'Here & There, Then & Now'

A *Story of Good Practice*

COMMUNITY RELATIONS COUNCIL
Equity | Diversity | Interdependence

Avila Media

Introduction

Intergenerational and intercultural community projects play a vital role in fostering understanding, empathy and cooperation among and within diverse groups. These projects provide opportunities for individuals of different ages and cultural backgrounds to come together, share experiences and learn from one another. In this 'story' of good practice, we emphasise the significance of utilising 'common goals', 'skills attainment' and binding 'cultural agents' to build capacity and good relations in the grassroots.

Note: We use the word 'story' rather than model, as we feel that is more exemplary of the work we have undertaken, how we have shaped this 'model' and resonates with the 'shared history' and storytelling themes of this project. However, we will interchangeably use the word 'model' throughout.

Note: In this case study, we explored the use of digital media training and storytelling as the 'common goals', 'skills attainment' and binding 'cultural agents', but these are interchangeable with many different activities and goals community groups may be interested in pursuing and attaining.

Rationale

We believe both the 'intergenerational' and 'intercultural' aspects of this model are pertinent in 2024 – and the intersectionality and the inter-working of people from across different cultural backgrounds and generations is particularly important for the following reasons:

1) The world is a particularly vulnerable place in 2024 (in light of recent global crises, conflicts and dissent) and it is more important than ever for younger and older generations to interact with and learn from each other.

For example, we are unfortunately near the end of the Second World War generation and it is especially important that the stories and values that came out of this era and after are preserved and made available for future generations to learn from.

2) The world and, in this case, Northern Ireland is much more diverse and interconnected than ever before. Therefore, it is vitally important to foster interactions between people of different backgrounds as well as ages.

3) However, in contrast to other models that have been built, we do not think intercultural interactions are fulfilled if only people of similar ages/generations are interacting. We know that intracultural changes across generations can be highly significant (look at Northern Ireland's local communities today compared to previous generations), so imagine how much truer this is across generations and cultural backgrounds. The aspect that sets this 'story' apart is that intersectionality.

4) We also know it is necessary to foster a common goal and skills to be attained for participants in the project. In this case, we have used digital media training and capacity building alongside storytelling. This of course is interchangeable and we highly suggest utilising this model with other types of training and activities. However, what we found was:

- Projects must be centred around learning a new skill, i.e., increased digital media production and know-how
- Accomplishing a common goal, i.e., producing a film together
- Projects must incorporate a binding cultural agent – in this case, storytelling.

Storytelling is something that all cultures – all humans – share. Moreover, it is also something vitally important to embedded Northern Irish communities that can be shared with migrants, newcomers and younger generations who are still becoming immersed in this place and its practices and norms. It humanises everyone involved, helps them learn and aids in finding commonality in one another.

Quote: *"Intergenerational activity is about more than bringing younger and older people together, it is a systemic approach to community development and wellbeing that recognises and values the contribution of all generations who live there. This means we all have a role in supporting the growth of intergenerational approaches collaboratively."* -Linking Generations *Northern Ireland*

Quote: *"At AvilaMedia, we prefer to welcome stories and develop projects with people engaged on the ground and have personal insight into communities. So often we hear narratives from a 'birds-eye' view and ignore the voices of those actually embedded in these communities. It is 'authenticity' that we seek and that's what we intend to bring you with our projects."* -Michael Avila, AvilaMedia

Story of Good Practice

"Being part of this project has allowed me to connect with people from different generations and cultures in ways I never imagined"

1. Community Needs Assessment

Begin by conducting a thorough needs assessment within and across communities to identify the key issues, interests, gaps and needs related to intergenerational and intercultural connections. This can involve surveys, focus groups and interviews with community members of different age groups and cultural backgrounds.

What we did: We identified that there was a gap in intercultural projects, in that intergenerational interaction was less emphasised and under-utilised. We then made connections with groups working intergenerationally and/or interculturally and recruited them to participate, highlighting that we would be encouraging learning across generations during the project. This was appealing because many organisations had both young peoples' and older generational groups that ran their own projects but rarely interacted even from within their own community centres. So, the project not only fostered intercommunity relations but also intracommunity relations. Also, members of families might also be involved in younger and older peoples groups, so this provided much needed time for younger people to spend time with their grandparents and/or older relatives and learn from them.

Lessons learned: Community organisations have vastly different groups within their own community working on a multitude of projects and initiatives with different focuses. They are often not homogenous. For example, you may have a Men's Shed alongside a women's group who are involved in quite different activities and rarely interact. This is more amplified across generations and cultures. That is why we 'double down' on the claim that common goals and binding cultural agents should be identified, promoted and approved by groups before starting the project, to ensure the project appeals to the widest range of ages, genders, cultures and backgrounds as possible – and of course is tailored to the needs and interest of those groups.

2. Promoting Inclusivity & Diversity

Ensure that programmes are inclusive and accessible to people of all ages, backgrounds, abilities and identities. Celebrate the diversity within the community and actively seek out marginalised voices and perspectives to amplify their stories and experiences.

What we did: Not only did we consult with groups with as many different backgrounds as possible across ethnic, cultural, religious, community background, genders and ability lines, but we also took into consideration groups from different regions (urban vs rural), socioeconomic backgrounds and groups/organisations with vastly different goals, expertise and constitutions.

Lessons Learned: A lesson learned would be to consult more with heritage institutions (rather than solely with community groups/organisations), as they are plugged into various communities and have a vast interest in utilising oral history and digital media to record and preserve their traditions, stories and activities. This would help cast a 'wider web' and attract a more diverse range of participants. We will pursue this in future projects.

Quote: *"Learning digital media skills has empowered me to amplify our voices and preserve our collective heritage for future generations."*

3. Establishing Partnerships

Forge partnerships with local community organisations and groups, cultural and heritage institutions, educational agencies and digital media experts to leverage resources and expertise, and to better understand where gaps/issues persist. These partnerships can provide access to funding, venues, technology and knowledge sharing. These organisations have their 'finger on the pulse' of what's happening in communities and know where the greatest needs are.

What we did: We deliberately prioritised establishing working relationships with organisational/group leaders. This helped build the capacity of the project, as we were able to share resources, access additional funding, utilise venues, IT and best practice initiatives to accomplish greater goals, host more interactive workshops and larger scale and more impactful events than we could on our own. This greatly enhanced participants experiences across the project.

Lessons learned: It is important to identify high capacity individuals within organisations to partner with because it uplifts projects to new heights. This helps streamline projects and reduces the prevalence and severity of inevitable 'hiccups' that may arise during projects. We also realised that there is a relational 'maintenance' factor. Having built strong relationships in previous projects helped us streamline this project, as relationships were already fostered with some organisations. It helped that AvilaMedia emphasises maintaining previously established relationships. It is vitally important to continue to hone and maintain those relationships post-projects, as it could lead to future projects and opportunities without having to 'start from scratch'.

4. Designing Intergenerational & Intercultural Programmes

Develop programmes that promote dialogue, understanding and collaboration across generations and cultures. Incorporate elements of oral history recording, storytelling, digital media and photography into these programmes to facilitate sharing of personal narratives, cultural traditions and generational experiences and perspectives, which will help build commonality across groups.

What we did: We demarcated that there is a general interest across society in increasing digital media skills, whether in photography, filming and editing and/or audio recording. We also were keenly aware of the profound influence of storytelling, not just in embedded NI communities but across cultures and generations.

Central Point: *We demarcated that storytelling was the common denominator that unified young and old and is the 'glue' that binds generations together and relates different cultures to each other.*

We then found groups that were eager to participate in these activities and began designing workshops tailored to their needs and interests.

Lessons learned: While the project has seen success in building relations, we suggest that future projects host an informal 'meet & greet' or chat with groups to get to know them beforehand. By the end of the project, unanimously, participants were interested in telling their stories and engaging, but at times it was slow in the beginning. Hosting a preliminary and, most importantly, informal 'get together' with groups as the first event would go a long way in diminishing any reservedness that may hinder storytelling and engagement early on.

Quote: *"Coming together to share our stories has strengthened the bonds within our community and enriched our understanding of one another."*

5. Digital Media Training

Provide training sessions on digital media tools and platforms, such as photography, filming, photographic and video editing software, social media and website development. Empower participants, especially older adults, to become proficient in using technology to preserve and share their stories and cultural heritage. Give them time behind the camera when recording interviews or documentary material and aid them in photo taking that can be incorporated into the project for the purposes of recording, monitoring and evaluating project activities, progress and outcomes, and can be utilised in publications. The more they have ownership over and can contribute directly to the creative elements of the project, the better.

What we did: We provided x5 digital media workshops, which provided an introduction to photography, time behind the camera filming, editing and audio recording. This included the compiling of a community-led documentary-style film, in which the participants utilised skills learned and attended film sets, gathering valuable insight into how this type of work is undertaken. Participants also contributed their own interviews and their creative insight was infused into every stage. This gave them ownership over the project and fostered interest in digital media production as a hobby and potential vocations in the future.

Lessons learned: We learned that through teaching practical skills and knowledge that participants can utilise on a daily basis and on a whim was the most valuable. For example, while project participants had an interest in photography and film, it was unlikely the majority of them would invest in advanced cameras or additional equipment. However, we were able to convey to them that with modern technology and a few helpful techniques, participants can still do much of this work – at high quality – directly with their smart phones. This accessibility and relating knowledge and skills to everyday life proved extremely valuable.

Quote: *"Learning how to use digital media has opened up new avenues for me to share our community's stories with the world and connect with others who share our values."*

6. Oral History Workshops

Once camaraderie between project participants and facilitators are fostered through capacity building / skills training, then offer opportunities to record oral history as a group – posing questions that, over time, foster a sense of shared history and identity within and across groups. Encourage participants to collect and share stories from their own lives and communities, documenting important events, traditions and memories. Facilitators can also build further digital media skills with the groups by sharing oral history recording and discussing techniques so that groups can facilitate their own shared history projects in the future. This fosters new skills and builds groups' and communities' abilities to accomplish new goals independently.

What we did: We utilised the common goal and interest in improving digital media skills to establish and enhance relationships within and between groups. Pursuing these goals and learning together built a foundation where people were then more comfortable to share their stories. Then, we facilitated x5 oral history workshops with the same groups. Their stories and quotes along the project have been included in this model.

Lessons learned: It is vital that 'common goal' workshops – in this case digital media training – be hosted first before storytelling / oral history recording. A lesson we learned was that it was much easier to get participants to share their stories after these activities and once individuals established working relationships with each other. 'Common goals' need to be established first before the binding 'cultural agents' are attempted, especially when the sharing of personal stories is involved. We also suggest that, where possible, oral history recording and storytelling should be done within groups first before mixing with other groups, as this builds a comfortability with the facilitator and allows participants to first share with friends/close contacts before engaging with people they may be less familiar with.

Quote: *"Listening to the stories of my elders has given me a deeper appreciation for our cultural heritage and instilled a sense of pride in our shared identity."*

7. Community Engagement & Outreach

Engage the broader community through exhibitions, public presentations, film premieres and online forums showcasing the outcomes and lessons learned / next steps of the intergenerational and intercultural projects. Encourage dialogue and participation from diverse stakeholders to foster a sense of belonging and collective ownership, and then promote the project and its accomplishments to the wider public and across sectors for greater learning – with the hope of fostering similar future projects and initiatives.

What we did: With partners we scheduled a film premiere in which the documentary of the project was showcased to a larger audience and online to the wider public, displaying all the knowledge and skills gained and stories told. This provided a 'feel good' moments and a great sense of accomplishment for those who participated. At the event, we also presented this model, again spreading good practice to a larger audience to inspire future projects.

Lessons learned: We suggest in the future live streaming events online via social media to reach an even larger audience and increase the impact. Involving participants in this process provides even further skills and experience they can utilise in the future.

8. Evaluation and Reflection

Regularly evaluate the impact of the project on participants' knowledge, skills, attitudes and sense of belonging. Gather feedback from participants and stakeholders to identify strengths, challenges and areas for improvement. Reflect on lessons learned and adapt the programmes accordingly.

What we did: We monitored the beliefs/perceptions of people from different backgrounds and generations before and after the project to see if/how attitudes changes (this was also recorded as part of the oral history recording exercises). Unanimously, participants came away with more positive perceptions and relationships with people of different ages and backgrounds post-project.

Lessons learned: We suggest in the future attempting projects with even wider cultural/background differences, prioritising areas with the greatest intercultural and intergenerational needs and where relations are in the most need of mending. While this pilot has experienced success, best practice should continually be monitored when upscaling the degree of diversity and community needs in future projects, and when attempting different types of training and activities.

9. Sustainability, Capacity & Legacy Building

Develop strategies for sustaining the momentum of the intergenerational and intercultural initiatives over the long term. Foster leadership and mentorship opportunities for younger generations to carry forward the traditions and knowledge passed down by their elders. Create digital archives and repositories to preserve their stories and heritage for future generations.

It is also important not to forget to build practical skills within groups and in particular with group leaders. Allowing group members to participate in recordkeeping, budgeting, evaluation and monitoring can help develop key administrative skills that can lead to them pursuing their own projects and funding in the future – uplifting the groups' capacities to new heights.

What we did: We involved participants in every stage of the project, from oral history recording, digital media training, filming, editing, event planning, administration and evaluation/monitoring, so that they can sustain these skills over the long term and independently develop their own projects moving forward while utilising this model. With participants' consent, AvilaMedia has retained the oral recordings which can be utilised in future projects and publications.

Lessons learned: We suggest organisers in the future:
·Identify intergroup needs earlier on
·Prioritise involving group leaders who may benefit from capacity building
·Prioritise the development of their administrative and project management skills
·Incorporate 'single identity', single generations and/or intragroup work first before bringing different groups together
·Co-designing the project together, fostering collaboration early on
This will build the group's independence to facilitate future projects and foster creative thinking.

Quote: *"Our project has not only enriched our lives but has also inspired us to continue working together to create positive change in our community."*

By following this model of good practice, intergenerational and intercultural community projects can effectively harness the power of oral history and digital media to bridge divides, foster mutual understanding and build stronger, more resilient communities.

Conclusion

Intergenerational and intercultural community projects that incorporate oral and shared history, as well as adopting shared goals and utilising binding cultural agents, have the potential to foster deeper connections, preserve cultural heritage, promote learning and empower individuals to become agents of change. By adopting the principles outlined in this Story of Good Practice, communities can create inclusive and sustainable initiatives that celebrate diversity. Doing so will aid in the cultural traditions of yesteryear being preserved and honed by future generations, providing further learning opportunities and greater cohesion in an ever-evolving Northern Ireland.

Quote: *"Together, we can build bridges across generations and cultures, creating a brighter future for us all."*