

From *I know ye to see ye to c'mere till a tell ye*

In September 2021, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, Trinity College Dublin opened its first dedicated space for civic and community engagement: Unit18 (Trinity in the Community). Located on the Trinity East site, just a twenty-minute walk from the main campus, where Pearse Street meets Macken Street, Unit18 is tucked within an unassuming industrial complex. What looks to be a modest facility from the outside contains a vital and vibrant hub for the local community. This article explores the impact of our Digital Skills class and the impact that co-designing modules with older adult learners can have on engagement levels and learning outcomes.

In the wake of the pandemic, I moved from Glasgow to Dublin, and I struggled to find ways to integrate, as heightened caution and lingering public health restrictions made genuine connection difficult. Hoping to contribute to the city I was now living in, and to counter my own sense of disconnection, Professor Ciarán O'Neill, who served as Community Liaison Officer from 2017 to 2021, introduced me to Mary Colclough, the Community and Enterprise Engagement Manager. At Unit18, they had already launched the Tech2Community project during the first year of the pandemic, with financial support from Meta and several corporate partners. The initiative aimed to provide laptops to individuals and families in the surrounding area who needed them for education and social engagement. This project however, raised questions into how older adults managed lockdown and the succeeding social distancing, not exclusively in the absence of technology, but without the proficient level of digital literacy demanded of us almost overnight by the pandemic. Indeed, the Digital Skill programme at Unit18 has created meaningful opportunities to address and talk about ageism from individual experience to community networks.

The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) team hypothesised that loneliness and social isolation would be 'impacted dramatically' during COVID-19, noting the long-term impact this could have on the physical and mental wellbeing of older adults. It is critical, they advised, that we recognise the interaction between loneliness and social isolation so that we may develop 'impactful responses.'¹ Indeed, beyond the disconnection brought about by the pandemic, older adults have been identified as the demographic most likely to experience digital exclusion and face accessibility barriers, particularly as goods and services, including healthcare, continue to shift toward online platforms. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Working Group on Ageing has identified digital exclusion as a significant barrier to active and healthy ageing, limiting opportunities for both social and economic participation, an issue that came into sharper focus in the aftermath of the pandemic.² In a

¹ Mark Ward, Peter May, Charles Normand, Rose Anne Kenny and Anne Nolan (2021) Mortality risk associated with combinations of loneliness and social isolation. Findings from The Irish Longitudinal Study on Aging (TILDA), *Age Aging*, 50: 4, pp. 1329-1335. [available online: www.tilda.tcd.ie/epidemiology-biostatistics-course/course-material/assets/Class2/Ward2021_Mortality-loneliness-social-isolation.pdf], p. 1334.

² United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) (2021) *Policy Brief: Ageing in the Digital Era*. Geneva: UNECE [available online: https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/PB26-ECE-WG.1-38_0.pdf];

more recent study conducted by Gretta Mohan and Seán Lyons using data from TILDA studies similarly noted that the pandemic highlighted a connection between internet usage, health and wellbeing amongst older adults.³ Using data from 2018, the TILDA team found that 71% of adults aged 50 and over had access to the internet at home, and 64% had access to a smartphone. Access to both declines with age, only 38% of adults aged 80 and over had home internet access, and just 30% owned a smartphone.⁴ This older cohort is particularly vulnerable to loneliness, not only due to the restrictions and reduced social contact during the pandemic, but also because of a heightened awareness of their own limitations when it comes to maintaining social contact via technology. Mohan and Lyons additionally flagged the correlation between socioeconomic status and general internet usage. This view is supported by Amanda Hunsaker and Eszter Hargittai who found that a ‘higher level of education is consistently linked to being an internet user’ in comparison to those with some experience in higher education at 76% and those with a high school education 49%.⁵

At the community level, the link between socioeconomic status, digital literacy, and access to technology and broadband was clear. In 2023, we launched a structured 10-week Digital Skills programme for older adults, led by a dedicated tutor with support from a team of student volunteers from Trinity. This class allowed us to establish a baseline for understanding the learning needs of our older adults, covering a wide range of topics: from the creation of the internet to practical skills like using the web for news, archives, maps, and more. Conversely, it was difficult to keep the class collectively engaged, particularly those who felt that the topic did not interest them, or they associated it with being beyond the scope of their capability. The socioeconomic background of our older adult participants ranged from Trinity College alumni to those who did not have any exposure to technology and those who struggled to focus in school. In their study on high-speed broadband availability, quality of life and loneliness, Mohan and Lyons highlighted that older adults are more susceptible to ‘technostress’ and ‘technophobia,’ and this was particularly evident in those with little to no experience of technology within an academic and/or occupational context. Indeed, one participant remarked

European Council (EC) (2020) *Human Rights, Participation and Well-Being of Older Persons in the Era of Digitalisation*. Brussels [available online: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11717-2020-REV-2/en/pdf>].

³ G. Mohan and S. Lyons (2022), High-speed broadband availability, internet activity among older people, quality of life and loneliness, *New Media & Society*, 25: 6, pp. 2889-2913 [available online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221095218>].

⁴ Paul Doody, Minjuan Wang, Siobhan Scarlett, Ann Hever, Paul O’Mahoney and Rose Anne Kenny (2020) Internet access and use among adults aged 50 and over in Ireland: results from Wave 5 of The Irish Longitudinal Study on Aging [available online: https://tilda.tcd.ie/publications/reports/pdf/Report_Covid19InternetReport.pdf]. a

⁵ A. Hunsaker and E Hargittai (2018) A review of internet use among older adults,’ *New Media & Society*, 20(10): 2937-3954 [available online: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1461444818787348>].

‘...everything was great because there was always someone to help you. When you got home it was a different story, anything that could go wrong went wrong!’⁶

While our main objective is to develop technological literacy, our primary focus has shifted to building participants’ confidence, not exclusively in relation to digital skills but how they approach their learning. Many learners in our Digital Skills class frequently apologise – often because they need to be shown a process multiple times, or because they feel their questions are too basic and take up the tutor’s time. This lack of confidence often stems from interactions with teachers, family and friends who responded with impatience and/or frustration. Although there is no one-size-fits-all solution for addressing low confidence in older adults, we have found that consistently reassuring participants that we have nowhere else to be other than with them, and validating their learning needs, increases their willingness to ask questions and engage with technology.

At the end of the programme, participants were awarded a framed certificate of completion with the Trinity College Dublin logo, presented by Elaine MacMahon, Director of Infrastructure Data Centres at Meta. In conversations that followed, several older adults shared that they had proudly displayed their certificates on the walls of their homes. This small gesture holds deeper significance, it reflected the powerful sense of achievement felt by participants and illustrates that it is never too late for Trinity College’s ‘formal arm for involvement with the wider community’ to meaningfully connect.⁷ As one participant noted, ‘I have my certificate on show for my children and my grandchildren to see. Their granny has a certificate from Trinity College.’⁸

The completion of the Digital Skills course was met with a genuine sense of loss among the older adult participants, many of whom requested that we establish a long-term or alternative programme. The success of the course highlighted the importance of ongoing efforts to demystify the digital world, but also the extent to which the programme had become an important part of their weekly routine. In response, we introduced a weekly two-hour drop-in session in the summer 2023 designed to offer continued support. The first hour is reserved for informal conversation and one-to-one assistance with personal devices, while the second hour focuses on group-based learning and shared exploration of digital tools. The decision to run classes during the summer was based on conversations with our older adult learners, who shared that most of their other activities take place during term time, leaving them feeling more isolated and lacking opportunities for social engagement in the summer months.

As a strategy to promote engagement and confidence, participants are asked to bring a topic they are personally interested in exploring further. This approach aimed to challenge ageist assumptions about

⁶ Testimonial given by participant regarding Digital Skills Programme at Unit18 to Mary Colclough (April 2023).

⁷ Matthew Hull (2025) Civic engagement at Trinity: a long time coming, *Trinity News*. [available online: <https://trinitynews.ie/2025/03/civic-engagement-at-trinity-staff-award/>].

⁸ Testimonial given by participant regarding Digital Skills Programme at Unit18 to Holly Ritchie (April, 2023).

what older adults should know and instead centred on what they wanted to learn.⁹ It was essential to address the psychological barriers that often hinder digital engagement among older adults. We recognised the need for positive, interest-driven learning to counteract internalised ageism, time-related pressures, motivation challenges, and disengagement. As the UNECE has highlighted, when older adults perceive that digital technologies and services are not aligned with their interests or needs, they are less likely to engage. While it is common to offer basic skills classes—such as sending emails, taking photos, or using brain-training apps—our participant-led approach led to far more dynamic and meaningful sessions. Topics ranged from “What is cryptocurrency?” and “How does artificial intelligence (AI) work?” to “How to get the most out of cloud storage.” These classes not only engaged curiosity but also consistently circle back to a central concern among participants, learning how to navigate these technologies safely.

Since its creation, the Digital Skills programme attracts a regular cohort of older adults, ranging from 50 to 80 years old, across different socioeconomic backgrounds who continue to bring new questions every Tuesday morning. Indeed, during one of our sessions, and in a bid to advertise our class and encourage new participants, I set out to design a window drawing a nondescript individual thinking over a laptop with the words ‘Digital Skills for old----.’ Before I could finish the sentence, a chorus of amused groans filled the room. “Old *what?*” one asked, grinning. I paused, marker hovering just above the glass. “Well... I was going to write ‘older adults’—should I not?” In response, one participant said,

‘It’s funny; you don’t really see yourself getting older as much as you feel it. One day you wake up, and everything feels heavier—that’s one thing no one tells you about aging, that one morning you wake up wearing a weighted suit. My thoughts are the same as yesterday; I’m still me, but my shell has changed. Then someone on the bus offers you a seat on your way to a computing class for the elderly. That’s how you know.’¹⁰

In a bid to ensure that the class appealed to an older demographic via neutral language I had reminded them of their age, not their agency. It was more than semantics. You could call it, ‘Digital Skills *for the young at heart*,’ ‘the *didnae kenners* (I don’t knowers),’ ‘the *Digital Explorers*’ they chimed. The conversation turned from wordplay to purpose, from labels to learning, with each participant adding another suggestion to what had started as a simple sign. Evidently, the class wasn’t just about mastering technology. It was about ownership, agency and dignity in exploring a world that they had, for a long time, felt excluded from.

⁹ A. Hunsaker and E Hargittai (2018) A review of internet use among older adults,’ [available online: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1461444818787348>].

¹⁰ Quote taken from a discussion by anonymous participant regarding Digital Skills Programme at Unit18 to Holly Ritchie (October, 2024).

More recently, I found myself running from Trinity to Unit18 when an older adult from the community stopped me outside of the Art of Coffee on Hogan Street, inviting me for a cup of tea. Distracted, I responded that I would arrange to have coffee with her later in the week because I had things to do. It was not until I reached Albert Place, some two minutes down the road, before I realised the opportunity that I missed. Why couldn't I sit for a moment and talk? What is discourse without action? Indeed, the surest solution to ageism in our community is through the simple act of giving our time – time to listen, time to discuss and time to understand.

And with that, I found myself sitting in the café and over a shared apple turnover and a cup of tea, we settled down to catch up. 'C'mere till a tell ye...' she said.