

# Challenging Ageism & Supporting Equity Through an Intergenerational Classroom

PROJECT REPORT



## CONTACT INFORMATION

Please visit our website [www.trentu.ca/ruralaging](http://www.trentu.ca/ruralaging) or email [twells@trentu.ca](mailto:twells@trentu.ca) or [elizabethrussell@trentu.ca](mailto:elizabethrussell@trentu.ca)

## FUNDING INFORMATION & PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

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## ETHICS APPROVAL INFORMATION

The research was approved by the Trent University Research Ethics Board (file number 28785).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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As Trent University researchers, we respectfully acknowledge that this project was undertaken on the treaty and traditional territory of the Mississauga Anishnaabeg. We offer our gratitude to the First Nations for their care for, and teachings about, our earth and our relations. May we honour those teachings.

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# Background



**Elizabeth Russell**

Principal Investigator  
Trent University

Based out of Trent University's Department of Psychology and the Trent Centre for Aging & Society in Peterborough, Ontario, Dr. Elizabeth Russell has been working to **uncover ways that university classrooms can strengthen societal views on aging through both lecture-based and intergenerational classrooms.**



**Tabytha Wells**

Research Coordinator  
Trent University

The funders of the ongoing Experiential Learning in Aging project include the RTOERO Foundation, Trent's Centre for Teaching and Learning, and Trent University's Office of Research & Innovation.

# About the Study

**Ageism**, or age-based stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination, is the most widespread and socially accepted form of bias. It can be directed toward people of all ages and has been linked to a variety of negative outcomes, including social isolation, reduced quality of life, and a shorter lifespan. **Universities can play an important social role in addressing ageism in our society**, and research suggests that university-based intergenerational classrooms can be effective and sustainable in doing so. Although there are implied benefits to intergenerational classrooms, research must further examine the extent of their impacts.

To assess the outcomes of a university-based intergenerational classroom and its role in reducing ageism, Dr. Elizabeth Russell and Tabytha Wells developed, implemented, and evaluated an intergenerational Psychology of Aging course at Trent University. This project, funded by the Retired Teachers of Ontario (RTOERO) Foundation and the Trent University Centre for Teaching & Learning, included **interviews** with (younger) students and (older) community participants about their experiences with ageism and intergenerational connectivity throughout the course.

Study findings provide insight into the role of **intergenerational connectivity**, fostered through the intergenerational classroom, in **challenging ageism** and **supporting equity** among younger and older adults. Through both formal course content and informal intergenerational interactions, the classroom helped to reduce ageism, break down perceived generational divides, and humanize people of all ages, ultimately facilitating the development of age-consciousness (i.e., a deeper understanding of the aging process, reduction in and increased awareness of ageism, and enhanced personal connection with aging) among student and community participants. In an increasingly age-segregated society, **these findings highlight the positive impacts that university-led intergenerational programming can have on both older and younger participants**, bringing us one step closer to challenging ageism as a larger social issue.



# Project Goal

To develop, implement, and evaluate an intergenerational classroom model that aims to reducing ageism.

## Objectives

1

Explore students' and community participants' experiences in the intergenerational classroom.

2

Understand the role of intergenerational connectivity in reducing ageism.



# Research Design

## Study Context

Our **intergenerational classroom** was embedded within the Psychology of Aging course at Trent University during the Winter, 2024 semester. The third-year course, available to students from a variety of academic disciplines, included both university students and older (age 65+) community participants. The classroom consisted of a **formal lecture component**, which focused on the biopsychosocial underpinnings of aging, and **small group intergenerational activities**. Intergenerational activities included both community-building and academic activities, such as speed interviewing, show and tell, and brainstorming course assignments. Through both lecture material and intergenerational interactions, the classroom aimed to encourage a **realistic and diverse view of aging** while fostering **meaningful intergenerational connections**.

## Participants

Research participants included **22 students** and **13 community members** who participated in the intergenerational classroom. Students ranged in age from 20 to 27, with an average age of 21 years. Community participants were between the ages of 67 and 83, with an average age of 74 years.



# Data Collection & Analysis

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## → Interviews and Focus Group Discussion

Data were collected from both students and community participants using **semi-structured interviews** and a **focus group**. The interviews and focus group were conducted between March and May 2024, and focused on participants' intergenerational interactions in the classroom, perceptions of aging/youth, and understanding of ageism.

Interviews were approximately **60 minutes** in length and were conducted both in-person and virtually. The focus group was approximately **70 minutes** in length and was conducted in-person. All interviews and the focus group were audio-recorded and transcribed with informed consent from participants.

## → Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using an iterative collaborative qualitative analysis. This included identifying and analyzing the **key themes** that emerged throughout the transcripts. From these themes, we then formed the study's key findings.





# What We Learned

**Three themes** emerged regarding students' and community participants' experiences with ageism, intergenerational connectivity, and age-consciousness. Namely, the intergenerational classroom:

- 1 Facilitated the development of **age-consciousness** among students and community participants;
- 2 Reduced perceived **generational divides**; and
- 3 **Humanized** people of all ages.



## 1

# Development of Age-Consciousness

Participants stated that the intergenerational classroom prompted a **deeper understanding of the aging process**, an **increased awareness** of and **reduction in ageism**, and an **enhanced personal connection with aging**, ultimately facilitating the development of **age-consciousness** among both students and community participants.

Students and community participants benefited from learning about the science behind aging, as well as the prevalence, manifestations, and negative outcomes of ageism. In gaining a deeper understanding of ageism and the aging process, **students and community participants recognized ageism in their own lives**, including the ways they may have witnessed, experienced, or perpetuated this form of bias.



**“I’m not so worried that these are the folks that are going to look after us when we’re old now.”**  
- *Community Participant*

This awareness prompted a reduction in ageism, and participants shared that they did not want to contribute to an ageist society. **Students were more patient, considerate, and accepting of older adults**, while **community participants felt that younger people were more approachable, intelligent, and engaged** than they previously thought.

Positive attitudes of aging and youth contributed to an **enhanced personal connection with aging** among students and an **increased sense of hope for the future** among community participants. Students felt less anxious about their own aging, with many sharing new positive feelings about growing older. Similarly, community participants felt more optimistic about the future after confronting ageist stereotypes of youth.

**“I think I was scared because I had this notion that aging means decline, and it doesn’t. [...] I can see these positive aspects of aging.”**  
- *Student*

## 2

## Reduction in Perceived Generational Divides

The intergenerational classroom highlighted the similarities (as opposed to the differences) between students and community participants, contributing to a **deconstruction of perceived generational divides**. Throughout the semester, younger and older participants were encouraged to **interact as equals** (rather than as distinct groups) as they worked together on in-class projects, discussed course assignments, and shared knowledge intergenerationally. These interactions **emphasized the commonalities between generations** as they discussed personal experiences, interests, and aspirations.

**“I think in sharing some of my experiences and them sharing back, you realize the common denominators.”**  
– *Community participant*



In building meaningful intergenerational relationships, both older and younger participants felt **more comfortable interacting with people of different ages**. These interactions challenged socially constructed generational divides engrained in Canadian society. Through these positive interactions, participants began to explore the role that intergenerational connectivity can play in their lives and our society more broadly. Benefits such as **intergenerational knowledge sharing** and **enhanced sense of community** encouraged participants to extend their intergenerational interactions beyond the classroom.

**“I just feel more open to talking with older adults, and I realize how beneficial it is now.”**  
– *Student*



## 3

## Humanization of People of All Ages

By reducing perceived generational divides, students and community participants were able to **demystify the realities of aging and youth** and gain a deeper understanding of each other as individuals. Rather than viewing older or younger people as homogeneous groups, as many did prior to the intergenerational classroom, participants appreciated the value of heterogeneity across groups. Furthermore, **intergenerational connections highlighted the humanity of people of all ages** and facilitated the development of **empathy toward others, regardless of age**.



**“They gave us all such renewed hope for the future.”**  
– *Community participant*



# Next Steps

**The success of our intergenerational classroom supports the development of future intergenerational university classrooms.**

Therefore, to expand this project, we will implement a second iteration of the intergenerational classroom in Winter, 2026. Following the same course format, this iteration will incorporate a research and evaluation component to further assess the role of intergenerational connectivity in the development of age-consciousness among student and community participants.

In addition to evaluating the outcomes of intergenerational classrooms, future research should **explore the impacts and sustainability of formal and informal intergenerational opportunities** within and beyond the university environment. By gaining a deeper understanding of the role of intergenerational opportunities in reducing ageism, as well as the ways in which we can better sustain these opportunities, **we can work toward addressing ageism at local, national, and international levels.**



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series [here!](#)





# For more information



[www.trentu.ca/ruralaging](http://www.trentu.ca/ruralaging)



[elizabethrussell@trentu.ca](mailto:elizabethrussell@trentu.ca)  
[twells@trentu.ca](mailto:twells@trentu.ca)