

YOU'RE ON MUTE

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Designing online spaces for elders: 8 points to consider

If you haven't engaged older adults with creative technology before, this resource shares some experiences to encourage you to think about the possibilities, and some of the issues, of this type of work. Whether you're designing an app from scratch, or simply considering the use of WhatsApp or Facebook in your project, here are some points to consider and suggestions for further exploration...

1

Start with the project aim, not the technology

It's attractive to think that technology might solve social issues affecting older participants, including isolation and digital exclusion. This may be enhanced by some funders expecting the use of digital elements in their applicants' projects, to increase reach and address issues of accessibility. However, it's important to ask why you are using digital technology in your project, and whose aims it's serving.

According to [Age UK](#), 4 million people over the age of 65 have never used the internet. How can we ensure the focus on digital does not alienate those who the project intends to include? The best creativity-based projects have thought about the whole participant experience from multiple perspectives. What is it about digital engagement that will benefit your participants?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- Map out your project, and identify relevant areas for digital technology to fit.
- Explore what the activity/project would look like without the use of digital technology. Will the use of digital technology enhance skills and learning, or celebrate participants' creative self-expression?

2

How can you engage in a user-led design process?

The most effective way of designing digital spaces is to engage the people who will use them in the design processes.

64 Million Artists have developed and designed a simple Wordpress site, www.dothinkshare.com, with older users as part of the [Leicester Ageing Together](#) programme. Liverpool Museum's celebrated [House of Memories](#) app engaged older people and carers in its design and this led to a UX (user experience) that has made it popular and accessible.

If you are engaging users with social media, such as WhatsApp or Facebook, ask users what would make these platforms safe for them and how they would like these spaces to be administered and moderated. This creates a user-led design which has both functional and ethical dimensions.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- How will the digital element(s) of your project be co-created with your participants? Consider engaging in a user-led design process or holding focus groups with your participants.
- Consider the spectrum of experiences throughout your user group. Will the technology be used by participants or predominantly by carers or activity leads? Consider the range of roles users may find themselves in.

3

Can you keep the digital dimension person-centred?

Person-centred technology is built around people and does not demand that people adapt to it. It's important to consider how digital technology can give choice and control to participants. How can digital technology create a platform to celebrate their unique identities? This is especially important when you consider that older people feel that parts of their lived experience can be overlooked. The best projects address the whole person, not just their experiences of ageing or 'being old'.

Many people equate digital platforms, especially social media, with spaces that are distancing and alienating, so it is important that they are designed to be human and relational, not distant and impersonal. [NAPA](#) (National Activity Providers Association) embraces a person-centred approach to the provision of activities in care homes — many of them with a digital dimension.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- [NAPA website](#) for person-centered principles, training and activity resources
- Consider how your project platforms and explores topics, themes and experiences that engage your participant's whole identities, not just their age.

4

Does the technology foreground 'product' or 'process'?

Participatory projects can focus on process, or the end work, or a mixture of the two. Will the use of a digital platform foster a culture of positive sharing, or will it focus on celebrating participants' final creative achievements? These can be subtly different online cultures and psychological experiences. Spaces which celebrate the end work may produce higher quality artworks, but might exclude some users. Those prioritising the process may have a richer engagement but can run the risk of seeming patronising. It is important to find the right balance for your project and participants.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- Explore the pros and cons of process-led and product-led creative projects, and consider where your project may sit.
- Discuss with your project partners and users what sort of culture they wish to foster.

5

How can technology enrich participants' experiences in the here-and-now?

Many creative projects with older participants have a focus on the past and the act of reminiscence. For projects engaging people living with dementia, this can be supportive and welcomed. However, consider whether the participants you are working with want to delve into the past. It may be more appropriate to explore and celebrate experiences in the present moment.

The GoldsQUAD programme at Derby QUAD (which has moved online during the pandemic) focuses on centering “creativity, learning and new skills” in the present, for participants who are 50+. Similarly, the House of Memories app uses creative prompts to enrich present-centred experiences for older people, their friends, relatives and carers.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- How can digital technology enrich participants' experiences in the present moment?
- How can the use of digital technology in your project explore topics, themes and issues which are not history or age-specific?

6

How will you address digital exclusion and discrimination?

Safe spaces are ones where different dimensions of privilege and otherness have been considered. It's important to remember that the projects and activities we devise and deliver will reflect our own prejudices and biases as practitioners.

Research suggests that Covid-19 has increased the digital divide. It is therefore more important than ever to consider who might be excluded from digital engagement (from a lack of equipment or lack of interest). It is also important to consider the different types of invisible challenges participants might experience. Inclusive digital design takes the initiative to offer accessibility tools, rather than waiting for users to request them.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- How will you ensure accessibility for a range of needs is included in your digital design? Creating an accessibility action plan will help to keep this clear.
- Share a prototype of your digital tool with a range of users and ask for their feedback. Do not fixate on failures or mistakes: learn and develop.

7

How can technology enhance experiences for carers, care staff or activity leads in social care settings?

Many creative practitioners work in close partnership with care homes or social care settings alongside managers, staff and activity leads to deliver creative workshops to residents. Technology can play an important role here, and during the pandemic lots of practitioners have delivered online sessions. Luminate Scotland have produced an excellent report outlining what creative practitioners have learned about delivering online activities during Covid-19.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- Check out the inspiring case studies on creative ageing during the pandemic from Luminate Scotland.
- Consider what co-facilitation with an in-house activity lead in a care home requires.

8

What's beyond the project experience?

An issue with many creative and cultural projects is their time-limited nature. This can have a specific impact on older participants, who may feel that they have had a positive experience but are 'dropped' once the project ends. Digital technology presents opportunities here. Can the group continue to connect on WhatsApp or Facebook after the managed part of the project ends? How do we consider participant 'pathways' beyond the project lifespan and the sustainability of participation once funding or management capacity has been reached? 64 Million Artists have developed a number of large scale projects such as #TheJanuaryChallenge and Creativity in Mind which have turned into thriving networks of creative sharing on social media.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- Create a 'participation pathways' map for your project to explore how older participants might continue to engage beyond the 'end' of your project's lifecycle.
- Check out 64 Million Artists' #TheJanuaryChallenge