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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.

