasis on games, playing and fun) and also reflexive questioning, the workshops were responsive and reactive. They were therefore able to encourage intergenerational interactions. This was facilitated by the sharing of personal stories in some of the exercises, the gentle encouragement given to one another during the games and the respect with which everyone listened to and played with one another. The participants, especially the students, came to realise how much they have in common and several older participants mentioned how much they enjoyed witnessing students gain in confidence. The intergenerational nature of the project was emphasised during the sharing event, when activities were equally introduced by older participants and students.

- **Community:** Associated with connection, the workshops generated a sense of community and belonging amongst all participants. Everyone present seemed to evince a real pride in being part of the workshop and were committed to the project. As noted by one of the students (during the 21st Feb workshop p.6) this was an event '*she couldn't miss*'. This was clearly an intergenerational community, in which people were mutually learning from one another - for instance: the student who to her great surprise learnt about technology from an older woman. The workshops were characterised by an inclusivity, a sense that nobody can do anything that is 'wrong' and the '*yes and*' ethos which helped to create a safe space enabling creative sharing. The creation of a safe space was facilitated at the Sharing Event by the warm up exercises led by Francesca, who stressed that above all '*we're safe in this space!*'.

Observations from the Interviews

Students

Two students were interviewed, using a dialogic approach ensuring that the interviews were as conversational as possible and guided by the students' remarks and observations. The few predetermined questions focused on the students' perceptions of the workshops and more specifically their experiences of improvisation with older people. Both students were women and MA students on the PDP course. Each interview started with obtaining full consent from the students and assuring them that they could have a copy of the ensuing report. The first interview lasted 21 minutes and the second 33 minutes, although I had a sense that both could have been extended (as the conversations were lively and interesting). They were not transcribed but were recorded and then listened to repeatedly, to ensure that the main points have been accurately represented. These points and illustrative quotes (in italics) from the interviews are outlined below:

⁴I and Thou by Martin Buber (1923) explicates some of the ways in which human life finds its meaningfulness in relationships. I-Thou describes the world of relations and is not a means to some object or goal, but a definitive relationship involving the whole being of each subject.

Student A

- A background in fine art and dance, she has a particular interest in mindfulness and incorporating this within the everyday and also in improvisation. She is curious about how performance can be very broad and not necessarily one thing.
- When discussing and describing the workshops she first emphasised their intergenerational emphasis and also the ways in which the students design the workshops, with Michael, based on the feedback from Friday sessions.
- The value of the workshops as a way in which she can get used to leading exercises "*It's really valuable experience...*"
- The lack of expectation about each workshop was outlined, their freedom, "*The possibilities are endless, it's very playful...I have a strong imagination and it's nice to be able to let that unfold*".
- "*What happens, happens. They often talk about a beginner's mind when it comes to improvisation. I always think of improvisation as something tangible, something that you mould and is always changing*"
- This prompted a conversation between myself and the interviewee about the possibility of 'feeling improvisation' in the room as an 'energy source' and its essentially creative nature. The ways in which individuals' creativity emerges in the workshops was also discussed.
- The success of the workshops as residing in their simplicity: "*There are certain rules but these are simple rules – you don't have to be a certain way, you can improvise with the rules' It's accepting what's there and then continuing it*"
- The making of offers within the workshops and ability of participants to accept these offers and then continue onwards.
- "*We talked today about having your own barriers as loose (porous) things can come in and come out, so parts of yourself can come out in ways that you didn't think that they would so it's a very humble thing this workshop.*"
- Student noticed that some participants find it hard to go with the flow and wondered whether this was connected with levels of imagination. This prompted me to query whether this was connected with individuals having different levels of imagination or rather with how confident people are in expressing their imagination. The extent to which the workshops nourish peoples' imaginations was noted and the overall importance of this for everyone in everyday life.
- When asked if there could be any changes to the workshops, this student proposed that they could emphasise more abstract aspects rather than the narrative and could also include more non-verbal exercises.
- Enjoyment of working with older people, forging connections with different people through the workshops "*I think it's really important to mix with other people from different backgrounds and although you might not know them very well you connect and bond with them.*"

- Student stressed that she doesn't tend to make assumptions based on peoples' age, "*I just see them as people*" "*There are a lot of different layers to people.*" I wondered about the extent to which participating in *Generations 3* facilitated this insight.

Student B

- Has become interested in improvisation and wanted to learn more about this and how to practice applied theatre in Beijing.
- Discussed how the students meet each Wednesday to shape the forthcoming Friday workshop, based on the feedback from the previous Friday. Outlined how after each exercise there is reflection and how Francesca starts each workshop with a mindful exercise and an introduction of each other's names (perhaps because the older people don't easily remember names). This is followed by a 'yes and' exercise every week – the extent to which the workshop follows a similar format (and thus has a quite clearly defined structure) was emphasised. "*We build up stories and try to make fun to make everyone feel relaxed, because the characters of the older people are quite diverse some are outgoing but some are more internal...*"
- I observed that perhaps the students are the ones creating the workshops? Student B agreed with this and stressed: "*We need more directly ideas from the older generations.*"
- "*I am not outgoing so I find the talks around the tea and coffee stressful*" This student noted that she finds it easier to interact with older people during the exercises than during the more social times.
- Discussion about improvisation and her perceptions of this "*We can create improvisations from our own background ... I find that older peoples' improvisations tend to follow the ideas of the person before them...*" Emphasised that a lot of the older peoples' improvisations is not as abstract as others. "*For me, I think this kind of art form doesn't need you to have any certain skills. Anyone can join in. And you can make it in your way and it is quite concerned with your own experience and ways of thinking.*" The inclusive and liberating nature of improvisation was stressed but also that it is harder for some people. "*Maybe we should give them more permission, or give a kind of example, some of them are thinking about traditional theatre...*" "*We offered them brown paper and you can use it anyway you want – this was much more free.*" Student recommended that there should be less exercises based on scenarios and more like those using the brown paper.
- Working with older people: "*They are like your grandparents...I am part of the generation that is quite anxious about the future but when working with older people you can see that everything can be fine*" Student agreed that intergenerational work was both calming and steadying. "*I realise the diversity in older generations...It seems that the young generation are trying to help the older generation but in fact it's not, its double ways. I am interested in what the older generation are getting from the workshops...then we could make the exercises with this aim.*"
- Interest in bringing this style of workshop to her own community (in China), interest in focussing on the process without the necessity for any particular outcome.

Student B stressed that she wanted to find a method and a way of working in this community based way that would be relevant for her own community.

- The workshops '*open the door between the two generations*'.
- "*Creativity is not just about the exercise but about making connections between the two generations and about communication – I never thought I could talk in this way with older people.*" We then discussed that the workshops were a means of releasing everyone's creativity.
- Student B discussed the power imbalance in the workshops (with students and facilitators often leading) and wondered why the older people were involved and whether they feel that they are helping out the students. She expressed worry that this may lead older people to compromise – do the older people feel obliged to take part in exercises because they don't want to disappoint students. NB* This led to a line of inquiry that informed the following interviews with older participants. There was some lively discussion about how hard it can be to offer negative feedback during the debrief sessions: could there be a different way of structuring this?

Summary of student interviews:

- Importance of the *Generation 3* workshops for students' own practice, extending their ideas about how improvisation can work – the freeing nature of this, prompting new thoughts about the role of process (rather than performance or product) and creativity and the ability for theatre to connect with and draw upon the experiences of a diverse range of people. Observation that improvisation doesn't require particular skills or specialised knowledge and is therefore inherently inclusive '*anyone can join in*'. Finally, it was noted (by Student A) that one of the unique qualities of improvisation is that '*the possibilities are endless*'.
- Sheer enjoyment of workshops, that are playful and which provide a unique opportunity to let their own imaginations 'unfold'.
- Calming and grounding nature of the workshops – e.g.: student B's comments that interactions with older people helped allay her overall sense of anxiety.
- Ability of the workshops to lead to insights about older people, the 'diversity' of this population, the different 'layers' that characterise people. The way in which the workshops have the potential to facilitate meaningful interactions between older and younger people (to 'open the door between the two generations').
- Some questioning about the power imbalances in the workshops which are mostly led by students and the possibility that older participants feel some obligation to take part – the need for more ideas and guidance directly from the older generation¹.

Older participants

Two older people (one man, one woman both in their 70s) were interviewed also using a dialogic approach, several of the questions arose directly from the queries expressed by student B. Each interview started with introductions and consent being obtained to use quotes and observations from the interview in a blog / other written document. The few predetermined questions (as with the student interviews) concentrated on perceptions of the workshops and the experience of working with younger people. The interviews were a similar length to those conducted with the students – the first with the older woman was 20 minutes long and the second 35 minutes in length. They were not transcribed but were recorded and then listened to repeatedly, to ensure that the main points have been accurately represented. Both participants became involved in *Generations 3* though the local company 'All Change'.

Older person A

- An older woman (73 years old) from Mauritius who in her introduction stressed how busy she had been last year and her inability to participate at that point in the workshops. I was reminded that it is tempting to imagine that retired people have a lot of time, but that this is often not the case. I gained the impression that she was currently 'fitting' *Generations 3* into her quite full life. She generously and fulsomely outlined her love of cooking ("I can cook for 3 or 4 hours"), dancing, music and how she looked after her husband, who had been a jazz musician and whom she nursed through Alzheimer's ("He played music and I danced.") "I am so happy what I achieved in life, what I done, I don't brag." I enjoyed being with someone who was able to reflect so positively and proudly on her life.

- The project was described as 'very welcoming' and Michael referred to as the 'manager'. "When you are working with young people it makes you feel so alive" "we are like a family" "And the manager is so nice and welcoming and makes you feel so great, you know looking after us, care for us."

- The importance of being greeted, met each week and having a cup of tea was stressed. 'It feels so good, they are very friendly, they talk to us all the time.'

- "Exercises are good, it's good for your mental health, it gives you something to do and for your body" The improvisation is 'very rewarding:'

- "An exercise that I really enjoyed is the dancing – I have been dancing since I was two years old."

Objects "was nice – I was listening, this lady came with something that someone gave her and I brought a cup that my husband brought me, he gave me this cup and I cherish it, it's worth a lot to me that cup – it's something very essential to me."

- "Its great working with much younger people, they are welcoming, they touch us - you don't get much of that in other places English people are a bit cold!"

- "The students are so welcoming, they take an interest, they ask us questions ..It's good to relate your life and to ask them as well"

"I wrote a poem already about coming here. I feel young being with them, you know, there is no word that I could use how wonderful, how great,...I will be coming every week!"

- Importance of interacting with younger people and need to support them: "...being with them, I feel so young."

- Despite adamantly stating that Generations project hadn't affected her life (I wonder if she interpreted this question as referring to whether the project had placed any extra burdens on her time / resources?) she did clearly state that her involvement in the workshops had given her 'extra strength'.

- No comments about whether they could be changed or improved in any way.

Older Person B

- This older man (72 years old) has been involved with the Generations project, via All Change since it started. He spent some time telling me about the history of the project and how it has changed since its start (at the Claremont in White Lion street). Noting that during the first year, there was someone running the improvisation (who is no longer involved) originally students were assisting whereas now they are running exercises. "Its changed quite dramatically". "The students are using their ideas to run different sessions within the course of the day." We discussed that its quite a long workshop – starting at 9.45am (although there was no sense that this was too long!). "It's a mixture of Francesca, Michael and the students doing various things, Francesca usually does a sort of relaxation thing and a validation of our names from others in the group." "There's a mixture of small groups, the whole group and a 1:1"

- Some discussion of what works well and what doesn't work so well – "The nature of improvisation is that even if it doesn't work well, it's okay! Today, for example when we had the groups, we had kind of themes – like our group had romance as a theme, our group doing romance worked incredibly well, but another group doing 'humour' said their group didn't work so well. So, it's just one of those things. There's not a simple kind of thing that this will work and this won't – even if it doesn't work, that's okay." I probed for whether there were group constellations that were more effective but this interviewee said he enjoyed the mix.

- "Personally, I like things that are new." I was reminded of the work that I do with people with dementia and the importance of new learning and new experiences. This older man outlined how the use of objects in today's session was new and effective.

- Improvisation and its importance in the workshops was discussed – "You don't know where it's going to go" the fun of the unexpected was highlighted. "I did an improvisation telling a story and that was enormous fun." We discussed how he had let himself go with the improvisation. "It's always good fun, most of the day and something exciting usually happens!" When prompted for an example, the use of the objects was remarked on. "That was pretty stunning" was a comment that this gentleman made when I recalled how his ringing of the bell had stopped the whole room.

- *"I love working with younger people...it's so good to share knowledge and do spontaneous things with a younger group which I probably wouldn't get to do in the normal course of life."* This led to a conversation about the interviewee's involvement with an organisation 'North London Cares' in which over 65s are teamed up with young professionals that he is part of – he is teamed with a group of young professionals. Again (as with the older lady interviewed) the engagement that these older people have with local communities, their full lives was evident.
- *"I can share my experiences with younger people...I suppose I enjoy their being interested in me, my knowledge, experience whatever...that they want to make contact and be involved with me."* The interviewee stressed that via All Change he was involved with many different projects, including at Sadler's Wells and in Islington where performances take place – that he finds performing exciting as well as improvisation.
- *"Because I am involved with All Change and performing at various venues, I have become more confident in a thing like improvisation with the students."* Impression that the All Change work has enabled him to do these workshops. *"I get a lot out of it all really."*
- *"All these groups are good for me, because I am getting out and about and doing positive things. So, certainly they are good for my mental health."*
"I think it is great that these things are going on. Yeah."
"The continuity of Generations is the important thing – this is the third time that I've done it, although the structure is different. That's the important thing – the continuity"
- Outlined his role in encouraging the involvement of the students in early sessions of the project: *"I did something in the improvisation to get the students involved, I felt like I was an anarchist."* Feels that there is an equal balance between the students and older participants.

Summary of older participant interviews:

- The warmly welcoming nature of the workshops, in which older people feel greeted, validated (both mentioned the name exercise) and valuable was noted by both interviewees. The older woman interviewed described the group as being *'like a family'*. This is fundamental to contributing to the creation of a safe space in which everyone feels able to contribute (or not!).
- The role of improvisation was particularly noted by the older man, who outlined that even if it doesn't work well *"that's okay!"*. In addition, the enjoyment of doing something 'new' which is facilitated by improvisation was mentioned by the older man. The failure free nature of the environment is liberating for participants.
- A sense from both older interviewees that they are listened to, interacted with and even cared for within the workshops. It was notable that the older woman interviewed also stressed that she was 'touched' and that this is something that doesn't necessarily happen every day (she is a widow and lives alone). Clearly, the workshops provide a rare opportunity for interacting with others in both imaginative and physical ways.

- The enjoyment of regularly engaging with much younger people was evident for both interviewees. This involved the ability to share life experiences, the deep satisfaction of being listened to (and heard) by younger people and also the chance to hear about younger people's lives too. The older woman interviewed emphasised that this interaction with younger people put life into her.
- The positive influence of the workshops on their wellbeing was mentioned, for them both this was specifically and positively connected with mental health, getting out and doing positive things and the older woman also observed that the project was giving her extra strength.

Concluding thoughts and comments

The *Generations 3* project in line with recent evidence on the role of the arts for health and wellbeing, demonstrated the ability of improvisatory arts based workshops to positively impact the wellbeing of a diversity of participants. This may be because the project, in line with the definitions quoted in the Introduction (p.2), provided important opportunities for participants to develop, feel fulfilled, keep learning, be active and also to give to others. In particular, the older participants specified that the workshops were beneficial to their mental health, whereas for students the workshops helped to ground and calm them. However, both generations commented on the inherent pleasure of sharing and learning from one another. The relevance of 'making a contribution to the community' is recognised as a component of wellbeing (Shah and Marks, 2004, as quoted in the Introduction p.2) and the workshops helped facilitate this, not solely by linking students with older people from the local community but also by forging a community spirit within the project itself. The workshops, due to their guided yet flexible structure based on improvisation, games and play – and above all the ethos of 'yes and', created opportunities for intergenerational connection, communication and community. They were inherently inclusive, with ample opportunity for various forms of participation: both in the exercises and in the periods of reflective questioning when the group was prompted to consider what worked in the session. A co-creative spirit pervaded the workshops, in which exercises led to unexpected moments and insights, relational interactions were emphasised and the process (rather than a predetermined endpoint) was privileged. The workshops also challenged students' preconceptions about older people, who they now realise are a diverse rather than homogenous group of people and who (according to one student interviewed) provide a calming, reassuring influence for the students. The improvisatory, playful – game oriented, nature of the project also allowed participants to work responsively with one another and to listen with openness. Similarly, the participants were prompted to interact in the moment and respond imaginatively, thus shedding the practical demands of everyday life and having fun. Above all, the project had an exploratory nature and was focussed on the process of engaging all participants, rather than generating any tangible or polished performance / product.

A safe, failure free environment provided a sense of time, licence and freedom to discover, imagine and create together. The importance of this was remarked on by an older participant who observed that the workshops 'develop' her creativity (p.7). As noted by others (Cutler, 2020) access to creativity is a fundamental right. In light of this, *Generations 3* provides a rich and unique opportunity for participants from across generations to engage in, express and enjoy creative experiences together.

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Generations is an annual collaboration, which began in 2018, between Central Saint Martins – University of the Arts London and All Change. Each spring for 10 weeks, a group of students from the performance programme, local older people and artists Francesca Beard and Michael Spencer come together to create improvised performance. The project was inspired by a pilot project with Improbable supported by Islington Giving.

MA Performance Design and Practice and BA Performance: Design and Practice at Central Saint Martins - Challenging assumptions and territories, these courses explore theatre, film, video and live art. The MA brings together artists, directors, writers, researchers and designers to set the agendas that will drive performance practice in the 21st century.

Michael Spencer has led performance based courses at Central Saint Martins for over twenty years. Inspired by seeing the work that Improbable were doing with older people, he had the idea of asking local residents to work alongside the students he was teaching, in a non-hierarchical co-creative project. Thus, Generations was born in spring 2018.

All Change brings artists and communities together to produce original and authentic arts experiences which make connections between people. All Change is committed to partnership, collaboration, innovation and risk taking. Projects are cross art form and interdisciplinary, led by exceptional artists. Work reaches those who would not usually have the opportunity to participate in the arts. Ambitious for communities, ambitious for artists. Based in north London since 1985.
www.allchangearts.org

Francesca Beard [Associate Artist, All Change] is an internationally acclaimed spoken word artist with over twenty years' experience facilitating cross-arts projects, with a wide range of diverse groups, working across generations. As a facilitator and dramaturge, she's worked with institutions such as All Change, BBC Radio 3 and The Young Vic to create ambitious, public facing, participatory community-led shows. She has held artist in residences at The Banff Centre, Canada and The Mixed Reality Lab, Nottingham University, to develop interactive, accessible story-telling platforms for live and on-line audiences with B3 Media and Kings Cultural Institute.
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Dr Hannah Zeilig [Senior Research Fellow at the London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London and associate fellow at University of East Anglia] has a background in social gerontology and the arts. She has long been interested in the role of older people in society and has investigated the role and value of the arts for people with dementia. She is curious about the complicated ways in which our culture represents old age and 'dementia'. Hannah also works with people with dementia in the community and in care homes. Her work is trans-disciplinary. As the principal researcher at the Wellcome Hub 'Created Out of Mind' she explored artistic co-creativity with people with dementia. Hannah is now co-developing and researching ways of using the arts with older people in care homes during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.
www.arts.ac.uk/research/ual-staff-researchers/hannah-zeilig

Generations - Associate Partners:

2018: Lucien Paul Stanfield (CEO) and older people from **Claremont Project**. The Claremont Project is a pioneering charity which provides isolated and marginalised older people living in Islington and neighbouring boroughs with a range of aspirational, creative, and invigorating opportunities within a caring and thriving community.
www.claremont-project.org



2020: Daniel Fulvio (Community Engagement Manager) and older people from **Camden People's Theatre (CPT)**. CPT is a central London space dedicated year-round to supporting early-career artists making unconventional theatre – particularly those whose work explores issues that matter to people now.
www.cpttheatre.co.uk



Participating students and older people:

Eula Harrison | Anthony M Baker | Prem Baboolall | Dina Nagler | Colleen Ogbebor | Pauline Williams | Maria D'Inverno | Stephen Bush | Kate Harwood | Jessica Buck | Scott Ewing | Aziza Kadyrova | Ronnie Kommené | Elly Rutherford | Mia Yang | Sharo Liang | Yuan Yue | Ella Jackson | Violeta Valcheva

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