

# ***Intergenerational and informal learning in communities: Building a bridge across the age-based digital divide***

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## **Abstract**

Digital Drop-In is a pilot project that aims to provide an informal social environment where older adults can come together to enhance their digital skills through facilitated informal peer and intergenerational learning (IGL). This qualitative study explores the digital skills assistance provided by a small sample of secondary school students aged 15 to 16 years to older adult participants in a series of pilot workshops in a secondary school in Ireland during Autumn 2023. Feedback solicited from participants following completion of the workshops yielded the following preliminary observations. First, from the perspectives of the students, all of whom had volunteered for the project, agreement that the learning experience was successful and that their motivation for volunteering was worthwhile. Second, from the perspective of the older adult participants, there was value in the personalised nature of the one-to-one learner-led exchanges by contrast with instructor-led offerings. Finally, from the perspective of the facilitator, guiding learner-led exchanges in informal social environments requires flexibility to meet the needs of individual learners. In Spring 2024, data are planned to be collected from both generations through an online survey instrument and generational focus groups.

When complete, this study will contribute to the field of intergenerational research by exploring the perspectives of mid-teenagers involved in an intergenerational exchange to support the digital skills of older adult community members in Ireland. It has potential to offer a contribution to the field of informal peer learning by proposing the role of a facilitator to guide and support the digital skills knowledge exchange in informal social settings.

## **Keywords**

Digital literacy. Digital skills. Intergenerational learning. Informal learning. Peer learning.

## **Aims and objectives of the study**

Digital Drop-In is a pilot project that aims to provide an informal social environment where older adults come together to enhance their digital skills through facilitated informal peer and intergenerational learning (IGL). Taking place in a small town in Ireland during Autumn 2023, the pilot project offers an opportunity to extend research from the perspectives of younger generation participants, one that has not been well-researched heretofore (Boström & Schmidt-Hertha, 2017). It also offers the opportunity to explore the perspectives of older adult participants engaged in the digital skills learning exchanges amongst peers and with a younger generation of 15- to 16-year-old students. Finally, it offers an opportunity to consider the role that a facilitator brings to the learning exchange by guiding and leading the workshops.

Lifelong learning, considered by the European Commission as a ‘seamless continuum from cradle to grave’ (European Commission, 2000, p. 7) and life-wide learning, the spectrum of learning contexts (formal, non-formal, informal) an individual comes into contact with during their lifetime (Rubenson, 2019), are important contributors to quality of life in later years (Field, 2011; Molina & Schettini, 2021; Narushima et al., 2018). Another important contributor to quality of later life is social participation (Ward et al., 2020). The Digital Drop-In pilot is an innovative opportunity to combine lifelong learning with social participation through a facilitated learning exchange in an informal environment.

The initial research question this study seeks to address is: what are the experiences of participants in facilitated informal digital skills learning exchanges?

## Research context

The Digital Drop-In pilot project central to this research, aims to provide a facilitated, informal, social environment where older adults can develop their digital skills in their own way, at their own pace, with support and assistance from peers or younger generations. The important point is that the individual experience is learner-led, not instructor-led. They can drop in, or not, on a week-to-week basis for problem-solving and troubleshooting support, without the commitment of signing up to a series of classes.

Using online survey data collected in Autumn 2020 from young adults in the age range 18-25 years, I examined their experiences of supporting older family members with their digital communications during the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Ireland (Flynn, 2022). The present study extends this examination in a number of ways. First, the sample focuses on workshop participants, young people, 10 secondary students aged 15-16 years, and eight older adults (seven of whom were aged 70 years or older) with no familial relationship to the young people participating. Second, the informal learning mode of digital skills support is in-person. Third, the methods of data collection are online surveys and in-person focus groups along with my own reflections as facilitator of all workshops.

A social problem currently exists in Ireland that, for older adults who wish to participate online, but have a need to develop and improve their digital skills, available options are limited to non-formal learning, usually short courses, offered by the Education and Training Boards or non-governmental organisations. Such courses are excellent for beginners, those with low levels of digital literacy skills or none, since they are mostly instructor-led and tend to follow a prescribed curriculum.

## Theory and framework

Census 2022 data for Ireland indicate that the highest population increase was in the age cohort of 70 years and older and that the number aged 85 years and older increased by 25% (Central Statistics Office, 2023). In a society and economy that is becoming increasingly digitalised, there is a risk that those who do not or keep up with technological advancements may become marginalised. The maintenance and development of digital literacy skills through intergenerational and peer learning offers a pathway forward for some.

Traditionally, intergenerational learning (IGL) is associated with families, passing knowledge and skills from one generation to the next (Cortellesi & Kernan, 2016; Rogoff, 2003; Stephan, 2020). It is also associated with learning outside of family units (Gadsden & Hall, 1996) and is of increasing importance in modern society (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008) with programmes of IGL characterised as involving multiple generations with at least two non-familial and non-adjacent generations (Hatton-Yeo, 2015; Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000). Peer learning in informal settings is also a consideration for the development of digital literacy skills amongst older adults (Han & Nam, 2021; Schmidt-Hertha & Strobel-Dümer, 2014). A component of lifelong learning, IGL has three principles as its core: learning with one another, learning from one another, and learning about one another. In addition to the IGL framework, this study considers peer learning through the lens of IGL and contends that peer learning satisfies at least two of the three principles of intergenerational learning, in relation to digital literacy skills development.

## Research design

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Kemmy Business School Research Ethics Committee at the University of Limerick, Ireland, on 23 November 2023, reference 2023\_10\_KBS\_01. Details included in the ethics application related to informed and parental consent, child safeguarding training, participants opting into the study rather than opting out. A vetting application reference number ACC001-20231004-01788 for the researcher as workshop facilitator was successful and a disclosure made to ACCS Association of Community & Comprehensive Schools.

At the final workshop on 30 November 2023 I distributed the necessary information and ethics documents to the participants and arranged for distribution to those who did not participate in that day's workshop. I then commenced the process of planning the research data collection and analysis to include an online survey instrument and focus group interviews as approved in the ethics application.

I am now looking forward to collecting data from consenting participants amongst both generational groups through an online survey instrument and focus groups in Spring 2024. Findings will be presented, analysed thematically and discussed. In addition to contributions to the fields of IGL and informal learning, this study is expected to make recommendations that can be considered for future design of learning exchanges.

## Preliminary observations from workshops

Workshops were scheduled with older adults during October and November 2023 at fortnightly intervals. Participants, in their post-workshop feedback, reported the individual nature of the learning exchange as very successful for them. They were able to bring along problems they needed assistance with or ask for information about a particular technology feature. The world of social media was an area they were keen to explore, particularly in relation to how the students used various social media applications. One participant was interested in learning how best to understand social media that her grandchildren use, and her mentor was able to help her with this. Another participant was having problems with Wi-Fi at home, and her mentor showed her how to set up a hotspot from her mobile phone, checking first that her data plan would not incur any additional charges. An important point raised by one participant over the mandatory cup of tea at the outset of each workshop, was supported by others at that day's workshop when she stated simply "we don't know what we don't know". In the intervening weeks when workshops were not scheduled, I met with the student mentors to capture their feedback and to agree any topics of common interest to be shared at future workshops. A feedback session with the mentors following workshop one suggested an improved understanding that not everyone understands technology in the same way. All agreed that their generation, having grown up with technology, takes it for granted. Other mentors commented that they enjoyed and felt rewarded by helping the older adults, aligning with their motivations for volunteering for the role.

As facilitator of these workshops, I was in the privileged position of participating in and contributing to learner-led discussions across both intergenerational and peer learning exchanges. For example, the knowledge shared between two peers with regarding to selling bicycles online was insightful. One participant had an experience of narrowly avoiding a scam to solicit money from her in the process of selling her bicycle. Based on this, the second participant decided to contact his local newspaper to place a paid classified advertisement for his bicycle. I considered the guided facilitation of learning exchanges to be a useful element of the workshops that might not otherwise have been possible. Without the requirement for a structured curriculum or lesson plan, it was possible to engage in a variety of topics of interest to participants. The need for a flexible approach in guiding the resulting learning exchanges was considerable, yet it was clear from participant feedback that this approach was both welcomed and valued.

These preliminary observations indicate support for previous research whereby reciprocal benefits are evidenced between younger mentors and older adult participants (Flynn, 2022). The consideration of learning exchanges outside of family environments, along with teenagers taking on the mentor roles, proposes to offer a new contribution to the IGL field. Further, older adult participants appreciate the informal, social setting for the learning exchange, offering support for previous research (Flynn, In Press) and enjoy the social interaction with their mentors as well as improving their digital skills. When complete, the study has potential to offer a contribution to the field of informal peer learning by proposing the role of a facilitator to guide and support the digital skills knowledge exchange in informal social settings.

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**Sandra Flynn** has over 20 years' experience in managing projects and project teams in dynamic and diverse industry environments.

As a project management educator since 2004, her expertise includes module design and development for both classroom and online delivery at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Her specialist areas in project management are global virtual teams, cultural intelligence and sustainability in project management practice. She has extensive experience in supervising MSc students on their capstone research projects across a variety of project management areas. Upon retirement from industry in 2017 Sandra's focus has been on the changing face of education for the twenty first century, with particular emphasis on lifelong and life-wide learning contexts. In 2018 she was awarded a postgraduate certificate in Digital Education with distinction from the University of Edinburgh. Sandra progressed to study at Lancaster University's Department of Educational Research in 2019 and was awarded a PhD in 2023. The title of her thesis is: Ireland and the lifelong learning curve: The intergenerational contribution to digital literacy for life.