FROM "PARALYSING MYTHS" [i] TO CURRICULUM EXPANSION: boundaries, spaces and territories and the place of new technologies

ABSTRACT

The use of digital tools within youth work contexts contributes to improved outcomes for young people such as increased communication, information-sharing, conversation and discussion, creativity, campaigning, networking, participation and agency, as well as promoting digital literacy at a number of levels. Online "social networks are ... becoming a tool for connecting people, hosting conversation and social interaction, and supporting collaboration" (Davies and Ali, 2009 : 2) and should surely be an extension of what the youth worker already does on a face-to-face level?

This paper will explore whether youth workers should seek to be included in the online spaces that young people inhabit, where the boundaries should be, and whether current moral panics focused towards new technologies that are oriented towards "violence, stereotyped, commercially exploitive or pornographic content and about the reinforcement of individualistic, lazy, prejudiced, uncritical or aggressive activities" (Livingstone, 2002, 2005: 5), are a stimulus for avoidance or action.

INTRODUCTION

Am I bothered? Why youth workers perhaps should be…

In previous work, I have drawn parallels between the digital 'habitus' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) of young people and UK youth work practice. Reflecting English youth work priorities (National Youth Agency, 2010), and rooted within the paradigms of informal education and experiential learning, are the principles of empowerment, equality, participation and voluntary engagement, which will feature throughout this paper. Embedded in a process-based perspective, informal education is 'facilitated' through conversation and discussion (Smith, 1995, 2005), however these are often 'mediated' (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978) by the use of tools which form a key part of the informal learning process. Informal education can take place in any location or context, which includes digital and online environments.

Despite a current contraction in services for young people in the UK, there is a still a belief in the need to foster learning beyond that which is considered academic, to give young people transferable and 'soft' skills that are still applicable to the workplace (Smith, 2002, 2009), and in today's context, there is the element of digital literacy to consider:

> "Digital technology offers new ways of addressing the challenges faced by young people by enabling new forms of collaboration; facilitating new communities of support and challenge, and affording new ways of accessing information and resources." (Davies et al., 2012:2)

Historically, UK youth workers have had a large amount of autonomy and/or agency in relation to needs-based intervention strategies. However, this paper aims to highlight inconsistencies of practice in relation to the adoption of digital media as a specific tool, with good practice in digital youth work the exception rather than the norm.

The role of digital youth work

The MacArthur Foundation Digital Youth Project poses some relevant questions in relation to this:

> "Youths' participation in this networked world suggests new ways of thinking about the role of education. What could it mean to really exploit the potential of the learning opportunities available through online resources and networks? Rather than assuming

> that education is primarily about preparing for jobs and careers, what would it mean to think of it as a process guiding youths' participation in public life more generally?" (Itō, 2009 :3)

Since our day-to-day lives are increasingly influenced by rapidly evolving forms of information communication technology (ICT), it might be assumed that digital youth work is high on the agenda, as in the UK today it is estimated that 90% of children aged 5-15 have regular internet access and that 40% of 12-15 year olds have a smartphone (Ofcom, 2011).

Nagy identifies two approaches to digital youth work which can be divided into passive and interactive (Nagy, 2010). The passive approach relates to the accessing of information whilst:

> "Actual virtual youth work begins beyond the proliferation of information, i.e. at the interactive level, where the sharing of information is not a one-way process going from a data provider to a consumer, but rather a two-way one with the user becoming a partner influencing, producing and owning the given content" (Nagy, 2010 :27).

From paralysing myths ….

In his Developmental Work Research (DWR) with Jakomaki teachers, Engestrom (2002) identified 'paralysing myths' where the use of myths, "organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth." (2002 :4) That is to say that myths, which are often "widely held but false" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013, [online resource]) beliefs or ideas or "exaggerated or idealized conception[s]" (ibid) of people, structures or objects can enable contradictions in practice to be explained away or hidden in a way that "harmonizes and normalizes them" (Engestrom et al., 2002 :4).

The mythology relating to whether youth workers have a place within the digital spaces that young people occupy or indeed, whether digital tools should even be used to support young people's learning in the 21st century (Melvin, 2013, cited in Curran et al., 2013), is created, supported and maintained on two levels. Firstly, the idea of moral panics where "violence, stereotyped, commercially exploitive or pornographic content and about the reinforcement of individualistic, lazy, prejudiced, uncritical or aggressive activities" (Livingstone, 2002, 2005: 5), are a potential stimulus for avoidance or inactivity. Secondly, the reliance on historical ways of working where, "the path of least resistance and least trouble is a mental rut already made" (Dewey, 1933 :136), requiring, "troublesome work to undertake the alteration of old beliefs " (ibid), can mean that existing practice is defensively guarded or not even questioned.

Embedding digital youth work into current practice requires a "step-change" (Hewes et al., 2012 :8) in professional attitudes towards digital technologies so that the potential can be exploited to enhance young people's informal learning. However, Hewes identifies a "a general 'fear' of digital technologies in formal and informal educational settings, linked with a resistance to engaging with and making sense of new approaches", which is linked to what she calls a "one-dimensional approach" and "a general failure to capitalise on the fact that many, but not all, young people are living digitally." (Hewes et al., 2012 :8)

Here the concept of Digital Residents and Digital Visitors might be relevant in that, "Visitors are unlikely to have any form of persistent profile online which projects their identity into the digital space "(White and Le Cornu, 2011 [online resource]), in contrast to Residents for whom "a proportion of their lives is actually lived out online where the distinction between online and off–line is increasingly blurred… When Residents log off, an aspect of their persona remains." (White and Le Cornu, 2011 [online resource]). If a youth worker's preference is that of a Digital Visitor, they may

competently use tools such as email, management information systems, search engines and websites, but 'won't get' or 'don't want' to use social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter, "so Visitors are users, not members, of the Web and place little value in belonging online" (White and Le Cornu, 2011 [online resource]). This idea of the 'value' placed on such tools is of interest, as is the additional challenge of staff who are under-confident, unskilled, or simply not interested in the use of digital tools of all kinds.

Davies et al view this as an "innovation gap" (2012 :14), and is where youth workers lack the skills and training to use digital media effectively or are expected to work with outdated or sub-standard equipment. Training can raise awareness of "existing tools and services that might be able to support practice, or [surmount] small barriers preventing use of new tools." (Davies et al., 2012 :14) They also believe that "disruptive digital innovation" might promote creativity and new ways of working, however this strategy may not be productive for all youth workers on the basis that: "For generations of adults who grew up in a world of books, travelling through cyberspace seems as treacherous and intimidating as speaking a new language. In fact, Prensky recognized such non-IT-literate individuals as burdened with an accent—non-native speakers of a language, struggling to survive in a strange new world" (Jones-Kavalier and Flannagan, 2006 :8).

Youth workers categorised as Digital Residents would be those that are interested in digital media from a personal as well as a professional perspective, are clear about the value of such tools and why they should use them with young people, as well as being confident about the tools that they use. Digital media has created some "subtle and significant shifts in learning" (Oblinger, 2010 [online resource]) and this relates to organisational policy, educators and pedagogy, as well as to the learning outcomes for young people. There is therefore an argument that says that youth work needs to rethink its current focus with Nicholas advising "organisations and institutions to stop thinking of their objective as delivering a service, and reframe their objective as one of engaging a community" (cited in Hewes et al., 2012 :49), and where digital media lends itself to a more outward-looking focus.

Davies (2009 :5-6) advocates that digital media and more specifically social media, supports this concept of establishing a community, supporting youth workers to:

- Reach young people where they already are
- Be found
- Communicate with young people in familiar settings
- Meet changing expectations
- Take advantage of networks to spread engagement opportunities

Engaging with young people digitally meets them on their own territory, and supports them to navigate this territory safely, responsibly and with awareness:

> "Today's youth may be coming of age and struggling for autonomy and identity as did their predecessors, but they are doing so amid new worlds for communication, friendship, play and self-expression" (Itō, 2009 :1).

In relation to how these "subtle and significant shifts" might apply to educators and pedagogy, Oblinger observes that "learning is much more than accessing content. In the 21st century, learning is a complex blend of skills, competencies, and the will to continue learning throughout life" (Oblinger, 2010 :4). The skills of managing a physical problem-solving task with a group compared to supporting a group to campaign against cuts in services through Facebook, are underpinned by the same competencies, which include " the ability to think critically and solve complex problems, work collaboratively, communicate effectively, and pursue self-directed learning (Oblinger, 2010 :4).

Digital youth work can help to "meet changing expectations" (Davies et al., 2012 :5-6), in that many young people expect the services that they access to use digital tools, and find it difficult to understand that policy might prevent the use of platforms like Facebook. If a key function of the youth worker is to engage with young people based on their needs and interests, the question is about how young people who are "spending their time in a space which adults find difficult to supervise or understand .." (Green and Hannon, 2007 :31) are able to influence digital practice in youth work settings? They also identify that:

> "The current generation of decision-makers – from politicians to teachers – see the world from a very different perspective to the generation of young people who do not remember life without the instant answers of the internet or the immediate communication of mobile phones. It is these decision-makers who shape the way that digital technologies are used in the system and who set them up to limit their use and role in everyday life." (2007 :15)

Guidance aimed at supporting the development of policy for the use of digital tools within UK youth work contexts is sparse, however Davies suggests:

> "It is relevant to consider whether online engagement with young people should have a policy of its own, or should be an element in other policies. A specific 'online engagement' policy can be useful to raise awareness of the specific issues with staff — but in the long run, you may want to ensure there is an online element across all your policies. Policies which may have an impact upon your online youth engagement include:
> • child protection policy
> • staff ICT guidance / policy
> • ICT acceptable use policy
> • photos/image consent policy
> • recognition and rewards for participation policies"
> (Davies and Ali, 2009 :18)

Youth work settings that are unable to offer access to appropriate equipment or facilitate free internet access, are therefore unable to support young people who are digitally excluded or who do not have easy access to digital media. Init@tive warn that this could result in the 'neglect' of those young people who are less able to access or who are less interested in using digital media, particularly those whose 'socio-economic and cultural' status mean that their choices are limited (Initi@tive, 2010).

A report by FreshMinds has identified that most young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) do not have access to digital media at home through PC's, laptops, satellite providers or other means, relying instead on:

> ".. pay-as-you-go mobile phones for social networking (for texts not calls because of cost) games and music, and 'screen' incoming calls, not answering those they do not want to. They change their numbers frequently, and have an aversion to electronic services that might 'track' them." (2008 :5)

Past research has identified that a 'significant minority' do not have a good digital literacy skills but would use digital media of all types more if they had better access or could afford it (Melvin, 2013, cited in Curran et al., 2013). In the UK, Department for Education (Uttley, 2012) statistics identify that just over 10% of young people were NEET at the end of May 2012, meaning that 1 in 10 young

people in the UK are potentially less digitally literate or skilled than their peers, which states the case for youth workers to be able to work on digital literacy skills with young people.

Raising the profile of digital youth work and why it needs to be developed, provides much of the motivation behind my on-going research. Digital literacy, digital exclusion alongside the needs and expectations of young people, are all compelling reasons that complement the more traditional language of principles of empowerment, equality, participation and voluntary engagement, once the very real challenges of skills, confidence and/or fear of the unknown, and adequate resourcing are surmounted.

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