Bridging the Age-Related Communication Gap: An Encounter Between Senior Citizens and Communication Students Towards Social Integration

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Abstract

This paper is built upon an attempt to answer the question: "What can be done to facilitate social integration between the elderly of Bagac, Bataan and the communication students of St. Paul University Manila?" The research was designed as a qualitative inquiry that involved an outreach activity by 24 dominantly female students of Development Communication to the senior citizens of Bagac, Bataan (Philippines) and a reflection period involving the students. The students were tasked to pay special attention to the digital engagements and/or disengagements of the elderly to allow them to learn more about the difficulties and potential of using social media in development-related projects involving senior citizens. The actual two-hour encounter involved socialization between the elderly and the students. The students, prior to the encounter, were tasked to generate the funds, use them to acquire and prepare the gifts, develop the program during the actual encounter based on research-based guidelines, and photo document the entire activity. They were given guide questions for reflections a week after. The reflections were thematically analyzed and revealed that in order to facilitate greater social integration between the elderly and the communication students. The university should address the health and digital aversion issues that intensify the sense of isolation of the elderly experience daily. This can be done by enhancing the communication skills of the communication students in 16 areas.

Keywords: communication students, digital aversion, elderly, health concerns.

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In 2015, a group of senior college students of St. Paul University Manila completed research that sought to empower the senior citizens of a community in Manila through expressive arts. It was chosen as the best thesis of the year and became the inspiration for an advocacy to which the Mass Communication Program of the university has committed since then. It generated a momentum that led to the program chair’s encounter with an elderly cancer patient of the Philippine General Hospital who later became the beneficiary of a fund-raising campaign by communication students. During the first semester of the 2016-2017 academic year, the Development Communication students under the mentorship of the first author took on an exploratory project that involved the elderly people of Bagac, Bataan, the author’s hometown. This research was the result of a realization that, while senior citizens are people who need the support of the youth, they are also the best teachers for them, because of their rich experiences and the wisdom they gained. It was also brought about by the fact that the younger generation are more informed about and exposed to new communication technologies than the older generation. The need to look at the elderly and the youth as mutually empowering agents stimulated the questions on which this paper is based.

Rationale

The author engaged in this research to explore the potential formative value of the elderly-youth encounter for both parties. While a higher education institution is expected to help address developmental problems in our adopted communities, it is also challenged to promote student learning and social responsibility by doing so. This project was made even more important by its attempt to engage in a project where both the elderly and the youth are not considered merely as beneficiaries, but also, and more importantly, as agents of mutual empowerment. The challenge presented by this opportunity, however, is to surface the relational and transactional potentials and risks should the project be sustained for at least three years. Hence, the author intends to clarify the murky areas and bring to light areas of change that might serve as indicators of the institution’s success in this endeavor.

Review of Literature

Communication gaps. Despite the naturally communicative property of the human body at the biological level (Randall, Matthews, & Stiles, 1997; Park & Mercier, 2015), communication gaps occur frequently between persons. Every human being must learn how to communicate effectively using his or her body to be able to achieve understanding.
that enhances human relationships. Knowledge, relevancy, perception, and preconception gaps are considered contributory to communication gaps (Wilson, 2014). A knowledge gap arises when vocabulary, concepts, and experiences are not shared by two communicating parties. A relevancy gap emerges when communicators do not assign the same value or importance to the subject being communicated. A perception gap occurs when details that affect meaning are missed during communication due to distractions, stress, fatigue, or other intervening conditions that impact each communicator’s reception and consequently the perception of the message. Previous ideation about a subject that affects interpretation and does not align well with another’s contributes to a conception gap. Conflicts owing to sex, age, culture, and interests are often intensified because of these gaps that shape communication outcomes.

**Generation gap.** While seemingly just stemming from age difference, a generation gap is an outcome of many different communication-related gaps, mostly culturally constructed. It may be found in every facet of an individual’s life (Ramasubbu, 2016). It is considered “widest when one of the two generations is the adolescent” (Ramasubbu, 2016, para. 1). This assertion stems from the fact that the use of digital technology by the youth, particularly the millennials (or those currently within the age range of 18 and 34), greatly contribute to the cultural distancing, which has not occurred between previous older generations. As such, the generation gap between grandparents and their grandchildren is considerably greater than those between parents and their children. Further widening this gap is the elderly person’s diminished capacity for effective communication that results from their greater irritability, declining health, challenged functionality and capacities, and age-related illnesses (Health in Aging, 2016). Further complicated by the youth’s highly variable hormone levels that impact perception (Wilson, 2014), one can imagine the many difficulties that can arise from their encounter, if not facilitated by moderating factors.

**Communication needs of the elderly and the digital divide.** Social isolation is a problem experienced by the elderly (Dury, 2014) that even digital technology may not be able to solve (McGauran, 2016). While most Filipinos try to keep older relatives at home, most families in developed countries find it more reasonable and convenient to live separately from them, if not, send them to or contract care to eldercare service facilities (Gibson, Gregory & Pandya, 2003). This separation from family members whom they cared for and lived most of their lives with, and their transfer to care facilities contribute to a sense of isolation in old age (BBC, 2010). Limited mobility due to physical challenges and communication difficulties brought about by aging and illness (Rantakokko, Manty, & Rantanen, 2013) further intensify their sense of isolation. In the age of global migration and economy, many elderly people, especially in the Philippines, find themselves separated
from their children due to economic reasons (Schmalzbauer, 2016). While contemporary
digital technologies help to sustain communication between geographically separated
family members, ailing elderly people are failed by these technologies as they are not able
to provide the physical support needed by the elderly. Studies have shown that most of the
elderly people are averse to contemporary communication tools (Haederle, 2011) that may
be able to alleviate, albeit to a very limited extent, their sense of isolation.

Communication skills development needs of the youth and ageism. The youth
are able to develop their communication skills as they experience more and more
interactions with a variety of people. They also gain communication knowledge from
media, which unfortunately, show very limited fair representations of elderly people
(Aging Watch, 2016) from whom they could potentially learn a lot about interpersonal
relationships. Because the elderly are a relatively a more limited market compared to
younger people, the former have limited visibility in mass media. As younger people live
their lives increasingly depending on media, especially social media, time spent in face-to-
face interactions have diminished among them (Suliveres, 2014), especially with older
populations. This limits the field of experience for most young people, and hence, the
potential for interpersonal communication skills development facilitated by interactions
with more mature members of society. Research results from BayShore HealthCare showed
that at least a quarter of millennials in the US avoid dealing with senior citizens
(Henderson, 2014).

Social integration. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for
Social Policy and Development (2005) defined social integration as “a dynamic and
principled process where all members participate in a dialogue to achieve and maintain
peaceful social relations” (para. 1). Social integration was a major agenda of the World
Summit for Social Development (UN Research Institute for Social Development, 1994) in
the early 1990s. The UN Research Institute for Social Development clarified that social
integration is marred with many different meanings, some of which may be contradictory
or conflicting – as in the case of it being an unwanted imposition of conformity on the one
hand, and a process of improving life chances, on the other. Social integration, being
“greater justice, equality, material well-being, and democratic freedom” (p. 5), could not be
achieved without “dialogue” (the spirit and value of communication that makes the study of
the discipline critically important in the postmodern world).

The need to develop an encounter between two parties that seem to have few
transactions and shared interests is driven by a desire to achieve social integration through
a process of dialogue. Realizing that the elderly people and the youth both constitute
vulnerable populations that are likely to be most affected and rendered helpless by man-made and natural crises despite their wealth of experience and potential, respectively, the authors seek to highlight that both parties are neither voiceless nor powerless to help each other. Hence, their dialogue will be instrumental in facilitating a bottom-up approach to achieving social inclusion, which is necessary for “inclusive growth” – one of the seven cornerstones of the Europe 2020 strategy against poverty and social exclusion (European Commission, n.d.). Thus, social integration in this paper is synonymous to social inclusion (York Institute for Health Research, n.d.).

Conceptual Framework

Studies have shown that the physical challenges and emotional isolation resulting from aging and the elderly person’s digital technology aversion, as mentioned above, create a cycle of weakness among the elderly. Meanwhile, the youth’s physical changes and emotional limitations inherent in a state of inexperience and dependence on digital technology that get in the way of time spent on interpersonal communication with more experienced people also creates a cycle of weakness. These cycles of weakness result in a relational gap between the elderly and the youth. By creating an encounter that addresses the relational gap, the project expects the emergence of social support needed by the elderly and social intelligence needed by the youth that both reinforce the momentum towards future encounters that will further diminish the relational gap, sustain social support for the elderly, and enhance the youth’s social intelligence. This process is represented in the model shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1 Social Integration Model for the Elderly-Youth Project of St. Paul University Manila**
Statement of the Problem

This paper is built upon an attempt to answer the question: “What can be done to facilitate social integration between the elderly of Bagac, Bataan and the communication students of St. Paul University Manila?” To do so, the following specific questions must be addressed first: (1) What experiences of the elderly relate to physical challenges and emotional isolation?; (2) How is digital technology aversion expressed in the lives of the elderly?; (3) What are experiences of youth that relate to physical changes and emotional limitation?; (4) How is digital technology dependence expressed in the lives of the youth?; (5) What form of social support is produced by the encounter between the elderly and the youth?; (6) What kind of social intelligence is desired by the youth after the encounter?

Research Design

The research was designed as a qualitative inquiry that involved an outreach activity (a social encounter) by a dominantly female class in Development Communication, 24 of whom voluntarily participated in a reflection writing activity after their social encounter with the elderly of Bagac, Bataan (a potential beneficiary community of the Mass Communication Program of St. Paul University Manila). The study could not get informants outside of those who participated in the encounter and volunteered to participate in the reflection writing activity. The encounter was an activity designed both for student and elderly benefit. There were 30 elderly participants in the social encounter, all of whom are 60 years old or older, and members of a senior citizen organization in one local government unit.

In the context of the Development Communication course where the students were enrolled during the first semester of the 2016-2017 academic year, the activity was meant to stimulate reflection on the needs and concerns of the elderly, which are a group of people, constituting a development stakeholder, with needs that are addressed only to a limited extent by the government. The students were also tasked to pay special attention to the digital engagements and/or disengagements of the elderly to allow them to learn more about the difficulties and potential of using social media in development-related projects involving senior citizens.

The actual two-hour encounter involved socialization between the elderly and the students and gift-giving (as is usual in many outreach projects in the university). There was no formal and structured interviewing process during the session; there was informal conversation, however, between the students and the elderly that revolved mostly around
their respective personal lives, and their use of mobile phones. It should be noted that the students did not have any special training on dealing with the elderly or were not at all involved in any regular outreach activities with the aging populations prior to the encounter (they were, however, exposed to the benefit program held by the Mass Communication Program a few months before for an elderly cancer patient). They were appropriately guided and oriented, instead, by the author in one of their classes by discussing the results of studies that highlighted the benefits of social interactions and youthful environments and memories to elderly populations’ well-being (Grierson, 2014) and an ongoing dissertation mentored by the author on the elderly living in eldercare facilities managed by religious groups in selected provinces in the country.

The students, prior to the encounter, were tasked with generating the funds (as required in development-driven fund-raising campaigns of non-profit organizations), use the funds to acquire and prepare the gifts to be given, develop the program during the actual encounter, and document the activities from beginning to end. They were given guide questions for reflection a week after the encounter, which included questions regarding the health and digital media concerns of the specific elderly person they spent time with during the encounter, and the students’ learning about their communication skills relevant to dealings with the elderly. The narratives generated by the students during the reflection period were thematically analyzed to arrive at the answers to the specific problem statements of this research.

Results and Discussion

The data below are presented independent of findings of studies done in other places by other researchers. Interpretations were limited to the data generated within the context of this one community alone. This is a qualitative study that did not aim to generalize; instead, it sought to focus on the community under investigation and aimed for depth of understanding of the community and phenomenon at hand. The data requires no validation via findings of other studies in other contexts.

Experiences of the Elderly Related to Physical Challenges and Emotional Isolation

Most of the senior citizens who participated in the encounter were experiencing aging-related health challenges: Diabetes that led to diminishing eyesight and skin itchiness; largely higher (rather than lower) blood pressure; mobility difficulties; back, joint and muscular pains; and poor hearing. Other health problems included common fever, cough, colds, wounds, dizziness, headaches, leg cramps, and specific chronic health
concerns arising from past accidents or traumas such as visual impairment, amnesia or memory loss, urinary tract infection, liver problems, and pneumonia. Some were also dealing with lack of or the effects of long-term medication. This explains why there was so much excitement about possibly getting medical attention, which did not happen due to a scheduling conflict of the doctor who was invited to accompany the project. These health-related concerns are related to communication difficulties because major senses for acquiring, and faculties in processing information during communication are affected, namely, eyesight, hearing, touch, taste, and memory.

At times, their speech is also affected, as is common among those who experience stroke and paralysis. This presents serious challenges to young people who have not encountered people who, unlike them, do not share their language and interests, and more so, well-coordinated and uncompromised communicative abilities. Communication problems are made even more serious for senior citizens as people who are used to their communication preferences and default mechanisms are no longer or rarely ever present to help facilitate communication with non-family members who are not aware of their communication deficiencies, or are similarly burdened by their own communicative failures or inadequacies. Separation from family members who understand them the most and diminishing communication competencies due to health-related issues lead to a greater experience of isolation.

Having to deal with the distance to travel to relatives or family members who have no desire to visit them or welcome them, despite their needy conditions, added to the pain elderly people experience and were brought to the table during the encounter with students of St. Paul University Manila. A few elders in the encounter never had children, and hence, live alone like those whose their partners have passed on ahead of them and/or whose children have moved to other countries (or local places that are difficult to reach physically) for a variety of reasons make social conditions for the elderly even worse than what they already are. Those who continue to work selling food, or are busy with hobbies and service work or advocacies in the community fare better as they do not need to deal with feeling “useless” as was expressed by one senior citizen: “…sometimes I feel that I no longer have use.” This sense of isolation is countered by visits by family members during special occasions or more frequently during weekends. These are moments the elderly treasure, according to one of the students. As the physical domain of their lives are constantly challenged by many health-related issues, physical contact with family members, however limited and constrained, is a source of consolation.
Digital Technology Aversion Expressed in the Lives of the Elderly

The presence and accessibility of digital technologies would help ease the burden of isolation if not for the discomfort and alienation that some of the elderly experience with them. One student said: “Some of them don’t really want to be engaging with new technology.” One of the elderly claimed the cell phone is too heavy and too bright for her comfort. To this, another student explained: “They hesitate to use technology (because they think) that they are not used to it, because they never had that type of gadget before.” This latter “flight” or “avoidance” response draws attention to some of the elderly who avoid situations where they feel more helpless or incapable of doing common things than they already are. Some of the elderly think these technologies are way too complicated. Others prefer to keep life simple and happier – without the gadgets around.

Others are not as threatened by mobile phones, tablets, or computers. Some of the elders are exposed to these gadgets at home or on television. However, they prefer not to be active users. One student explained: “they have cellphones but don’t use it too long because their eyes (get) tired.” One of the elderly participants could not see clearly. Another student claimed that such is the case because they don’t know how to use them or find it too complicated to understand. They are satisfied that their grandchildren or friends can use them on their behalf. If some of them use it, they only do so to receive calls or texts from or to contact their family or very close friends, or to enjoy being photographed by other users. More moderate users among them play games such as Candy Crush, go online to use Facebook or social media to post pictures or connect with family members and friends. They were willing to learn more about it, particularly the touch screen and apps like Snap Chat.

Unlike most young people, the elderly believe that while the gadgets may be useful, they are not that necessary, despite their longing for connection to people who matter to them the most. This could mean that online connections do not count as much as physical transactions made during face-to-face encounters with them. One elderly participant, enthralled by his encounter with one of the students, asked for the latter’s phone number so that he could keep in touch until the next encounter. Another elderly participant was more engaged in the physical social interaction the mobile phone facilitated during the activity. As such, it could be surmised that physical contact is irreplaceable for the elderly despite the wonders that digital technologies can do and to which young people are drawn. Furthermore, the physical contact is likely to make the use of digital technology more interesting for the elderly.
Experiences of Youth Related to Physical Changes and Emotional Limitation

The encounter served some sort of a mirroring experience to the students in that through their communication with the elderly, some relevant aspects of themselves and personal concerns related to physical changes and limitations that they cannot fully grasp just yet on their own and are often off of their personal radar were revealed. The students resonated with the following areas of interest among the elderly: (1) exuberance; (2) nurturance; (3) appreciation; (4) physical well-being; (5) presence; (6) priorities; and (7) independence.

Exuberance had something to do with being able to experience life freely, without worries or hesitation – that “life is not just about solving problems... it is also about... being carefree.” This had a lot to do with loving generously or being able to “do anything in your power to not let the (loved ones) go,” recollected one student. Nurturance pertained to experiences of the elderly that required caring for others like “motherhood” (which was the state of being one student was in) and the youth’s need to respond to the needs of the elderly as a result of their personal encounter. Appreciation surfaces from narratives that underscored the value of talking with the elderly people to show that they really matter, which was what one student experienced with the elderly and her own grandmother. One student recounted what she heard from one senior citizen: “Talking to elderly people is enough because they felt that they really matter.” Some of the elderly also reminded the students to appreciate the effort of their parents in ensuring the latter’s future.

Many students were particularly concerned about the physical well-being of the elderly, especially after they heard them share about their health concerns and difficulties. Health is one of the last things that concerns students because the youth are not at the age that is particularly burdened by the impacts of aging on the human body. However, the interaction encouraged the students to remind the elderly about maintaining good health, which is something a mother would likely do to her child. While physical well-being here overlaps with nurturance and appreciation, it deserves to be seen separately as this is a concern that often evades young people. It is a specific area that only an encounter with the elderly would underscore, as this study revealed.

Presence was highlighted when a student shared the importance of being completely present while in conversation with the elderly so that there could be more understanding, engagement, and continuous verbal and physical communication. The student refers to this as the “apo (grandchild)-vibe” which, if analyzed deeply, could mean being quietly present to a grandparent. Some students were also reminded by the elderly regarding setting their priorities right, particularly, focusing on self-love and self-empowerment through
education that calls for having self-worth outside of any external validation or support such as that love coming from a husband or lover. Being able to pursue one’s dreams and happiness freely is what constitutes self-determination, which can only be achieved by one’s practice of self-love, self-empowerment, and self-discipline.

**Digital Technology Dependence in the Lives of the Youth**

While students were tasked with documenting the encounter using cameras, they also used their mobile phones as a way to go online, as was instructed, when the opportunity to engage the elderly in social media arose. The “selfie” took the center stage via their mobile phone cameras or the Snap Chat app. Facebook was also the social media of choice by default. Some students were also using texting as a tool to engage the elderly in future communications. Some students “explained (to the elderly) what the Internet can do... and what Facebook and Skype were,” that digital technology had “good effects” and are made for an easier and convenient way of communication. However, one particular encounter revealed that while students were engaged full throttle in digital technology, some of them think its absence may have its benefits. One student recalled:

...*One of the topics we’ve talked about is technology. The moment I mentioned about it, she immediately said that “My child, life was much more organized and pleasurable when they were not yet so popular.” I was shy to continue the topic because I agree with her statement...*

The student was quick to qualify that “the way people use it (a gadget)” was what made it problematic. This specific episode in the encounter revealed that students are able to detach themselves from their own dependence and see digital technologies for what they truly are, mere tools used for many human intentions, both appropriate and otherwise. However, it remains to be seen whether such a clear understanding of digital technology actually translates to proper use among the youth.

**Ideations of Social Support Produced by the Encounter Between the Elderly and the Youth**

After the encounter, the author was informed by the president of the senior citizens’ association that she found it quite surprising that the elderly stayed the whole time during the activity. She revealed that, normally, the elderly are quick to leave once the gifts or forms of assistance were given to them by the organizers. She noted that the program (social encounter) helped and the interaction with the students proved to be engaging for the elderly. The way in which the program was designed allowed for the elderly to warm up to the students, tell their stories, and respond to the students’ reactions. It also required
the students to listen well to the stories told to them as a way to provide immediate social support that are hardly present on a daily basis in their lives.

In return, the students found themselves enriched by the wisdom and the personal advice the elderly shared with them individually – hence, the students found social support as well. One student wrote:

*I wish I could still (go) back to Bagac, Bataan. I really miss grandmother Y... it’s like I’ve been attached to her in just a short time. I thank everyone who made this encounter possible, I thank her for making me feel loved as if I was her own granddaughter. I feel very lucky that I met her.*

Many students were able to show support to the elderly by drawing from their personal relationships with their grandparents – thus, from existing emotional capital. This is shown by a student’s recollection: “I talk to them like I am their granddaughter.” The attention the students gave was enough for the elderly to share life stories that resulted to the latter’s sense of being appreciated for their individual experiences.

The encounter was also designed to reveal specific needs of the elderly to which the students can respond to appropriately in future activities. As such, it was developed in such a way that students were able to draw from the information given to them by the elderly potential support structures that could be of more benefit to them. To this, many students thought about providing (1) health-related services, such as a medical mission; (2) socialization events that can help in “uplifting their spirits (which is) as important as their health”; (3) social media orientation; (4) art activities; (5) home visits; (6) family-bonding opportunities (which may involve use of communication technologies); (6) seminars on wellness and nutrition; (7) energizing and exercise-oriented activities; and (8) fundraising events to help them build their own community center where they are free to engage in life-giving activities.

As a creative exercise for students, it is notable that they saw many possibilities in the horizon that are worth considering in future plans. Many of these ideas require longer planning, greater resources, manpower, and detailed organizing work that translate to more than two hours of actual encounter with the elderly. Proposals to go beyond the initial two hours or so of face-to-face social encounter actually reflect the desire of the students and the elderly to spend more time with each other. Many of the students expressed willingness to go back to Bagac, Bataan to continue the initial contact that they have forged. This indicates to a large extent that the encounter stimulated a need to continually show support to the elderly, and, hence, a momentum towards greater and
long-term support that is likely to reduce the relational gap between the students and the elderly.

Social Intelligence Desired by the Youth after the Encounter

As the students were able to think about their communication skills and their possible areas for growth in this reflexive exercise, it is expected to not only contribute to their social intelligence, but also to their self-awareness, and desire for more effective communication fueled by sensitivity to another human being. Areas for growth informed by this were identified as sources of data that can inform future interventions towards student improvement in the program, and empowering encounters with the elderly. The areas of growth towards greater social intelligence were related to: (1) warmth and enthusiasm; (2) mutual appreciation; (3) personality development; (4) listening; (5) art of questioning; (6) public speaking; (7) self-presentation; (8) voice modulation; (9) openness; (10) feedback-giving; (11) art of conversation; (12) interpersonal communication skills; (13) intercultural communication; (14) counseling; (15) effective use of facial expressions; and (16) self-expression.

Warmth and enthusiasm during communication was expressed in the context of wanting to elicit positive response during the conversation. The student said, “I should be more energetic and warm because I observe that they behave according to how you treat them.”

Warmth and appreciation are linked to mutual appreciation which can be achieved by attempting to “(g)ive them importance and value them and they will return more than what you’ve given.” This could be a challenge to students who tend to be shy and less competent in conversations. Thus, one shy student said: “I need to reduce my shyness to be more interactive and able to ask questions.” This can be helped with personality development. Introverts and young people who live alone tend to have difficulty going outside of their comfort zone in a social environment. One student confessed, “I think the reason why I also couldn’t (interact well) with the elderly is because I was afraid of approaching them since I’ve never really talked to many elderly persons before, because I live alone.”

Listening is also a critical area in that not only are the elderly no longer as physiologically equipped to perform communicative tasks as effectively as they were in their youth, the young students tend to have minimal exposure and experience with older people nowadays. Hence, there are limited opportunities to listen to the elderly people among young people. One student who enjoyed listening remarked: “Listening to them a lot is a skill I actually liked.” This is very much connected to the art of questioning as the
student narrated: “Asking them a lot of questions would make them answer.” Another student who found herself lacking in this area admitted:

“I would develop my listening skills. I will (be able to) listen to understand and not to judge nor condemn them. I will (be able to) empathize with their situation before I take any action or say anything about their state.”

Responding to what the elderly share with as much warmth and enthusiasm as possible requires being able to speak well or effectively. Public speaking, then, would empower a student in “saying the words… (that) they can understand and hear properly.” Public speaking goes hand in hand with self-presentation as self-presentation makes a speaker more acceptable to an audience or listener in a non-verbal way. This was highlighted by a student who recognized the cultural gap that translated into differing styles of self-presentation. She said: “During their time, they were very conservative unlike today that we are influenced by other countries and are somewhat liberated, not just in the type of clothes but also with the way we speak and our custom’s way of being respectful.” Verbal communication is further enhanced by the quality of the voice of a speaker. Voice modulation or the need for it was underscored by a student who remarked that “the tone of voice must be lively and approachable.” Her peer also shared: “I think I should also develop a loud and clear voice so that we can understand each other well.”

Openness is also key, as listening will not be possible without it. A student admitted: “I need to be more open.” Another student remembered a lecture of the author that changed her approach to dealing with the elderly. She said:

“Curiosity towards the subject and a lot of background would be helpful in communicating with the elderly. I knew nothing about grandparents in general but was reminded of the effective study mentioned by Dr. Bantugan. Interest towards their past and youth seemed to brighten them up, rather than treating them with care and reminding of how they should be at their age.”

Feedback-giving is also essential because it is necessary to “keep up conversation with them.” Another student reiterated this when she said, “I need to develop (the skill in) giving feedback. I am a good listener but giving feedback after each statement is difficult. When I do not reply, the conversation gets dull and boring. Soon I will get tired and just end the whole conversation.” Being alert during the conversation will make one able to think quickly and “ask questions to entertain them and to keep up conversation with them.” Hence, the art of conversation is tied to feedback-giving. The art of conversation, however, is a more prominent concern of verbally-challenged students. One such student said: “I don’t
know how to start the conversation and to keep it maintained and going.” A more verbally equipped student narrated how she managed to keep the conversation running:

“I approached grandmother X with a simple “Hello!” and “How are you?” first. I was trying to gain her comfortableness so she would be able to express herself easily. I asked her about the weather, the beach and had a few chitchats before she told her story to me voluntarily. In our conversation, I made sure that I do not ask her sensitive questions... also, to always reply with a smile.

A student who was used to dealing with the elderly also felt inadequate in her conversation at some point. She confided: “Although I’m very used to talk to the elderly people, sometimes I run out of things to say.”

Hence, it is possible to enable verbally challenged students with the help of verbally enabled ones by increasing their interactions, explaining the dynamics of the interactions between them, and helping them accept inadequacies that are not necessarily failures. Another approach is allowing the former to observe the latter in a conversation episode with an elderly person. This will prepare them more for future encounters with the elderly, an idea which was echoed by a response from one student who said: “I think I should try to be more prepared next time on topics/ways on how we’ll continue on our conversations aside from their personal stories.”

Interpersonal communication also surfaced as an area worth looking at. While most young people deal with other people on a daily basis, some are more comfortable with it than others. Some people are easier to interact with than others. It should be noted that some students feel extremely challenged in particular interpersonal communication episodes as one student narrated: “I was personally challenged on how I’ll start to approach them.” It should be noted that this student was also challenged in the art of conversation. That said, it is proper to recognize that even at the college level students feel incompetent in interpersonal communication with people they do not know just yet. (This is data that should be taken seriously and addressed by the Mass Communication Program). Alongside this challenge is intercultural communication, which places greater demands on students who are interpersonally challenged, as this adds more variables in the interpersonal communication process. Dealing with the elderly is definitely an intercultural and not merely interpersonal communication task. For those who have limited encounters with the elderly outside of this activity, it helped present an opportunity to grow in that area. One student confided:

“...Having a little chitchat with some of them I learned their life and challenges in life. There this one lola (grandmother) that I talked with, Lola
Perlita, whom we helped within one of our courses last semester but recently passed away because of cancer.”

At some point during the encounter, students felt moved to share words of advice or inspiration to console an elderly person. While significantly inexperienced compared to the elderly, the encounter provided an opportunity for students to counsel. Thus, counseling is also an area that should be looked into for preparation of students for these kinds of activities. One student said:

“I was shocked that time and she made me cry... I told her “Grandma, do not think that way... that is how life is... we will all grow old.” After that she kept holding my hand and I can’t help but remember my grandmother who’s suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. I also shared my story and also my grandmother’s story and she gave me pieces of advice, as well.”

In the absence of words, effective use of facial expressions and non-verbal forms of communication were considered important. Not many students are taught this form of communication in their courses and may draw guidance only from personal experience. One student said:

“‘I talked to them with encouraging smile and (listened well) for them to feel that they were heard and feel that they were special. I interact more with them for them to feel that we are really happy to be with them.”

Finally, self-expression, which is a challenge somewhat connected to being shy must be noted in that some students feel anxiety responding more personally to the stories told to them. One student confided that she felt she needs to be more open, responsive and spontaneous about her reactions. This comes from a difficulty to express one’s self to others especially in situations that elicit tears or feelings of pity. Because responses to situations are often socially constructed, the difficulty in self-expression arises from not knowing whether one’s self-expression is allowed within an unfamiliar culture. The youth are especially prone to social acceptance anxieties, which explain the difficulty in self-expression of more socially sensitive youths in an intercultural context.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study found that a social encounter between the youth and the elderly contribute to a deepening of the former’s self-knowledge, particularly on their communication growth
areas, and knowledge of the elderly, especially in relation to their social needs. The findings, based on experiences, perceptions, and attitudes between the youth and the elderly, reveal that opinions by a select group of people can be a source of personal growth and can encourage social responsibility to the more vulnerable members of society, and in the case of this study, to those who are left in geographically isolated areas and are experiencing social isolation based on physiological human development. Opinion, founded on genuine and disinterested social encounters, can be made a source of information on which educational development and innovation can be based. At a time when new communication technologies are continually widening the gap between the youth and the elderly, and the social spaces where these two groups are able to interact are dwindling, social encounters between them must be created, and such opportune times must provide the answer to minimizing generation and communication gaps that get in the way of genuine human solidarity.

To facilitate greater social integration between the elderly of Bagac, Bataan and the communication students of St. Paul University Manila, the university and the Mass Communication program should address the health issues and digital aversion issues that intensify the sense of isolation that the elderly experience on a daily basis via activities that address not only health concerns but social needs of the elderly. This can be done by enhancing the communication skills of the communication students in the areas of (1) warmth and enthusiasm; (2) mutual appreciation; (3) personality development; (4) listening; (5) art of questioning; (6) public speaking; (7) self-presentation; (8) voice modulation; (9) openness; (10) feedback-giving; (11) art of conversation; (12) interpersonal communication skills; (13) intercultural communication; (14) counseling; (15) effective use of facial expressions; and (16) self-expression. By helping the elderly, the program is likely to help its own students, especially in their journey to becoming more integrated persons at the service of society and the Church.

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References


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