



Zeitgeist: an intergenerational storytelling project

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Abstract: The Zeitgeist project asks what role design students can play in enhancing creative endeavours and wellbeing of residents through an intergenerational co-design programme. Between Spring 2018 and Summer 2019, Zeitgeist brought together undergraduate design students and residents of long-term care homes for a project that challenged them to co-design publications that focused on the life experiences, stories and knowledge of the residents and emphasized an intergenerational exchange between two very different groups of people that could have a tangible, positive impact upon each other.

It is often the case that residents in long-term care homes face issues of social isolation and diminishment of personal identity. In care homes opportunities for genuine creative and personal expression tend to be limited due to limited resources and a focus on medical priorities. It's not unusual for residents to feel like they no longer have anything to contribute to society, that their story has closed and they no longer feel challenged, which can lead to cognitive decline.

Design students are predominately young and tend to have limited life experience, with many still living at home and unsure about what direction they want their life to take.

Zeitgeist looked to explore the possible benefits of a reciprocal relationship between the two parties by engaging participants in a range of creative activities that would allow for a mutual exchange of information and skills. This project uniquely positions an art and design university as a community partner for developing new approaches to enhance the wellbeing of seniors.

Keywords: *storytelling; intergenerational exchange; communication design; codesign;*

1. Introduction

Residents of long-term care homes often have vast and rich experiences of different cultures, living environments and historical contexts. However, what they lack is the opportunity for creative expression and social engagement (Brownie et al. 2014).

Design students possess the skills to channel narratives, themes and data into visual materials, while frequently possessing strong technical, verbal communication and collaborative research skills. What they often lack is meaningful opportunities to use their skills beyond a simulated classroom environment.

Zeitgeist Vancouver is a new program model which brings together students within a university-level communication design course, with residents of long-term care homes to collaboratively co-design and co-write mini publications featuring resident stories, experiences and opinions. Through an intergenerational exchange these seemingly disparate groups of people come together to enhance each other's learning and social experience, and in many cases, find surprising connections.



Figure 1 Students and residents engage in creative activities during a content generation session.

Before the program, some students had limited experience of interacting with older adults and this project served to challenge many of their preconceived notions of what interactions with the elderly would be like.

After the project, many of the students expressed an interest in pursuing a career in designing for an aging population, due to feeling more connected to and having gained an understanding of the needs of elderly people. Some also commented that they felt rewarded by the work they had produced during the project by creating work with a tangible emotional aspect on a person they had created a connection with, something they considered more rewarding than creating, often superficial, visual design.

The publications created through this process not only document the resident stories, but also illustrate the serendipitous creativity, bonds and new meanings that can be formed when two unlikely groups of people are brought together.

2. Description of Design Proposal

The design submission includes 10 physical, Risograph printed publications co-created by students and residents participating in the *Zeitgeist Vancouver program*. These publications were created through two rounds of the program, each with approximately 18 participating undergraduate communication design students and 15 residents living in a long-term care home. Each publication was produced by a team of 2–3 residents and 2–3 students, over the course of 6, 1-hour visits with each other.



Figure 2 A selection of student and resident publications.



Figure 3 A spread from a finished publication in which students described their impressions of the residents.

The *Zeitgeist Vancouver* program first focused on creating a bond and building trust between residents and students by having them participate in Getting to Know Me activities. Once this relationship had been established the focus shifted to content generation during which students designed creative prompts and probes for residents to respond to. A wide range of content was generated that was then synthesized by the students and focused into consistent themes for visual exploration before this content was taken back to residents for consultation. Finally, a celebration event was held to share the final publications with all of the participants.

“The most memorable and rewarding aspect of this project is that we get to listen to the different life experiences from each resident and learning from them and getting life advice from them.” (Student response in post-project interview)

The students were asked to implement the Design + Storytelling framework (Gausepohl, Winchester, Smith-Jackson et al. 2016) that could allow them to use narrative analysis to pull together consistent themes from the information gathered, but we observed that the students tended not to follow a chronological, or linear approach to information-gathering, instead covering a wide range of topics. For example, residents would be asked their views on the importance of respect, before being asked to express their thoughts on sharks, or respond to tactile or sensory prompts such as textures and smells.

The response to the project from residents was overwhelmingly positive and when asked in a post-project interview about the most rewarding aspect of participating one resident responded, “Another look at the younger generation, what is going on with them and to see that they are with us, there is no separation between the ages, we are all the same.”



Figure 4 Illustration from student and resident publication. The caption underneath reads, "David likes the smell after the rain, and he likes the smell of roses and lilac. Since he was a carpenter, he likes the smell of fresh cut wood, especially pine."



Figure 5 Illustration from student and resident publication. The caption underneath reads, "John, the Polish soldier who Vera fancied, was a great quick stepper himself so he mustered up the courage to ask her for a dance, and she threw him a bright smile and accepted. This probably broke a few hearts, but who is to stand in the way of love right? She remembers her first date with John to be short, simple and sweet, just walking in the park holding hands. Maybe a cheeky kiss or two, but a lady never kisses and tells."

3. Complementary Data Description

These publications are the tangible output from the program, however notably the intergenerational exchange and creative process through which these were developed was of great significance and impact to both sets of participants. Following the conclusion of the program, residents received copies of these publications to share with other residents, care home staff, family and friends. The opportunity to share their publication within their locality allowed the opportunity for residents to make meaningful contributions to local culture (Kerchof 2015).



Figure 6 Students and residents engage in storytelling session following the completion of the project. Groups decided individually how they would like to tell their story, often with residents and students taking turns to read directly from the magazine, or sharing anecdotal information about the relationship that had developed.

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5. References

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