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The Socrates Café: Community Philosophy as an empowering tool in a day care centre for older people

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Abstract

The Socrates café at 'Cuan' day centre is a nonformal educational initiative. The café is loosely based on the Socratic method of seeking the truth through questioning and dialogue. The participants include people who attend the day centre, staff and students on placement. The Socrates café aims to treat older people as 'elders', providing intellectual challenge and opportunity for learning. Based on participant observation and interviews with participants and organisers, the paper will examine the purposes, benefits and use of community philosophy as an empowering tool.

Social justice demands that we seek to create the conditions for people to flourish. Yet, our elder care services often treat older people as passive and incapable. Services for older people have traditionally adopted a care and health focus and there has been little emphasis on adult learning especially for people in the 'fourth' age. The findings suggest that the café provides an important forum for learning in a convivial environment with positive impacts for participants and benefits for the organisation itself. The café succeeded in integrating and linking participants with wider communities and promoting further learning opportunities. Located at the intersection of social care work and adult education, the paper argues that the Socrates café helps the participants to be self-advocates and to create the conditions for their own social inclusion. Drawing on the experiences of participants at the Socrates café the paper considers the potential of Community Philosophy to promote greater social engagement in an elder care setting.

Keywords

Community Philosophy; Socrates café; day centre for older people; adult education; nonformal learning; social pedagogy; social engagement

Introduction

The Socrates café at Cuan day care centre¹ in a north Dublin suburb is a forum where older people who attend the day centre meet and discuss philosophical questions as they apply to the everyday lives of themselves and others. The introduction of Community Philosophy (CP) to participants at the day centre is a nonformal educational initiative designed to encourage and

enable people to talk to and listen to each other and enter into dialogue about important questions of life. Initially set up as a breakfast club idea by a member of the staff in December 2011, it was developed as a philosophical discussion group loosely based on the Socratic Method by the voluntary Chairperson of the Board of Management who acts as facilitator. In addition to his interest in philosophy the facilitator has a professional background in mediation and advocacy work. The manager of Cuan centre has supported the development of the Socrates café since the beginning and is herself an active participant. The Socrates café has continued to meet on a set morning once every week for 2 hours. The participants are mainly older adults who attend the day care centre, many of whom live in the adjoining sheltered housing complex. The number of participants varies from approximately 10 to 16. There is a core group who attend every week and participants who attend periodically including students on placementⁱⁱ and visitors.

The Socrates café seeks to open up learning to people in the ‘third’ and ‘fourth’ ages from a variety of backgrounds and with varying capabilities and disabilities. It offers a more democratic and collaborative approach to learning, where traditional boundaries and roles in teaching and learning are more loose, and where service users and staff engage in intellectual dialogue in an open, friendly and non-hierarchical way. Establishing the Socrates café in the day centre was one of a number of initiatives designed to provide more purposive activities for the day centre users. The extent to which this CP initiative is an empowering tool, and its potential in elder care settings is the focus of this paper. The paper is based on a small-scale research study carried out between 2012 and 2013. The methodology involved semi-structured interviews with nine participants as well as participant observation at the café.

The paper begins by locating the idea of Community Philosophy within the broad tradition of nonformal education and explains its development mainly in the United Kingdom (UK). It examines the low levels of participation in education in Ireland, both formal and nonformal, among older people and highlights how older people in the ‘fourth’ age have been excluded from lifelong learning opportunities. The growing recognition of the value of nonformal learning opportunities for older people and the role of community and leisure organisations in facilitating this learning is discussed. The absence of a tradition of social pedagogy in elder care settings in Ireland is noted, and the social pedagogic approach is linked with the idea of well-being as a dynamic process involving the agency of older people. The paper then outlines the methods used in the study and presents findings on the experiences of participants at the Socrates café at Cuan day centre. The findings are discussed in relation to the learning and benefits involved for service users and staff, as well as opportunities provided by the Socrates café to create conditions for people’s own social inclusion.

Literature review

Community Philosophy and social engagement

Community Philosophy continues a tradition of philosophy outside academia and is linked with practical wisdom or ‘phronesis’ (Humphreys, 2015). Community Philosophy clubs as adult education initiatives have grown in popularity especially in the United States (US) since the 1960s and the UK since the 1990s. In the UK, CP is seen as part of the broad lifelong learning movement facilitated by social-media websites (Evans, 2012). The idea of CP is also linked with the practice of community development and a tradition of self-help and practical advice on how to live ethically (Tiffany, 2009). Civic philosophy is related to the idea of democratic

citizenship and the obligations to engage with fellow citizens and others. While civic philosophy is often associated with social action and movements for political and social change, CP tends to focus more on process rather than outcomes. Both approaches bring people together and give them access to practical and potentially transformational philosophy.

The academic research evidence on CP is only emerging and there is little research on philosophy clubs for adults in terms of motivation and benefits.ⁱⁱⁱ Evans who carried out a comprehensive study of philosophy clubs in the UK and the US found that club organisers reported that members mainly use clubs to help them think intelligently about their beliefs and the beliefs of others (Evans, 2012). In the city of York in the UK, ‘The Thinking Village Project’, a demonstration project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, used Community Philosophy to promote positive community relationships by working with different groups of people including young people and older people and dealt with controversial issues such as anti-social behaviour and the societal response (Tiffany, 2009). The project found that CP could be an effective means of engaging people, promoting dialogue across groups and generations and even leading to constructive engagement on controversial and conflictual issues in a locality.

The CP venture called Socrates Cafés was started by Christopher Phillips in 1992 in the US and has grown in popularity, being established in settings such as libraries, public squares, preschools, care centres and prisons. Each Socrates Café adopts a ‘community of inquiry’ approach, is self-run and has a loose, decentralised structure. The idea is to construct a forum that is open to the public, free of charge and takes place under the guidance of a facilitator using the Socratic Method (Evans, 2012). The Socratic Method consists in seeking truth through an ongoing interrogation of life through public discourse (Humphreys, 2015). A strict application of the Socratic Method would be less compromising than the CP approach adopted in Cuan day centre, which seeks to foster reflective capacity and positive social engagement.

Education in later years

The terms lifelong and lifewide education in use since the 1970s reflect the view that everyone should have an opportunity to engage in learning at any time during their lives (UNESCO, 2001). The United Nations (UN) Principles for Older Persons include the right to education, to seek and develop opportunities for service to the community, and to share skills and knowledge (UNHRC, 1991). The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA, 2002) reiterated the right to continued access to education and training (Article 12) and encouraged the utilisation of the social, cultural and educational knowledge and potential of older persons (Objective 41).

There is growing evidence that people continue to learn and develop right throughout their older years (see for example Baltes, 1987; Hertzog *et al.*, 2009; Willis *et al.*, 2006; Cohen, 2006). However, participation levels in formal adult education are very low across Europe, especially for those over 70 years, and there is a paucity of provision for people in the ‘fourth’ age (Formosa, 2014). A review of Ireland’s progress in policy actions to implement the recommendations of MIPAA was conducted (National Review of MIPAA in Ireland, 2011). Data presented in the report on levels of educational participation by older people in Ireland

revealed that in 2008, 1 per cent of those aged 65-74 years and no-one aged 75 years and over, reported receiving any formal education in the previous year. Furthermore, 7 per cent of those aged 65-74 years and 4 per cent of those aged 75 and over had received some nonformal education in the previous year (National Review of MIPAA in Ireland, 2011, p. 20).

The low rates of participation of older people in lifelong learning can be seen as evidence of social exclusion and ageism in our society. Ageist attitudes in society generally and among older people themselves, often depict older people as having diminished capacities for learning (NCAOP, 2005). A survey of the community participation of older adults found that 85 per cent of respondents said they would not be interested in further educational opportunities and many of these added that they were 'too old' for education. Yet, a number also added that they might have been interested at an earlier stage of their lives (Gallagher, 2008, p. 145).

The idea of lifelong learning fits with Laslett's concept of the 'third' age which he argued became established as a settled feature of the social structure during the 1980s (Laslett, 1989). Laslett argued that, following retirement, people may enter into a 'third' age of productive and creative pursuit of interests including intellectual discovery and education as a value in itself (Laslett, 1996). He differentiated the 'third' age from the 'fourth' age which he associated with illness and decline (Laslett, 1989). The 'third' age has been defined for statistical purposes as expected between 50 and 74, while the 'fourth' age refers to 75 years and older. Educational initiatives for older people, for example through Active Retirement groups or The University of the Third Age (U3A) are often geared to those who have had prior educational experience and are associated with more recently retired professionals. It can be argued that Laslett's separation of the 'third' from the 'fourth' age has had the effect of marginalising and stigmatising the 'fourth' age, which is the fastest growing segment of the population, by disassociating it from learning and developmental activities (Gallagher, 2008). While there are various initiatives in elder care and community settings in Ireland to encourage computer literacy among older people (for example Age Action's Getting Started programme and Logon Learn), adult education has largely been absent from elder care settings.

Social pedagogy, nonformal learning and well-being in elder care settings

Studies have stressed that being a 'non-learner' in the sense of not participating in a formal education sense does not preclude learning (Dench & Regan, 2000). Research evidence is accumulating on the benefits of informal and nonformal learning in the lives of older adults. As well as uncovering varying ideas of what constitutes learning, Withnall (2006) found that acquisition of knowledge was far less important than intellectual stimulation and enjoyment in older people's experiences of learning in later life.

Carragher & Golding (2015) summarise the considerable research evidence on the benefits of participation in adult learning for health and well-being. These include increasing social networks of participants, extending social supports when additional needs arise, improving well-being, making people feel valued and encouraging healthier behaviour patterns. Older people prefer to learn what is relevant for them in managing the stage of life they are at, and also what is meaningful for them, utilising their own resources and having autonomy in their learning (Withnall, 2006; MacKean & Abbott-Chapman, 2011).

Peer-based learning brings additional benefits in terms of encouraging leadership and providing opportunities for older people to contribute skills and knowledge (MacKean & Abbott-Chapman, 2011). Their research in Australia found that the range of leisure choices and social activities provided by community based organisations provides opportunities for experiential learning, expands choice and promotes enjoyable peer-interaction. While the terminology of 'learning' was not used by the older participants, they themselves identified learning experiences including learning new skills, growth in confidence, tackling new challenges, choosing activities that one enjoys and sharing knowledge and skills (MacKean & Abbott-Chapman, 2011)

Carragher and Golding examined the impact of community-based Men's Sheds on informal and nonformal learning by older men in Ireland and found that older men were motivated to participate in learning activities through their desire for stimulating and meaningful activities and a need for male peer company and support. Social relationships were important for men's learning and they felt productive, valued and positive about the opportunity to both learn and teach new skills (Carragher & Golding, 2015). It was interesting that many of the men in the study (297 in total) had recently experienced a major life event including unemployment, depression, financial crisis and loss.

The European tradition of social pedagogy which emphasises developmental and educational approaches and has informed social care work particularly with children and young people in Ireland over the last three decades, has not been to the fore in the development of services for older people. Hogstrom, Nilsson & Hallstedt (2013) describe a programme in Sweden where elder-pedagogues were employed to respond to evidence of loneliness among older people and used the tool of conversation in a day centre. Hogstrom *et al.* (2013) highlighted the value to older people of someone being interested in your life and thoughts as it makes you keep track of yourself and forms a basis for opening up your mind to new things.

While voluntary and community groups have sought to normalise and widen opportunities for participation across a range of educational, creative and social arenas, with older people often taking leadership roles in such initiatives, yet, education and learning are not activities explicitly promoted in elder care settings which are seen as essentially care-giving and service-oriented (Gallagher, 2013). Community Philosophy fits well with perspectives on well-being that emphasise the agency of older people as well as the 'work' involved in adapting and responding to life's challenges. By focusing on 'how we can live well today' (Tiffany, 2009), CP can be an empowering type of 'intervention' to counter 'care' cultures that chiefly emphasise measurable 'outcomes' and social/leisure 'activities'. In a UK study on well-being in old age that involved older people themselves as co-researchers, narrative accounts from older people lead the authors to reflect on the 'work' that ageing entails, and the learning that is necessary to be well enough at different stages of older age (Ward, Barnes & Gahagan, 2012).

Methods

The paper explores the benefits of the Socrates café in Cuan centre, a community-based day centre for older people in a suburb of Dublin. We wished to investigate how a conversational forum can contribute to learning and promote social engagement of older adults. We explored

this question from the perspectives of both service users and staff. Specifically, the paper aims to examine how the Socrates café operates at Cuan day centre, to explore the experiences of members in relation to their participation, and to consider the extent to which the Socrates café promotes advocacy for the service users.

The author took part in the Socrates café as a participant observer and recorded the conversations by contemporaneous notes at each session over a period of one year from February 2012 to February 2013. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with six of the older participants, four women and two men who are service users of Cuan day centre and all resident in the adjoining complex. In addition, the three organisers were interviewed: the female manager of the day centre, a female staff member who had the original idea for a breakfast club, and the male facilitator of the Socrates café. The interviews took place in May and June 2012 and were conducted in either the interviewee's home or in the day centre. Each interview lasted from 20 minutes to 60 minutes and was audio recorded. Ethical approval for the research study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee, DIT. Informed consent was obtained from the interviewees, a summary of the findings was presented to members of the café and the participants were asked for their permission to quote them directly or refer to their experiences.

The questions discussed focused on participants' understanding of the purpose of the Socrates café, perceived benefits and views on the initiative. The organisers were additionally asked about their reasons for setting up the Socrates café and their views on the elements that appeared to make it work well. The service users are not individually identified and are referred to as 'the participants' while the facilitator and manager are identified by their roles.

The interviews were analysed through thematic analysis of categories within the data based on the main topics covered in the interviews and additional themes identified. Conceptual development of categories occurred through integration of interview data with added insights from transcripts of discussions at the café. Themes were synthesised, compared and contrasted; differences in views and emphases were noted among the participants and between the participants and staff. Excerpts of dialogue from transcripts of the conversations are used to give some contextual background and a brief ethnographic account of the café. The transcripts were selected to illustrate the following: the approaches of the facilitator in eliciting responses and self-reflection, the degree of participation by members, the open-ended flow of the conversation and how ethical positions became explicit.

A brief summary of the findings of the interviews was presented at a meeting of the café and the participants reported being happy with their recorded views. It must be acknowledged that the participants interviewed were participants who came regularly and who by their attendance clearly found some value in the café. We have not heard the views of participants who may have attended once or twice only and decided it was not for them. A further limitation relates to the role of the researcher as both participant at the café and interviewer/observer. While the researcher sought to minimise the possibility of bias by providing opportunity for the interviewees to be critical, nonetheless, the researcher's own interest in and participation in the group indicates that she is not a completely 'dispassionate' observer.

Findings

Participants' understanding of the purpose and benefits of the Socrates café

All the participants interviewed shared common ideas about what the café was about; these were essentially to talk, to listen and to get to know people better. Participants spoke about how the café brings people together to interact, have stimulating conversation and come to know and understand other people better. While those living in the sheltered housing were neighbours, most of them did not know each other prior to meeting in the café. Participants stated that a range of topics were dealt with and this breadth was appreciated. One participant saw the variety of topics as 'balanced'. Another participant stated: 'The interesting thing to me is where a discussion will lead, how it will spawn another discussion'. Participants highlighted that deeper questions were explored: 'The rights and wrongs and the spiritual side'; 'religion and meaning of life'. Participants considered that there were 'no right and wrong answers'. Participants said they found all the topics interesting, and all said that they had no inhibitions in expressing themselves in the café. However, one person would like more of an international and political focus and would like participants to be more 'critical' and less 'insular' in their comments.

The way the café works is that a question is posed, one person leads the discussion and dialogue commences with iterations and refinements until the group find the answer together or more commonly agree that there is no answer. The initial question is usually from the facilitator but anyone can pose a question or a related question. Examples of the more challenging questions posed included: 'What is goodness?', 'Is there goodness in everyone?', 'Can you be good without God?', 'Is happiness a choice?', 'Can you be happy on your own?'

The following is an excerpt from a conversation (5th March 2012) that illustrates how things are discussed as well as what is discussed:

Facilitator: 'Is money the root of all evil?'

B: 'Yes, some people think it can buy happiness'.

C: 'It's a misquotation, it's the love of money that is evil'.

Facilitator: 'Can anyone suggest they don't love money?'

F and C: 'Just what you need'.

T: 'It's evil when you put money before the good of people'.

H: 'When you put power before people - power is a mighty thing'.

T: 'You can buy things with power'.

M: 'If we are greedy about it then it's the root of all evil. You need a certain amount to live but over and above that...'

L: 'When people put money first it's bad'.

T: 'Or damage people in the acquisition of money...People have a right to their little place'.

An introductory question such as: ‘What went right for you during the week?’ is used to get the conversation going. Responses included sharing of good and bad experiences, news of family members, trips away, a mixture of routine and unexpected events. A frequent response was: ‘Well, nothing bad happened’ or ‘Just the usual’ which was often regarded as positive. Happenings in the community provided opportunity to reflect on the human condition: the untimely death of a young person known to some of the participants led to deeper discussion on why a young person may die while a frail older person in poor health can have a prolonged life – the perennial problem of suffering. All the participants said it was good that the staff were involved, one person describing it as both ‘important and necessary’. The participants believed the staff would get to know the service users better and some added that the service users would get to know the staff better.

Perspectives of Facilitator and Manager

While the **facilitator** uses the Socratic Method of questioning, he does so in a gentle way; he also draws on an eclectic range of philosophical perspectives to promote reflection and discussion, including virtue ethics and writings/exercises on resilience. His approach is that everybody gets a turn to speak and the conversation can move in different directions. The manager and service users appreciated this: ‘I think [the format] is loose enough and yet it’s structured enough’ (Manager); ‘It might be something that you think would be nothing of interest to Socrates but ...we all get talking about it’ (Participant). The facilitator said that he deliberately does not bring up sensitive topics which might elicit painful memories of difficult experiences. Yet, people sometimes spoke voluntarily about difficult past events and the facilitator ensured that the person was okay afterwards. He said he is careful that the discussion should not deliberately set out to undermine people’s deeply held convictions such as religious beliefs. In this regard he was not strictly following the Socratic Method since Socrates deliberately challenged people’s assumptions.

The **manager** said the café was designed to ‘stimulate them [residents and day centres users] to think more deeply about themselves and how they could improve their lives’ and in developing the café the organisers wished to ‘build in a bit of training’. The need for structure and leadership was emphasised by the manager; otherwise, she believed, ‘Nobody would be listening’. The manager stated that having a mixed age group [which occurs when students and other ‘visitors’ participate] and having people from different backgrounds contributes positively to the café. An important aspect of the café from the manager’s perspective is sharing information about local issues and opportunities for social engagement. The manager conveys information from the Gardai (police) about personal security, new amenities in the area, social events and opportunities for short courses. The manager spoke about how the café benefits her both personally and in her role:

I just see it as a supportive one I suppose. I go there because, well I enjoy it I have to say, and for me it gives me a new insight into the elderly. I can get ideas of what their needs might be where I could maybe plan something separate to that that might suit them. You have a chance to listen to what they’re saying and what they’re not saying, sometimes what’s behind their words, and it can give me ideas on maybe what I could be doing for them ... But, I was thinking that it also has broadened my own mind. I love sitting in there and having opinions and listening to other people’s opinions’ (Manager).

Social benefits and enjoyment

All the participants stated that the café was worthwhile and they all looked forward to coming. Social interaction and stimulation were the main benefits expressed: 'It gets me out of the house'; 'it brings people out of themselves'. Many participants referred to the fact that most residents in Cuan live alone and lack company: 'When I leave the meetings on Tuesday you don't see anyone unless in the day centre'. Many of the participants said they enjoyed the fun, the banter and the spontaneity. Humour was evident in every meeting. For example one person was speaking about having bought a lounge chair for her garden and another responded: 'Have you a bell for ringing for your cocktails!' A participant said: 'I thought it would be good for us, you know, wake us up a bit'. Another said it gives her 'food for thought' and 'brings us down to earth'. Many said they think about the issues that came up the previous Tuesday: 'I pick over things'; 'I mull over it'. The stimulation was said to include 'social, mental and emotional' aspects. Other comments were: 'It probably has given me a deeper understanding of issues than I would have had before' and 'It has broadened my mind'.

The discussion below from the Socrates café provides some insight in to the values that people live by. It also illustrates how the facilitator encourages people to think more deeply about what they mean by certain constructs such as being 'Christian' or 'good' or 'religious'.

Facilitator: 'What's the point of New Year resolutions? Do you make New Year resolutions?'

M: 'Giving up my walking stick'.

C: 'I used to make them but it's a waste of time'.

Facilitator: 'Where does the desire come from to be a new person?'

C: 'Self-criticism'.

F: 'Anyway, I'm not going to confession to you!' [said with humour]

Facilitator: 'Do you not set goals for yourself?'

C: 'One day at a time'.

Facilitator: 'Is that not a goal?'

M: 'After P. [named a resident who died tragically], one day at a time'.

V: 'We did all that, I'm taking it easy now'.

A: 'More patience'.

M (student) 'Two resolutions - to run 2 marathons and get my driving test'.

Facilitator: 'Improving as a person implies that there's a standard by which we live our lives'.

F: 'That's subjective. But you can set standards'.

Facilitator: 'What's a good person?'

M: 'A Christian'.

Facilitator: 'You could be a good person and be a Muslim or non-religious'.

M: 'Helping, helping others when they need it. You may not like that person'.

Facilitator: ‘Someone said you can love a person without liking them’.

A: ‘Help people out’.

G: ‘An ounce of help is better than a ton of pity’.

(Excerpt from Socrates café 8th January 2013)

Encouraging a narrative approach provided opportunities for people to talk about the interesting things they had done at earlier stages of their lives in relation to career or voluntary work. One participant with a passion for ships was encouraged to return to the theme being discussed by the facilitator asking him about religion and spirituality aboard ship and his role as captain. His response was: ‘It’s up to the captain. There were 7 different nationalities and 7 different religions. Every Sunday in port in Ireland a priest came on board and blessed the ship. In the Netherlands we got the Dutch service. ... I read excerpts from a book. Told them to stay away from the bad girls ... the Captain was the one who had to inject them if any of them had problems. You had to be a captain, father, mother, doctor, spiritual adviser... we didn’t get paid enough for it...’ (Participant). In addition to providing insight into his former life, a response like this could provide much scope for further discussion.

One person spoke about the difficulties of having had a stroke and being dependant while another person gave insight into living with a sensory disability. Support and empathy were evident in the responses made when people shared difficult experiences from earlier phases of their lives. When a participant spoke about her sadness caused by a series of bereavements and being reared by relatives following the early death of a parent, another participant responded: ‘They obviously gave you a lot of love’. This happened in a spontaneous way and such disclosures were not deliberately sought.

Further learning opportunities arose through the Socrates café^{iv} and it appeared that the café had provided an impetus for the organisers to seek further learning opportunities for the day centre users. The facilitator and manager saw the café as part of the culture of Cuan which they defined as the fundamental value of ‘respect for personhood’.^v They hoped that the café would contribute to their ongoing work to give expression to the ethos of Cuan, to ensure its sustainability into the future and to set standards for other services. It was interesting, therefore, that when the service users were asked how the café fitted in with other aspects of Cuan centre, most of them believed it was qualitatively different to other activities there: ‘It’s not like anything else that happens, I suppose, because the things that I would be aware of would mostly be parties or sing-songs or entertainment or quizzes, or maybe a computer course from time to time or art projects that happen... So it’s quite different from all of those things’. A number of the participants said that some of the other activities did not appeal to them personally, but they often supported social events in recognition of the efforts made by staff. One of the participants said that the ‘café makes community’, and that while many never participate in the various social activities and events, they recognised that they are designed to encourage interaction with other people.

Learning, social engagement and well-being

The interviews and observations outlined above suggest that the Socrates café provided an important forum for learning in a convivial environment with positive impacts for participants and benefits for Cuan day centre itself. Participants at the café who include people with a

sensory disability, wheelchair users and people with a degree of dementia, were able to express themselves, to show their personality and tell about their lives. The authors of the Swedish study on the use of elder-pedagogues argue that purposeful activity and meaningful conversation are the tools of the social pedagogue (Hogstrom *et al.* 2013). However, they also suggest that it is equally important that older people are encouraged to talk to each other. Participants at the café learned to be more understanding and tolerant of one another. Reflexivity was encouraged in relation to attitudes and behaviours towards older people generally, changing and alternative values and norms in Irish society and the ethical markers that guided their own lives.

The café provided an impetus for other learning initiatives in the day centre. The organisers started a singing class prompted by the awareness of unrecognised musical talent among the group and lack of outlet for their creativity. The Cuan choral group was formed which performed a Christmas recital at the centre with members of the café performing solo parts. While such initiatives were very positive, the manager also spoke about the reality where increasing numbers of service users have disabilities and frailties that make participation more challenging. She on occasion gently exhorted the participants to be more proactive by taking part in the social activities available and by organising outings for themselves such as a trip to the cinema. She said that the Cuan bus was available to them in the evenings. She suggested that it was important to be open to doing things: ‘Very often you get into bad habits I think openness to new things, tolerance and laughter is important’ (Manager speaking at café). There appeared to be limits to what the participants could organise themselves, however, and to the possibility of generating sufficient interest among residents in the complex; subsequent efforts by a couple of residents to organise outings were not entirely successful. Many of the residents have disabilities, many prefer to do their ‘own thing’ and most residents choose not to attend any of the activities at the centre. Yet, it was noteworthy that the participants frequently explicitly affirmed the work done by the management and staff at Cuan. In the course of a discussion one participant, addressing the staff, said: ‘We know you are there...thank you’.

The findings suggest that Community Philosophy adds an important dimension of lifelong learning to the more traditional ‘leisure/recreational’ programmes in elder care settings and this can make a qualitative difference in participants’ lives. The Socrates café at Cuan centre was more than a vehicle for intellectual discussion; it was also used to generate interest in and provide opportunities for wider social engagement in the community. Thus, it fostered the development of talents and enabled the pursuit of interests. This was facilitated by the day centre itself being embedded in the community and having cultivated a wide range of resources of civil society including educational, cultural and volunteering social capital. The study also highlights the importance of a nonformal educational initiative like the Socrates café being embedded in a leadership and organisational culture that is open to learning and change.

The idea that older people, regardless of age or infirmity, should have opportunities for meaningful interaction and continuous development and learning demands that services be more innovative (Gallagher, 2013; O’Shea, 2006). The challenge of developing and sustaining such initiatives means drawing on resources of services users themselves, as well as staff and community. The highest standards in elder care settings are found where people are valued for who they are and have opportunities to flourish. The hallmark of excellence in elder care

settings is having multidimensional relationships of mutual regard, with staff, service users and others contributing to a culture of tolerance, openness and learning (Gallagher & Edmondson, 2015). The Socrates café is an example of collaborative peer-learning, leading to personal growth, social engagement and non-hierarchical participation.

Conclusion

The Socrates café at Cuan day care centre can be located within the broad traditions of Community Philosophy and social pedagogy. Experiential and peer-learning ensured that the learning was relevant and seen in terms of participation rather than acquisition (Withnall, 2006; MacKean & Abbott-Chapman, 2011). The participants and organisers saw the purpose and benefits of the café in similar terms. Participants emphasised intellectual stimulation, opportunity for reflection, social interaction, social recognition and affirmation. The organisers believed the café promoted the ethos of Cuan in terms of respect and social engagement. While there were similar benefits to those reported by Evans (2012), the Socrates café at Cuan centre appeared to impact directly on social practices in the centre by facilitating further social participation and breaking down ‘us’ and ‘them’ distinctions between staff and service users, and older people and other age and social groups.

The spin-off social activities documented and the ‘openness’ and willingness of all participants to share opinions and experiences, suggest that the café succeeded in integrating and linking participants with wider communities and promoting more equal relationships with staff. While the organisers explicitly promote a ‘positive outlook’, the grounding of the café in Socratic and open questioning ensures that there is room left for people to dispute, disagree, and make up their own minds. Furthermore, the use of narrative as a medium for meaningful conversation woven throughout every meeting ensured that the conversations were grounded and authentic.

A key aspect of the ‘success’ of the Café appears to be that it is used as an enabling tool to foster genuine, open dialogue, to encourage social engagement and empower the participants to be critical about a range of issues including giving their views on programmes in the centre itself. The value of nonformal learning using the tool of Community Philosophy can help to counter care cultures that promote passivity and dependency in elder care settings. Thus, learning and dialogue helped to create the conditions for the participants’ own social inclusion. The Socrates café adds value to the work of Cuan day centre as both a care-giving and a learning organisation.

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Notes

- i. Cuan centre is a fictitious name. The day care centre in question is a purpose-built centre in the grounds of a local-authority sheltered-housing complex. The centre provides integrated social and health care five

- days a week with an emphasis on a social model of care. It caters for people from the sheltered housing complex and the surrounding community; attendance varies from some fifty to eighty people every day.
- ii. Students on placement include third level social care students and second level Transition Year students.
 - iii. Since CP takes place in pockets of civil society and there are many varying philosophical approaches including 'pure' open philosophical inquiry, self-help groups and ethical groups (Evans, 2012) our knowledge is selective and partial.
 - iv. Participants were invited to be part of a social history project in the locality. A choral group was formed which gave a creative outlet for music talent, knowledge of which emerged during the course of the café meetings. Other activities organised included conducting a session of the Socrates café in a pub as part of a community festival, taking part in a conference and visiting a local park and having their photograph taken beside a statue of Socrates.
 - v. The focus of the Socrates café lies in treating the service users of the Centre as "Elders" of their community, honouring their wisdom as graduates of the 'University of Life', thereby enabling them to flourish and develop as unique human beings, living to full potential (personal communication, facilitator, Cuan day Centre)

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