Impact Case Study
Shaping Connections

Introduction

Global research shows that social isolation and loneliness among older people affects their emotional, physical and mental health. Persistent loneliness – the feeling of sadness that comes from feeling alone, even when not isolated – can increase the risks of depression, anxiety, suicide, dementia, heart disease, stroke and premature death.

Finding ways to improve social connectedness for seniors through digital inclusion has the potential to reduce all of those risks, as well as reducing social service dependency and enabling older adults to be active for longer.

Background

While many older Australians use email, search engines and online shopping, many are ambivalent about the rapidly changing digital environment and its inherent or perceived risks.

Shaping Connections was established in 2018 to investigate how the use of technology supports social inclusion and participation among seniors, and encourages the connectedness that enhances their physical and mental wellbeing.

> "The Shaping Connections peer-to-peer approach to learning was validated as an effective approach to improve the Digital Skills of seniors," says Glen Wall, of industry project partner U3A. "It also validated the power of working with individuals who are social connectors in their community."

The Research
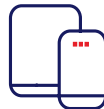
Shaping Connections was a collaboration between RMIT and the University of Third Age (U3A) Network Victoria, led by RMIT's Dr Bernardo Figueiredo. It aimed to improve social and digital connectedness in older adults.

Rather than assuming how older adults can or should use technology, Shaping Connections asked U3A's membership to share their voices, opinions, beliefs, and experiences so that empowering, co-designed projects could be created and pursued together

One project, developed with funding from the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), aimed to understand seniors' perceived risks of going online. Through a series of interviews, surveys and workshops with U3A's members, a number of resources were created, including interactive tools and video-vignettes of seniors talking about connectedness and technology, barriers to connecting, how they learn, and from whom.

During this early work, the value of peer-to-peer learning and the power of working with individual "social connectors" within communities were identified. This insight has helped U3A to steer activities away from large computer classes and towards peer-to-peer mentoring, aimed at workshopping solutions for the community's concerns and needs.

This approach helped to improve digital skills among U3A's members. When the Covid-19 pandemic made online communication a necessity rather than an option, U3A already had significant capacity to conduct its courses via Zoom. U3A formed a Technology Community of practice, which helped Digital Skills Mentors to apply the principles of peer-to-peer learning when mentoring others.

Project Outcomes

Sharing Connections has designed and built a website to share videos, news and insights, to showcase projects, and to outline the impact of the work. The site also links to further government information and potential U3A courses. https://www.shapingconnections.org/

Publications

- Commentary: Strength-based co-design that EMPOWERs – Lessons from codesigning with older adults, Journal of Services Marketing, 2023
- Digital Inclusion in Later Life: Older Adults' Socialisation Processes in Learning and Using Technology, Australasian Marketing Journal, 2023
- Improving digital inclusion for seniors, Golden Years, 2023
- Support clients to engage with technology, Australian Ageing Agenda, 2023
- Socialisation Agents' Use(fulness) for Older Consumers Learning ICT, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2023
- Co-designing ICT strategies with older adults, ACCAN, 2022
- Gaining resolution when creating imagery of aging, Frontiers in Sociology, 2022
- Co-Creating ICT Risk Strategies with Older Australians: A Workshop Model, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2022
- Technology: Strengthening digital social inclusion, Australian Ageing Agenda, 2022
- Reducing perceived risk and promoting digital inclusion, ACCAN, 2021

YouTube

Video vignettes can be found at:

- https://www.youtube.com/@shapingconnections

Resources

Shaping Connections shares its insights and outcomes through open access interactive tools and free downloads for individuals, industry, organisations and researchers https://www.shapingconnections.org/interactive-resources

Resources include:

- strategies to help reduce the perceived risks of online connections and improve older Australians' confidence in connecting safely.
- reports on connectedness and technology, perceived risks, and co-designing ICT strategies with older adults.
- tools for older Australians to self-asses their existing internet skills.

Overview of the Impact

The development of Shaping Connections' co-created, co-designed projects resulted in a surge of membership at U3A. Over 200 mentors from 45 U3A groups now provide mentoring to U3A members. U3A has also nominated the project for the 2023 Engagement Australia Excellence Awards

The program's digital tools and resources were showcased to several organisations, councils, and individuals involved with older adults and technology, including:

- Research institutions (NARI, University of Melbourne, University of Western Australia)
- Government services (Emergency Management Victoria, Victoria State Emergency Service, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing)
- CALD services (Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, Multicultural Consulting Services)
- Local councils (Banyule, Bayside, Boroondara, Casey, Hepburn, La Trobe, Manning, Maroondah, Melbourne, Melton, Moorabool, Moreland, Wellington, Wyndham)
- Aged care services (DPV Health Estia Health, Lifestyle Communities, Halley Assist, Proactive Ageing)
- Community services (Football Victoria, Brotherhood of Saint Laurence, Dianella Health and Plenty Valley Community Health).

Roundtable discussions were held with the Commissioner for Senior Victorians and the Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria hosted two seminars on "digital connectedness for seniors" for Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) providers across Australia.

As a result, the program's insights have contributed to policy development within the Victorian state government; influenced the practices of providers of home support for older adults; shaped how businesses such as NBNCO and Telstra communicate with older adults; and influenced the development of digital and social connectedness programs within Victorian councils, including Digital Skills Mentoring programs for Casey Council and City of Whittlesea.

Next Steps
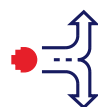
Shaping Connections' methodology has potential applications to empower other types of collaborations. A framework explaining how co-design can be tailored to empower and strengthen collaborations has been developed and is under review for publication.

Funding Support and/or Institutional Support

Shaping Connections was funded by RMIT ($5,000) to establish the partnership; U3A funded a further $18,000 to develop the website and some key resources. The project was then funded by a two-year $100,000 grant from ACCAN and $20,000 from U3A and the Council of Whittlesea. The RMIT team worked in partnership with U3A, drawing on interviews, surveys and activities with its pool of 35,000+ members in 100 local chapters across Victoria.

3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

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