REIMAGINING THE FUTURE IN OLDER AGE

CREATIVE TOOLKIT

A toolkit to embed utopian thinking and creative methods into policy and practice to reimagine the future as we all age...

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Cover image: Ray Bird

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Overview

This toolkit has been created to advise organisations on how to practically embed creative methods and utopian thinking into planning and campaigns to encourage more imagination and aspiration in policy and beyond.

Imagination and aspiration are important elements in any campaign that seeks to include older adults. So often public rhetoric frames older age as a problem to be solved – an economic burden that undervalues older people's futures. As many of us can expect to live into old age, it is in all our interests to have a sense of belonging in the future.

The 'Coming of Age' report (Bazalgette et al, 2011) found that older people are feeling increasingly alienated by rhetoric that categorises their experiences as a social burden. They recommended policy-makers enact 'a shift of mind-set' that would finally recognise the contributions older adults make to society and create room for their skills. This toolkit suggests that a shift in mind-set can be achieved via 'utopian methods' (Levitas, 2013), which 'facilitates genuinely holistic thinking about possible futures' (xi). These methods take us out of the present way of doing things and encourage reflexive thinking, democratic engagement and co-design when it comes to creating long-term policies and engaging with intergenerational audiences and older adults.

This toolkit can be used by anyone who wants to think beyond just needs-based solutions. We offer resources to think more imaginatively about addressing desires for later life rather than just needs as we all age.

As the Baring Foundation report 'Older and wiser? Creative ageing in the UK 2010–19' (2019) argues, arts engagement is a human right that leads to social connectedness, improvements to wellbeing and resilience. Giving a creative voice to older people can create a space for solutions that centre hopes, dreams and desires.

Embedded in this toolkit are also practical ways to use creative methods both online and in-person. These methods were developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when we quickly had to consider how community building and creative outputs can be built in an online setting. Although it is important to acknowledge that some older adults were at risk, there was also immense pushback in our groups from people over 70 against being framed as vulnerable. Their personal stories pointed more towards resilience and community building. The value of creativity became a bedrock for arts organisations working with older adults during the pandemic. Our project, too, became a way of remaining connected in increasingly difficult times.

Our creative methods were centred around two activities: reading groups and Forum Theatre workshops. Each of these methods allowed for co-creation. This toolkit emphasises the importance of including older adults and intergenerational involvement in cultural policies and provides practical ways to do this. We also offer the opportunity to build on these methods in an ongoing, collaborative process.

Key terms

'Self-identified older people'
As a project concerned with social and cultural constructions of age and deconstructing chronological age categories, the only age-related criterion for taking part in the forum theatre workshops were that participants identify as an 'older adult'.

'Utopian methods'
Developed by sociologist Ruth Levitas using 'utopia as method' helps us envision the future without relying on a rigid goal or blueprint. Instead, she advocates for a reflexive response that focuses on using collective action to change present issues.

'Intergenerational'
Interactions and relationships that occur between a variety of different generations.

'Intragenerational'
Interactions and relationships that occur within a generation.

'Arts-based methods'
Techniques that use artistic, narrative and performative representation to understand, evaluate and sometimes challenge subjective human experiences.

'Forum theatre'
A type of theatre that enables an audience to stop the action, step onto the stage and explore alternatives to a particular problem. With an emphasis on exploration rather than finding the 'solution', Forum Theatre is one branch of the Theatre of the Oppressed, developed by Brazilian director Augusto Boal.

'Spect-actors'
Refers to the dual role of those involved in a Forum Theatre performance, who act as both spectator and actor, both observing and participating in the dramatic action.

Image: Forum Theatre online workshop | Credit: Ray Bird

"old" "older"....in other societies we are considered "elders" which implies respect, having something to offer, wisdom.

Owning the concept of old age and not doing it with any denial. Being realistic about how old you are chronalogicly. Honest about it with yourself.

The idea of defining, grouping and labeling people is bad. Where is the benchmark? Who has the right to define a group of people as older and what are the implictions?

There are so many ways that people are grouped and put into boxes. We are in multiple boxes. How much control to we have over that?

Older than who?

Health is bigger problem than age

Pandemic and lockdown... was happy with age and life style before but now officially externally defined by people making the rules. Our role has been given to sit and be patient.

People who are old or sick now can't do anything now. Have to just sit in the house, not seeing anybody.

Language: "self defined older person" Week 2

isolation

Defined by society. Had to stay in even though I didn't feel vulnerable. If i didn't do what society said I would be seen as irresponsible.

It's a club everyone's going to join one day. If you're old you're old.

Pandemic has resulted in a fragmented, drifting, loss of itentity.

I've still got things to give...expereicnes, helping...and that helps me.

Accepting you are older doesn't mean accepting that you're useless or can't have opinions.

Giving, holding, sharing as a elder. I own it becuase I feel that it's valuable.

Image: Jamboard from Forum Theatre Workshop, participants' responses to 'self defined older person'
Credit: Active Inquiry

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Methodology

"Utopian experiment disrupts the taken-for-granted nature of the present" – Ruth Levitas

Arts-based practice

'Reimagining the Future in Older Age' used participatory, arts-based practices to engage our intergenerational and intragenerational audiences. Thinking about the future is a complex task – for one, it hasn't happened yet. Using traditional social science methods to think about the future can sometimes feel too empirical – how can we measure, observe and predict what will happen without living through it? Arts-based methods have proven to be a great way to supplement and enrich statistics (and in the 'Resources' section we highlight other projects that offer helpful insights).

Creative methods are also useful to break away from dominant narratives about the future contained in socio-economic discourses, which do not allow space to think about the future imaginatively or with desire (Levitas 2013). The chosen research methods of reading groups and forum theatre are designed to create the space in which to think imaginatively about the relationship between the future and age, and provide opportunities to challenge oppressive, ageist narratives and practices.

Forget the blueprint – embrace utopian thinking

A utopia is often defined as an imaginary community or society that possesses highly desirable or nearly perfect qualities for its citizens. We often see utopias as offering an ideal blueprint that more often than not fails to materialise. However, the 'utopian methods' our project uses offers something different. Rather than trying to create a perfect world, we instead pose questions, suggest practices and offer methods that are more about utopia as an ongoing process than as a final destination.

How to use co-design

We wanted to be led by the participants in the projects as much as possible. The emphasis of co-creation is the act of making a project with participants, not just for them. Co-creation is a collaborative process that develops new concepts, ideas and solutions with a range of contributors. Ideas are shared, built on and improved together. The results of co-design and co-creation often see those involved in the collaboration shift from being engaged to being empowered (Cantù and Selloni, 2013).

Why Utopia?

Utopia offers time to embrace "the expression of desire for a better way of living and of being" (Levitas, 2013: p.4). We put utopian methods into practice through arts-based workshops but there are many other ways...

You can even put creative methods into practice by simply asking: **'What do you *desire* in older age?'.**

A question worth asking...

Conversations on the topic of desire and the future of older age are important to come up with new policy ideas. Policy assesses the needs of older adults – often in terms of care, housing and pensions – but as we live longer, we can fill our future time with what we hope for too, be that community-building, learning new skills, or being more creative.

This toolkit approaches utopia as a goal that is constantly being worked towards.

Context of ageing

Thinking about utopia takes us on tangents that the real world might make us think are impossible and frees us up to imagine our ideal alternatives.

In the context of ageing, this way of thinking can get us away from ageist assumptions and existing policy frameworks that might feel taken for granted.

Utopian methods in practice can help us...

To focus on what we desire and require to flourish, not just need to survive

To use imagination to find out what we want for our futures

To open up space for intergenerational connection

To discover who we are at every age

To create alternative narratives of ageing

To go beyond the present way of doing things

To challenge dominant ageist stereotypes

To create opportunities for cultural engagement

CASE STUDIES

Creative methods can help us think imaginatively about later life as we all age. Next, we share two case studies that model utopian methods through creative practice. The reading groups model this by deconstructing dominant ageist narratives and forum theatre by rewriting them...

Case Study 1: Reading Groups
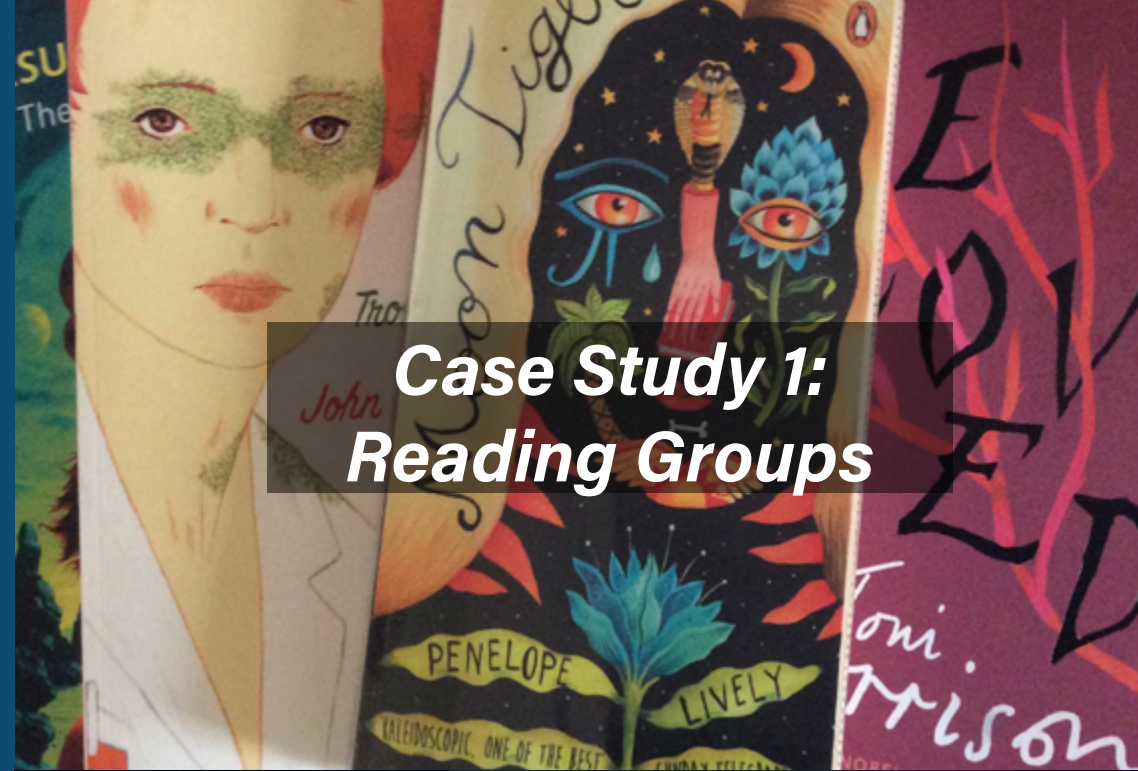
Case Study 2: Theatre Workshops

Image 1: Front covers of novels | Credit: Valerie Wright
Image 2: Active Inquiry theatre performance | Credit: Pula Forum Festival

READING GROUPS:
Deconstructing narratives about ageing

Aim

The aim was to draw on Levitas' utopia as method by using fiction to unlock narratives of the future of ageing and deconstruct representations of intergenerational relationships.

Action

We led discussions on how older age could be experienced differently and how ageism could be addressed. Fiction requires imagination and offers the opportunity to empathise with different characters and societies beyond our immediate experiences. In the reading groups we discussed novels depicting themes of ageing and intergenerational relationships with adults of different ages. Participants were invited to use these fictional narratives to reimagine societies in which everyone's futures are valued, regardless of age or circumstance.

Outcome

We found that reading novels opened intriguing lines of flight: although we started from the details of the books, discussing character and plot, these opening discussions often led to sharing real-world situations and imagined alternatives.

Key benefits of using novels:

▷ Can be helpful to approach topics in an oblique way / using fictional examples

▷ Language is less restrictive and prescriptive

▷ Opens up imaginative ways of thinking

▷ Allows us to put ourselves in the place of the characters to imagine ways to address their problems

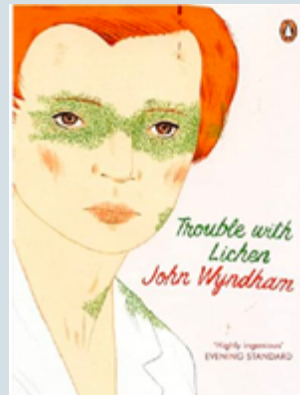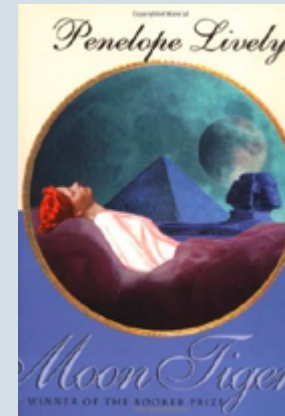# Novels we read...

...which others would you add?
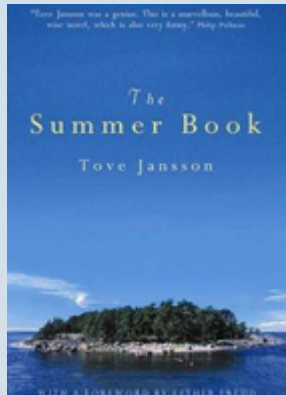
Title: The Summer Book
Author: Tove Jansson
Genre: Realism

A grandmother and granddaughter
connect on a remote Finnish island..

Title: Trouble with Lichen
Author: John Wyndham
Genre: Science fiction

A biochemist discovers an extract that
can slow down the ageing process...

Title: Moon Tiger (1987)
Author: Penelope Lively
Genre: Historical novel

An older writer on her deathbed recalls the
history of the world – and her own affairs...

Title: The Dark Flood Rises
Author: Margaret Drabble
Genre: Literary fiction

A road-trip through different ways
of living longer in Britain...

Title: Turnabout
Author: Margaret Peterson Haddix
Genre: Science fiction/Young adult.

When a miracle anti-ageing drug turns out
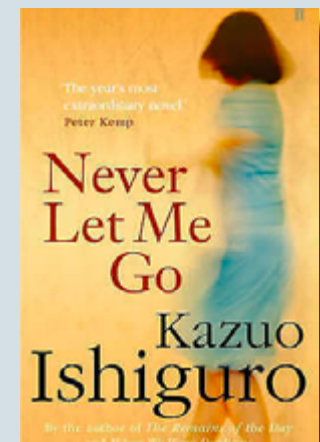to be deadly, two women go on the run...

Title: Young Art and Old Hector
Author: Neil M. Gunn
Genre: Realism

Old Hector teaches Young Art about the
painful business of growing up...

Title: The Last Children of Tokyo
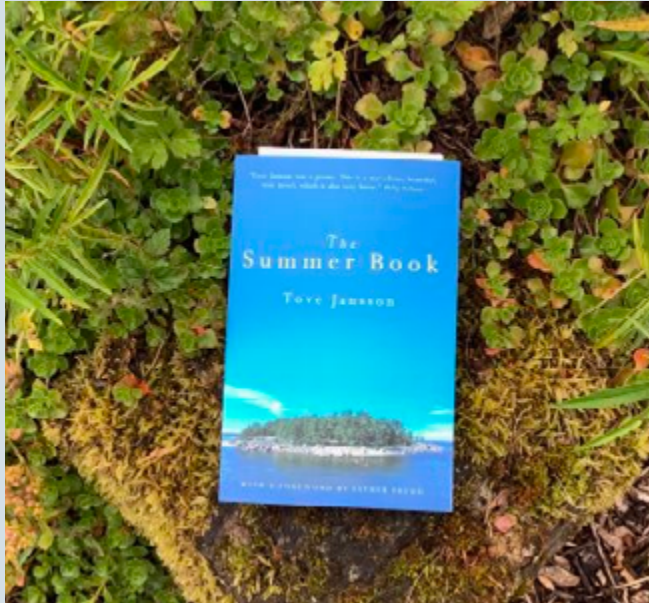Author: Yoko Tawada
Genre: Science fiction

Old and young swap places in this
dystopian future Tokyo...

Title: Never Let Me Go
Author: Kazuo Ishiguro
Genre: Science fiction

A gripping, unusual book about love,
friendship, memory and finitude...

Build your own book club...

1. Gather a group:
Think about the type of audience you would like to connect with. If you have a specific topic you want to discuss, this might also dictate the themes and novels you will pick

2. Choose a theme:
Choose a relevant theme that all participants would like to discuss. Novels can be chosen to ensure representation from different time periods and genres (e.g. social realism, historical, science fiction, comedy and post-colonial fiction).

3. Vote on the books:
Make a list of potential novels and circulate to the group – having a say in the novels makes you more likely to read them!
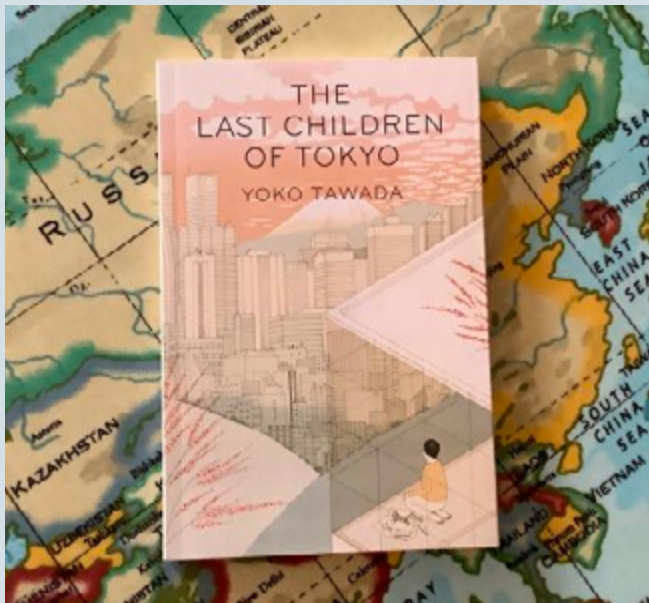
4. Choose a time, date and venue to meet:
This might be online or in-person, local libraries are a great place to bring together communities of all ages.

5. Read the books and come up with discussion points:
Write down your thoughts on the themes and characters ahead of time

6. Meet up, discuss and enjoy

Beyond the books...

Building discursive spaces

Not everyone will have time to set up and run a monthly reading group. But we can bring the techniques of a reading group into any room in three core ways. By generating discussion, encouraging critical questions and asking for opinions, and connecting in collaborative spaces.

Learn More

Discussing

Bring to the table a question, comment or policy to discuss. Give participants as much context as they need to actively particpate in a discussion.
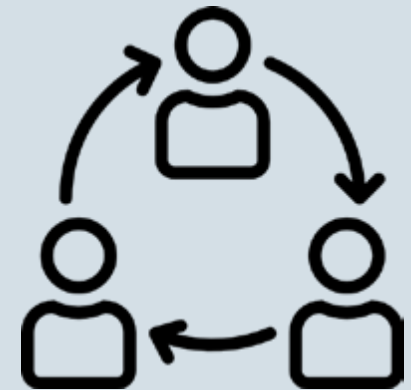
Questioning

Ask relevant questions about the topic, creating space where everyone can share their thoughts.

Collaborating

Work together to solve the problems raised by the questions, these 'solutions' should be as bold and big as you can make them.

Discussion prompts

What do you want from the future / your future?

Do you think tensions between generations are real, imagined or influenced by the media?

What kind of places/settings could exist to facilitate people of different ages meeting up and spending time together?

Would you like to have more friends or contact with people of different ages and generations?

What kinds of activities could exist to help generations connect?

Do you think people make assumptions about each other based on age and which generation they are presumed to be?

Have any fictional works changed your perception of what it means to be 'older'?

Can you think of an example of characters in a positive fictional intergenerational relationship? What makes it work?

THEATRE WORKSHOPS:
Rewriting narratives about the future as we age

Aims

This arts-based activity aimed to give older people the opportunity to address dominant ageist narratives by creating their own vision of the future in older age.

Action

A series of workshops with older people were conducted in collaboration with Active Inquiry, an Edinburgh-based theatre and arts activist company that uses participatory forum theatre with community organisations to address social injustice.

Outcome

During the course of the workshops, participants were guided to create one or more narratives of the future in older age that they performed online. Audience members of all ages were invited to 'step into' and engage with the performances, in line with the ethos of forum theatre. The workshops and performances took place on Zoom and were filmed.

Key benefits of using drama:

▷ We can explore emotions and intellect at the same time (without it feeling weird!)

▷ We can use fiction to build distance and objectivity from our own experiences

▷ We can learn using our whole selves (not just our heads)

▷ We can imagine and embody how we would like things to be

Why join the theatre workshops?

theatre opens up more than a normal conversation.

Something interesting and stimulating to do. Meet more people.

interested in topic. Interested in why don't people think about the future.

outside our normal comfort zone. feels good to stretch ourselves and do something we don't usually do.

use imagination, thinking on feet – applying that to acting

outside our normal comfort zone. feels good to stretch ourselves and do something we don't usually do.

There are so many ways that people are grouped and put into boxes. We are in multiple boxes. How much control to we have over that?

I've still got things to give...expereicnes, helping...and that helps me.

Image: Jamboard from Forum Theatre Workshop, selected participants' responses to 'Why are we here?'
Credit: Active Inquiry

The performances...

Return to Wonderland and *Waiting for Dot* were two short plays devised by older adults, working with Active Inquiry, exploring issues of ageism, activism and the future in older age. Each performance had a series of questions at their core to prompt the audience to think about potential answers and interventions...

If we think about drama as a method through which we can learn practically then there are many possibilities that open up. You do not need to be a trained actor or director to use drama techniques.

Forum theatre's emphasis on participation and reflexive engagement chimes with the intention of utopia as method, where the intention is more to generate ongoing reflections, rather than create a 'fixed' blueprint of a better society.

Watch the Films

Return to Wonderland

It's Alice's birthday and she's looking forward to more adventures in Wonderland, but there's no seat for her at the tea party.

Why is this world of opportunities and imagination no longer open to her?

How many merry unbirthdays are too many?

Can she convince them to let her stay?

Waiting for Dot

Dot has been an activist in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament for decades. She is due to speak at a meeting tonight and the taxi is waiting outside.

So why is she hesitating?

Is activism only a young person's game?

"We must all do theatre, to find out who we are, and to discover who we could become." – Augusto Boal

Image: Forum Theatre performers after first online show.
Credit: Active Inquiry

Exercises

If we think about using theatre as a genuine inquiry, rather than a way to transmit a message, then the simple games and exercises described below become vehicles for discovery and keys for unlocking knowledge...

Benefits of playing games

Most of us will have experience of playing some kind of game in meetings or training sessions. Often called 'ice-breakers' these are designed to do just that, enabling people to relate to each other in a different way. However, theatre games have the potential to do much more than just break the ice...

Image credit: Active Inquiry

Encourage playfulness

Being able to play is often something we associate with children. But why shouldn't adults be able to play too? Playing can open up new ways of looking at the world and our ability to imagine something different.

Play with the rules

Games have fixed rules and free elements within those rules. There are also opportunities to bend or stretch rules. In this way, they can be used as a metaphor for other parts of our lives. We can explore what is useful about rules, why it is difficult to follow or not follow rules, who decides on rules, and what happens when we break them.

Free the body and mind from the everyday

Our bodies become mechanised to the tasks that we ask them to fulfill each day. By opening up what our bodies are capable of doing we start to open up what we are able to imagine.

Exercise 1: 1,2,3 Change

In pairs, participants are invited to count to three so that participant A says "one", participant B says "two", A says "three", and then B starts again with "one".

Once this rhythm is established, each pair is invited to replace the word 'one' with a random sound and movement.

This sound and movement is then always said in place of "one".

Then the pair are invited to replace "two" and "three" with different sounds and movements.

Exercise 2: Change the meaning

Ask everyone to walk around the room.

When the facilitator shouts "stop", everyone has to freeze.

When they shout "go", everyone has to walk.

Then change the meaning of these words so that go means stop and stop means go.

Then add in others such as jump and crouch, shout and whisper, then change the meanings.

Reflect on why it is difficult to do this.

Exercise 3: Hypnosis

In pairs, participant A holds their palm a few inches from participant B's face.

Participant A then starts to move, leading participant B around the room, who has to at all times keep their face the same distance from Participant A's hand.

Once trust is developed, encourage the pairs to try to stretch each other, playing with levels and speed, whilst always taking care of their partner.

Questions & reflections:

▷ You may run a game for a specific purpose but participants will often experience other uses or read in other meanings.

▷ By asking a question like "what was in that game for you?" you invite a space for new interpretations and interesting discussions.

Create images

Often called 'freeze frames' or 'tableaus', an image just means putting our bodies in space and freezing so that others can interpret what we are doing. However, this is more than just creating a photo-album. Imagine if I was to stand in an image with my hands above my head and palms facing the ceiling. What could I be doing? Maybe some dancing? Holding a heavy rock? Protecting my eyes from the bright sunshine? The beauty of images is that I could be doing all of those things. Images open themselves up to multiple readings, all of which are 'right'. This can be extremely useful in opening up different perspectives and dialogue around a particular subject. Images can then be brought to life in various ways.

Image: Online workshop with participants
Credit: Active Inquiry

Exercise 1: Real and ideal images

Imagine you are working with a group of people exploring issues around inadequate housing.

Rather than discussing problems, split the group into small groups to make images that show the problems. We can call this the real image. This can help to distill down what the problem is that the group wants to explore.

Ask each group to show their image to the other groups and for the audience to comment on what they see before the group says what they were trying to show. Remember that different perspectives are useful here rather than the right answer.

Then ask the groups to make the ideal image. How would they like the situation to be. Again, ask each group to view and comment on each image. How might we get from the real to the ideal?

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Exercise 2: Activating Images

Images start out static but they don't need to stay that way!

There are many techniques for bringing them to life that can add depth:

Moving from real to ideal:
Over a count of 10, ask groups to move slowly from their real image to their ideal image. Ask an audience to say what they saw needing to happen to move from one to another

Thought track: Tap each member of an image on the shoulder and ask them what their character is thinking

Sound and movement: Ask each image to add a repetitive sound and movement

Questions & reflections:

It is really important to have time to reflect on each of the images and to not narrow down meaning too quickly.

Possible questions that you could ask are:

▷ 'What do we see in this image?'
▷ 'What do we think this character is doing/representing?'
▷ 'Does anybody see something different?'
▷ 'Tell me more about what you mean by that?'

Image: Stills from workshops
Credit: Active Inquiry
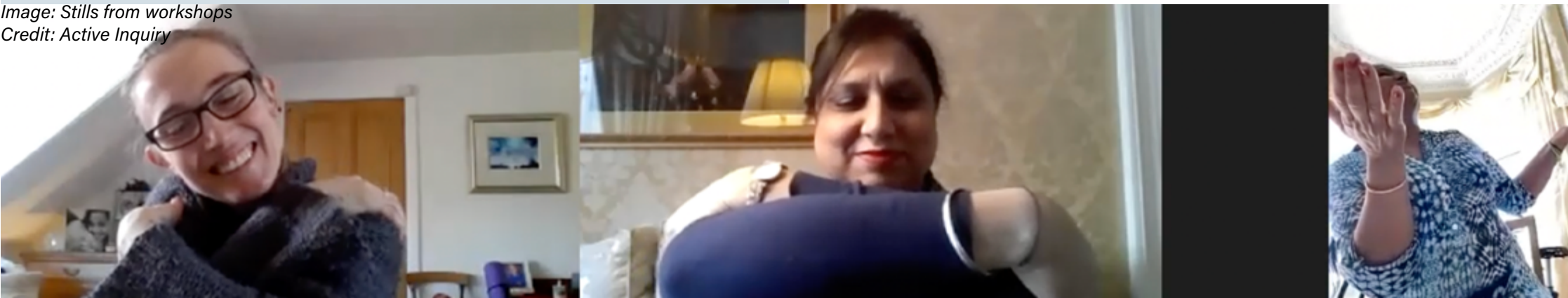
Develop character

In plays, characters are usually included because they fulfill a particular function in moving the plot forwards and of representing something. However, characters can be useful vehicles for exploring tricky concepts and enabling people to take a step back from their own experiences to analyse things more objectively...

Image: Stills from performances
Credit: Active Inquiry

Exercise 1: Turning concepts into people

When talking about tricky concepts, for example 'older age' and 'the future' it can be useful to think about what these would be like as people.

What gender would the character 'the future' be? How old would they be? What would their job be or favourite food be? Who would a character representing 'older age' be? What would the relationship be between these two characters?

This can be done as a paper exercise or you could ask people to prepare a short scene showing this relationship.

Exercise 2: Taking distance

Instead of asking people to talk directly about their own experiences, you can ask a group to create a character with similar experience.

For example, if working with a group of young people looking at housing issues you could ask the group to create a character of someone who is 19 and having housing problems.

The group creates this character together which enables them to put their own experiences into the character and to find a character that represents the group experience.

We can then talk about how this character got into the situation they are in and what help they need for example.

Create your own forum theatre scenes

Forum theatre is a type of theatre that was developed by Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal. It enables an audience to stop and step into action onstage and try to change the outcome! However, this does not have to be done in a big theatre and can be equally useful in a community centre or resident's lounge!

Step 1: Characters

At least 2 characters, a protagonist and an antagonist. The protagonist (main character) should be representative of the group and should have something they want to achieve in the scene that feels fair and just. The antagonist is usually a representative of an institution or system and will stop the protagonist getting what they want. It is important the antagonist is not just a 'baddie' but is a representative of unfair power. In this way discussions will be about how we reframe and reform power rather than just how we get around or get rid of a horrible person

Step 2: A conflict

The scene will show the protagonist trying to get what they want and being stopped by the antagonist. Try to show that the protagonist has some fight in them but it is the system that is stopping them (as opposed to their ability to stand up for themselves)

Step 3: A defeat

A defeat. In the end the protagonist should be defeated. They don't get what they want

Step 4: No easy answer

No easy answer. Forum Theatre should open up a range of possibilities rather than pointing an audience to a predetermined right answer or solution.

Step 5: A performance

The scene will be performed to the audience.

Step 6: A debate

The facilitator (or Joker as they are called in Forum Theatre) can ask the audience what they saw, what they think the problem is and what might be possible.

Step 7: Interventions

The play is performed again but this time the audience can stop the play and replace a character, or bring in a new character, to suggest a possible way forward.

Step 8: Reflection

After each intervention the joker should ask the audience if we have made any progress and what we have learned. What else can we try?
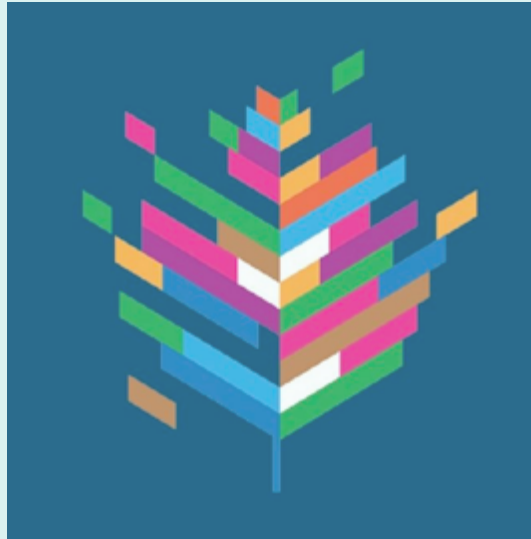
What next?

This toolkit has provided some ideas on how to kick start thinking about the future of older age – for us all. We believe utopian methods are ongoing so in these final pages we share some ways to get in touch to keep these conversations going...

Utopia is ongoing...
Postcard to your future self

One final exercise to keep reflecting on the future of older age is a simple creative writing task: write a postcard to your future self and what you imagine your hopes and desires will be in 20 years' time. This can be done in groups, or as an individual reflection task.

Groups will need:
Postcards
Pens
Blu-tac
Large paper to collate ideas

Discussion prompts

A key lesson they are taking from the present that they don't want to forget...

A message or commitment to their future self about their hopes for the future of older age...

A desire for how older age might be perceived in the future...

To me...

Utopia is ongoing... Feedback

We discussed the first draft of this toolkit with participants who attended a project event in May 2022. We have since updated the toolkit to incorporate their suggestions.

In their feedback participants said they thought the toolkit could:

▷ help them to start an intergenerational reading group; prompt discussion points as part of their work;

▷ help them to foster more intergenerational social and creative content;

▷ be used as a follow-on from an awareness-raising workshop;

▷ give them useful creative exercises to use in their work;

▷ help them to move a 'stuck' group forward by using Forum Theatre techniques;

▷ be used as a learning resource for children.

Image: 'Hacking the Toolkit', May 2022
Credit: Ray Bird

We'd love to carry on these utopian conversations...

It would be fantastic if organisations could share their experiences of using the toolkit in their own work, so they can learn from each other. If you've used the toolkit please do let us know on our project website:

Get in touch

Further resources

ACTIVE INQUIRY www.activeinquiry.co.uk

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BERNARD, M. & RICKETT, M. 2017. 'The cultural value of older people's experiences of theater-making: a review'. *The Gerontologist*, 57, 1–26.

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LEVITAS, R. 2013. *Utopia as Method: the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

"**Curiouser** and curiouser"

Website   **Twitter**

For more information or to share your thoughts on
the project please contact: melanie.lovatt1@stir.ac.uk