

# Connecting Postgraduate Students and Older Adults in the Community to Support Wellbeing: A Service-Learning Module During COVID-19 and Beyond. A *Practice Report*

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## Abstract

The aim of this practice report is to discuss the implementation of a service-learning module developed to support the psychological wellbeing of postgraduate students and older adults in the community, with a view to fostering their connection and tackling loneliness in both populations. The module, 'Self-Identity, Intergenerational and Intercultural Learning' (SIIL), was offered to students enrolled in the Mental Health Studies Master of Science at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, King's College London. The module included lectures on the scientific underpinnings of wellbeing and ageism positionally within intercultural and intergenerational contexts. Students were introduced to qualitative research with a focus on autoethnography. They engaged with older adults through phone conversations and undertook wellbeing-promoting experiential exercises and self-reflection. The interactions provided students the opportunity to learn at an academic and personal level, while allowing older adults to share their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. These lessons learnt will inform future practice. Future directions for further developments of this methodology in other disciplines are also discussed in this practice report.

**Keywords:** Wellbeing; postgraduate; community; intergenerational; intercultural learning; autoethnography; art-based methodologies; loneliness

## Introduction

Loneliness is recognised as one of the most pressing public health issues across different age groups in the UK (Macdonald et al., 2021), with high levels experienced worldwide (Surkalim et al., 2022). Worryingly, loneliness has been shown to be high in both university students (Diehl et al., 2018; Hysing et al., 2020) and in older adults (Su et al., 2022), and levels have increased due to the various physical distancing restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ernst et al., 2022). Loneliness has been associated with significant risk for worsening of both physical and mental health conditions (Cacioppo



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& Cacioppo, 2018; Miller, 2011). Loneliness is a strong predictor of mental distress among students (McIntyre et al., 2018). However, despite its negative impacts on the overall quality of life, loneliness is often stigmatised, trivialised, or ignored.

Following life transitions—such as starting a new course at university or retiring—it is common for people to experience loneliness. Therefore, universities have an unprecedented opportunity to offer contributions for tackling loneliness through fostering social connections between students and older adults in the community. To help achieve this, we designed and implemented a postgraduate service learning module established in partnership with the Southwark Pensioners Centre (SPC), a charity that supports older adults in southeast London, close to the faculty. As many postgraduate students may only spend a year in this city, with many coming from overseas, an important consideration when planning the module was the expectation that participation would allow students to exhibit a greater understanding of and involvement in the community geographically located around their campus, developing a greater sense of belonging that would allow fostering and expanding connections beyond the students' community (hooks, 2009).

## Module Development

The conception and design of the “Self-Identity, Intergenerational and Intercultural Learning” (SIIL) module was guided by the key principles of service-learning, where students and academics serve society by engaging with a specific group in the community. Students reflect on their learning engagement in a structured and supported way, both within and outside academia, by bringing together their personal, academic and civic experiences, to help foster collaborations within and outside their learning community. With the delivery of SIIL we wanted to support the development of students as “whole persons” who have not only acquired academic skills, but also social and interpersonal competences, offering them an opportunity to further engage as responsible, active and critical citizens (Nortomaa & Grönlund, 2019). SIIL was offered to students enrolled in the Mental Health Studies Master of Science at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, King's College London (Puntill et al., 2022).

An important aspect of this module, alongside tackling loneliness, was its aim to address ageism. Ageism refers to the stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of age (Bytheway, 2005). Research shows that the lives of individuals who internalise an ageist attitude are 7.5 years shorter than those with higher self-perceptions of ageing (Levy et al., 2002). Moreover, evidence shows that interventions such as education and intergenerational contact are effective in reducing ageism likely via the achievement of a deeper understanding of older adults, and the development of comfort and more positive attitudes towards the older population (Burnes et al., 2019). Our module therefore aimed to implement a strategy to reduce ageism bilaterally, by educating and raising awareness on the topic across students and simultaneously by empowering older adults in giving value to their personal experiences and knowledge, and a space where their voices are heard.

In partnership with the SPC with them and for them, we developed a plan responding to their needs. SPC explained to us that they had started “Living Stories”, a project to capture COVID-19 histories of their members through stories, talking to them about their experiences, as they wanted to amplify their voices by offering a record of these narratives to the British Library, the largest collection of oral histories in the world. They also wanted to use these stories to approach local authorities, asking for their active support for the communities of older adults, whose voices are usually marginalised and under-represented. We met several times with the manager of the SPC and with a very active member of the community, in order to design the collaborative activities taking into consideration the older adults' needs and requirements. Students would participate in training sessions consisting of theoretical and experiential activities delivered by us, academics, but also by key members of the SPC, particularly in relation to the structure of the Living Stories Project. The main content of the lectures, as described later in this paper, focused on ageism, positive psychology and mental health topics. The role that cultural identity plays, and how it shapes and is manifested in people's mental health and wellbeing, were also considered. Students were asked to regularly perform some experiential exercises and to reflect upon them with the aim to support them not only academically, but also in terms of their own self-awareness and wellbeing. Having students feeling actively included and connected also speaks to the core of the module, grounded on collaboration across communities of practice, co-production and reflexivity as key components of its service-learning nature (Brandes, 2017; Etherington, 2004).

## Module Structure

The module consisted of 11 sessions, which ran over three months during the Spring Term, and was offered as an optional 15-credit module, corresponding to 150 learning hours. Each student was partnered with two older adults and had three conversations with each one. A total of six conversations per student over the phone were recorded to be thematically analysed in the future. Students encouraged their older adult partners to talk about their experiences before and during the pandemic, as

well as to discuss plans for the future. We asked students to keep a self-reflective diary and invited them to share their thoughts within the peer learning community, encouraging self-growth through the development of self-efficacy and autonomous learning (Macaskill & Denovan, 2013), as well as through collaboration with peers. Topics covered in the lectures included:

- Positive psychology: the aim was to provide students with theoretical underpinnings (Kobau et al., 2011), guiding the interactions with the older adults (e.g., the importance of appreciating reminiscence gaining awareness of personal accomplishments, identifying strengths and personal goals (Chiang et al., 2010), as well as detailed instructions of experiential exercises to be completed for sustained self-growth and wellbeing promotion.
- Reflection on own identity and intercultural awareness (Ahmed, 2012; Ferri, 2020; Piller, 2011): inclusion of these topics was of special importance given the multicultural nature of our student cohort and of the population of older adults in the community.
- Communication skills and sessions on ageism to reduce negative attitudes towards ageing, increasing an awareness of the realities of the older adults to be able to adjust to their needs (Burnes et al., 2019; Lytly & Levy, 2019).
- Narrative (Clandinin, 2013) and autoethnography (Adams et al., 2015) methodologies to support reflection on the service element of the module.

To enable the continuous self-awareness and the sustained self-growth and wellbeing of students as they engaged with the module, we also set up weekly experiential exercises underpinned by positive psychology. Examples include:

- *Using signature strengths differently*: consisting of identifying one's personal strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and creatively finding ways to apply these in different ways, based on the use of strengths for increased levels of wellbeing (Govindji & Linley, 2007) and goal progress (Linley et al., 2010).
- *Savouring exercise*: consisting of choosing an experience in daily life that one enjoys and making an intentional effort to step outside of it to review it and appreciate it, considering how savouring had shown effects on mental health, particularly as a protective factor against depression (Ford et al., 2017).
- *Random acts of kindness*: consisting of creating opportunities in daily life to act kindly and selflessly towards people around us, with evidence suggesting a strong link between being emotionally and behaviourally compassionate towards others and the giver's experiencing improved physical and mental health (Post, 2005).

### Interdisciplinary Dialogues

One particular and unique aspect of this module was the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration (Appleby, 2015; Gruenwald, 2014), which offered students not only the possibility to be exposed to theories and practices coming from different disciplines, but also the opportunity to experience different pedagogies and teaching styles. Academics teaching on the module came from different disciplines and therefore this exposed students to different ways of producing and exchanging knowledge, as well as to different pedagogical approaches. We embraced co-teaching as a pedagogical practice throughout the module, enhancing collaboration across colleagues and promoting peer and group work as a learning skill. Co-teaching offered students the opportunity to directly experience different methodologies, skills and use of different resources, offering a concrete example of interdisciplinarity at work. This interdisciplinary approach aligned very well with the core principles of service-learning, promoting an education that fosters equality, community-engagement, collaboration, social agency and cultural awareness, enriching at the same time students' personal and lifelong experiences of learning within and outside academia (Bringle & Clayton, 2012). Three out of the four academics on the module came from a more scientific background, while one was from the Arts and Humanities. Their teaching styles and pedagogical approaches varied when presenting and dealing with data, for example, or if involving students as co-partners throughout the module.

The use of art-based methodologies, which represented an epistemological tool brought into the module by the Art and Humanities colleague to explore and represent data in the final assessment, was something new to students who were used to more traditional ways of being assessed. On some occasions, this seemed to represent a challenge for some students who, coming mainly from a psychological background, were used to a more homogeneous teaching style. Despite the initial difficulties, students slowly came to appreciate the variety of topics and teaching styles the module presented and commented on this very positively in their feedback. They were critically exposed to the notion that knowledge is not produced in a single way and that research and research-based teaching can be performed in a multitude of ways, allowing for a variety of realities

to be represented. Encountering narrative and art-based methodologies (Mannay, 2016; Rose, 2016;), for example, represented a major challenge for some students who had been mainly exposed to an evidence-based tradition of knowledge production, while for others this opportunity represented the possibility to explore learning from a different perspective.

The use of autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2016) encouraged as part of the self-reflexive diary and of the final assessed report represented a challenge for some students, particularly in the use of the first-person as an academic authoritative voice. For others it offered the possibility to write more creatively and to express themselves more deeply, beyond the synthesised and objective academic manner. This use of reflexivity as a key aspect at the core of the module also represented an important learning element of the course by which students were asked to reflect on their learning experiences beyond academic and discipline-based learning. In applying this deep, personal and transformational model of learning, we adopted theories and practices from qualitative research and from professional development that enhances reflexivity as a core component of learning and researching (Brookfield, 2017; Etherington, 2004) grounded on the principles of learning in and on action. The use of reflexivity as a learning skill is also in line with the service-learning framework which at its core has experiential and reflective learning through collaboration with a community outside academia (Furco & Novell, 2019).

We, as educators and academics, strongly believe in the value of interdisciplinary learning in higher education. This allows students not only to learn the concepts and the framework of different disciplines, but also the skills to navigate through different territories, languages and frameworks of representation. We believe this enriches students' lifelong learning, as well as promoting self-growth, paving the way for the development of a variety of learning strategies. Interdisciplinarity allows students to see beyond the boundaries of their original disciplines, developing critical thinking skills and the capacity to move across a variety of ways through which knowledge is produced and mediated.

Engaging students critically, personally and creatively throughout the SIIL module allowed us to experiment with innovative and transformative learning and teaching techniques, fostering the collaboration and the dialogue across disciplines, research methodologies and pedagogical styles. We believe we created some new intersections and intra-connections across scientific and art-based learning, offering at the same time a space to reflect and to take social action by engaging and fostering connections within academia and, at the same time, with the community outside academia. We could think of service-learning as a form of academic activism related to contemporary social and community issues, that can be faced and possibly solved through a multidisciplinary approach. Students experienced that learning is multi-faceted, heterogeneous and fluid through class discussions, individual and peer learning, personal reflections and above all through the contact with members of the community. We believe this represents a type of transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000) that can further equip students with tools to expand their roles as active citizens encouraging social change within and beyond academia.

### **Pedagogical Approach Challenges**

As outlined in the previous section, we faced some pedagogical challenges throughout the delivery of the SIIL module represented by the innovative teaching approach grounded in interdisciplinarity and service-learning. One of the main challenges we encountered was also a practical and organisational one, related to students contacting the older adults in the community. The COVID-19 restrictions did not allow people, particularly vulnerable people, to meet in person, which forced upon us the use of phone conversations rather than in-person meetings as originally planned. Students were paired with the older adults by the community centre, but they had to make the first contact on their own and some encountered difficulties. Examples included not being able to get in contact (e.g., not answering the call), poor engagement or no interest from the community peer, poor fluency of conversation (e.g., short answers affecting the natural flow of the conversation), and inconvenient timing to establish communication. The fact that students were previously offered training on communication skills with a specific focus on liaising with older adults (e.g., allowing time to answer, checking volume speech, offering respite breaks) prepared them for potential inconveniences they could encounter which were addressed successfully. For some students, interacting closely with older adults was a new experience, which could have risen some underlying anxiety in facing the unknown. In order to address this, during teaching sessions students also had the opportunity to express their feelings, and open discussions on possible scenarios and how to navigate these successfully were offered. Introducing students to the concept of ageism was also a helpful strategy. It aimed to empower students in preparation for their exchange with their older peers. We believe that these challenges represented a further learning outcome linked to real-life scenarios that enhanced the benefits of the module and the transferable learning skills linked to navigating through these issues.

## Students' Reflections

The requirement of weekly experiential exercises encouraged students to reflect regularly on their conversations with their older adult partners. These reflections were thematically analysed and focused on four topics: their personal growth, the academic linkage with the experiential exercises, the subject knowledge and the application of learnt experiences in other settings, which are similar to observations described in the service-learning literature (Eyler et al., 2001; Ma & Chan, 2013; Ma et al., 2016).

### *Personal Growth*

Most students were nervous when they first conversed with the older adults. Their reflections revealed that they commenced with assumptions, including some based on previous negative experiences, as is evident in the following insights:

Before the first conversation I felt really nervous and didn't want to do the phone call because I thought it would be really challenging to interact with the older adults.

...perhaps because of my own prejudices and experiences with my grandparents which were not so positive at times. I do feel a bit anxious about meeting the older adults, understanding that I have assumptions about others, I am concerned that they might hold assumptions towards me as a foreigner and a younger person.

Students reported that they learnt to be more open-minded and appreciate their own growth:

I guess I thought that self-reflectivity might help me to grow my introspection, broaden my perspectives on how I interact with others.

After the phone call I felt relieved, and a little bit proud of myself for finally getting it done.

### *Academic Linkage with the Experiential Exercises*

Service-learning links closely with the academic knowledge. One important observation is how students used what they have learnt in the classroom to link it to the experiential exercises they had to complete. This observation is expressed in the following student quotes:

The process of self-reflection was a bit difficult in the beginning but now I've become used to it. It not only was helpful for this module but in general where the exercises make you think about e.g. happiness and gratitude in life. They are things we should do in our normal lives where we should self-reflect.

I love learning about positive psychology and mindfulness as I am currently trying to my best to incorporate these practices in my personal life to better my mental health. [...] The content of this lecture made me feel hopeful and excited to be in an open, non-judgemental space to reflect. I have hundreds of reflective journals that I love to get my hands on but I lose motivation to finish them, so having the accountability to complete weekly reflections will be great for my mental health.

### *Critical Reflections on Ageing*

Because of the linking with the service-learning experience and academic knowledge that they have learnt in the class, students critically reflected on various ageing issues. Below are some examples:

I started to understand perhaps she didn't stop the conversation because I bored her, she might have stopped the conversation because talking on the phone for more than 15 minutes is tiring for her (as mentioned in the ageism lecture). [...] I have gained a bit more confidence in myself and learned more about the older adult's perspectives.

I was amused by the positivity of one of the older adults. She is in her 70's but she is still working at the cathedral, she learned how to use a smartphone [...] and enjoys doing a great variety of things. Listening to her narratives of being positive during the pandemic had made me reflect on my own response to the pandemic, and there are a lot of things I can learn from her.

Older adults are often unheard, and marginalised and it would be wonderful if the work could somehow give them a voice.

### ***Application of Learnt Experiences in Other Settings***

After the service-learning experience, the students paid more attention to the older adults' needs and applied what they had learnt to different settings. Some students also wanted to hear more about older adults' life experiences and care for those who are in need:

The other week I was coming home [...] and I was driving down a dark forest road and I saw a man lying in the middle of the road ahead. I instantly stopped and pulled over. He was 73, confused, and freezing cold. I called an ambulance and gave him my jacket and spoke to him about his wife and children who he was trying to get back to. It turned out that he was reported missing from earlier on in the day [...] He was unfamiliar with the city [...] He collapsed [...] from the cold and exhaustion [...]

Because of the empathy and curiosity of the student, this young person not only helped this particular older person but was also empowered to pay more attention to others. The learnt experience and communication skills that students learnt in the lectures raise their awareness of ageism in daily life:

When the police and ambulance arrived they told me he was hypothermic and I likely saved his life. The certain communication skills I have been learning about in lectures and awareness of types of ageism aided me in navigating my conversation with him in order to keep him calm in an emergency situation. We had a great, calming, distracting conversation about his life and family whilst waiting for emergency services. He told me that he was very grateful for helping him and for keeping him calm. I have thought about him ever since [...] Our conversation makes me even more excited to converse with older adults, and I'm looking forward to hearing their stories

### **Community Partners' Reflections**

A key aspect of service-learning is meeting community needs and collaboratively working towards making an impact. Comments from members of the SPC attest to the success of SIIL as an impactful service-learning initiative:

Thank you so much for inviting me to join in the moving and rich final session of your module. When [...] you both so cogently summarised the full content of the module, I was so moved. My professional background was in part about bringing together academic and experiential learning. Often so difficult to describe or to create the conditions for that to happen. Your students in their oral comments at the end expressed that for them it has happened. Words like 'Bridging', 'crossing paths', 'extra capability'.

The opportunity to work with students and the approach taken meant participants from SPC service users felt included, supported and connected. One of key principles is that "every older person matters", our users felt seen and recognised. They added value by sharing their wisdom, their ideas and opinions, supported the development of young people and equally contributed to their own learning by listening and learning from the students. It was very much an exchange of learning, support and inclusion and very much in line with SPC's vision 'a community where all older people are engaging in services and activities, connected to social networks and accessing services that sustain independent, vibrant lives'.

The community partners commented that the wider this intergenerational, mutually supportive and enriching collaboration between students and older adults can be shared, the more significant the impact for both sets of generations will be. One of the SPC organizers shared this impact with students, with the following e-mail:

... you were stunning at our Pensioners Event. All of us were in some way outside of our comfort zones. But being 'outside' is a positive. The effect of your presence, how beautifully and respectfully you handled yourself with T, your partner pensioner. The joy in her face and the impact yours and all of the students work on the module has and will continue to have on older people in Southwark is quite something. That you chose your reflection to speak of this complexity, of confidence in language and in situations, speaks to me of your insight and great judgment. It is also a leadership skill!

This SPC organiser also commented how during an in-person event organised in June 2021 where the older adults participants met the students and heard about the work they created as the result of their conversations, one of them said: "Wow..! All of that has come out of my three chats with [the student]!"

## Discussion and Conclusion

The pedagogical approach used in SIIIL was grounded in fostering collaboration and engagement across communities within and outside academia. The approach is flexible and could be applied to several other domains/disciplines and populations, such as other community partners, refugees, primary and secondary schools, further education settings, sports centres, charities and organisations. Although each of these communities have unique needs, solutions could be collaboratively co-created with students and academic teams from various disciplines, in all cases providing opportunities to foster connections.

The communication skills and reflections on positionality through intercultural awareness are highly transferable to any domain or discipline aiming to enhance students' skills to further expand their role as global citizens – from life sciences, business and law to psychology, arts and humanities. Furthermore, there is growing evidence for a role of personal strengths awareness and application in promoting autonomous learning, self-efficacy, and self-esteem in university students (Macaskill & Denovan, 2013), as well as the role of positive emotions, positive reappraisal and resilience on academic engagement and learning (Chaffee et al., 2014; Dewaele et al., 2019). In this way, a flexible approach embedding the teaching of positive psychology constructs can be seen as an endeavour relevant to virtually any academic discipline.

We also believe in the transferable value of deep and transformational learning that takes place through community-engaged and meaningful learning, as promoted by this module. The opportunity students had to think-act-reflect throughout the structure of this module with its theoretical, practical and engaged exercises is unique in terms of providing students with a whole learning experience, beyond disciplinary knowledge. This structure, which is based on the key service-learning principles of learning-reflecting-acting (Meijs et al., 2019), can be replicated within other contexts promoting learning beyond academia. What is nevertheless unique to this course is the intergenerational learning that was made possible through the contact between students and older adults. This connection was theoretically explored through the framework of ageism and through intercultural awareness as an experiential learning in context. Students explored the notion of being *other* from a generational point of view, beyond race, class, language and gender as social and cultural distinctive marks and reflected upon the encounter with *different others* from an intercultural perspective (Ferri, 2000; Piller, 2011), as we can see in the following quote from one SPC member:

In the friendliest way and truthful way, we pensioners can actually show just how included and connected their involvement has been. And, as someone, who was also a pensioner being called, I can say that there were many examples where despite the huge age difference, our experiences of Covid-19 have been similar, and I hope the student also felt something of the support from me that she too gave me. Intergenerational solidarity.

The rationale behind the module's pedagogical approach was to support students on their journey towards a deeper understanding of the theory behind several topics, but also of their responses to these topics as a driving force for personal and societal change. Fostering connections, through the interactions with older adults provided an opportunity to share their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond while also listening to students' experiences and giving students, as active listeners and conversational partners, the unique opportunity to learn from the stories shared, and from the support received, at an academic and personal level. From the conception to the delivery of the SIIIL module, we considered both students and the community partners as active co-creators of knowledge, rather than passive consumers of pre-established theoretical frameworks. We viewed all participants as change-agents who potentially can have an impact on present and future society and who have raised awareness on collaboratively tackling social roots of inequality, injustice and marginalisation. We honour and believe in diverse forms of knowledge-construction, valuing multiple points of view, advocating for knowledge-mobilisation through and with rigorous academic research and pedagogical interdisciplinary work that can bring meaningful change both within and outside academia.

## Acknowledgments

We thank the students who participated in this module, Dr. Eugenia Kravariti as Director of the Mental Health Studies programme within which the module sits and Denzil Steele from the Southwark Pensioner Centre for technical support. We are grateful for the funding received from King's Academy to develop this module as part of the Curriculum Innovation Competition.

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**Please cite this article as:**

Puntil, D., Dias, G., Kralj, C., Deplessis, C., Rylance-Watson, E., Ma, C., & Zunszain, P. A. (2022). Connecting postgraduate students and older adults in the community to support wellbeing: A service-learning module during COVID-19 and beyond. A practice report. *Student Success*, 13(3), 20-28. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.2481>

This practice report has been accepted for publication in *Student Success*. Please see the Editorial Policies under the 'About' section of the Journal website for further information

**Student Success: A journal exploring the experiences of students in tertiary education.**



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