Utilising Digital Technologies in the Delivery of Youth Work

By Nicholas Hudd 15/10/18

Anyone who has ever studied youth work at a higher education level has first-hand experience of retracing the historical evolution of the practice in order to reflect on key events, learn lessons from the past and therefore inform current and future development. It seems reasonable to suggest that few would argue about the merits of such reflections, though some may offer a cautionary note relating to the dangers of indulging in nostalgic reminiscing. Whilst there is always a balance to strike between looking over your shoulder instead of over the horizon, this paper sets out an argument that the youth work sector in Wales has been looking in the wrong direction, in terms of embracing new digital technologies, for many years. The unprecedented accelerated rate of technological advancement, ever increasing, suggests the sector is now in a position where it has little to learn from history in terms of this subject and therefore should adjust its focus to the future, not the past. Instead of associating technological advancements with opportunities, a new way to do things, there are those who see this digital evolution as a threat; competing for young people's time and attention and accelerating the demise of face to face youth work practice.   Admittedly not all are so pessimistic, arguably though, the majority of those who do not subscribe to such fatalistic paradigms, whether through an absence of knowledge and understanding or perhaps due to a strict adherence to traditional methods of youth work delivery, lack the desire or ambition to fully embrace the new world. That being said, commentators who draw attention to the potential dangers and risks of allowing those who control the associated budgets to utilise such technologies as an *alternative for*, rather than *enhancement to* the current youth work offer, are right to do so.

Passey (2014) explores the use of digital technologies by both support and youth workers who engage young people. Whilst reflecting on a host of ways in which they have been employed by practitioners, the author suggests only two categories exist: to promote communication or disseminate information. Though written in 2014, it could be contended that little has changed from this approach in the last four years. Although both are important elements in any youth work offer, restricting the use of such technologies to

merely these purposes arguably restricts the benefits of tools that have the potential to offer so much more. In a time when youth work is suffering from the effects of austerity, with reduced budgets, resources and staff, the digital world, at the very least, offers the opportunity to look at new solutions to old problems. These technologies could be used to increase engagement and ensure youth workers are accessible to young people where no physical presence exist in their communities. They afford them the opportunity to actively participate in decision making processes, with direct access to decision makers. They allow for more proactive, ongoing consultations, where dialogue could be maintained over long periods of time. As has been alluded to already though, in times of declining budgets there are those who would see the virtual world as an opportunity to reduce costs rather than expand engagement. Some may feel it contradictory to emphasise the new opportunities whilst highlighting the limitations, arguably this is one of the challenges the sector faces in embracing and better utilising these platforms.

The Office for National Statistics produced a statistical bulletin in May 2018, *Internet users UK: 2018* in which it states 99% of 16-24 year olds living in UK access the internet on a daily basis. Ofcom's 2017 *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report* reaffirms this statistic and states the same amount use social media on a weekly basis, spending an average of 2 hours 26 minutes on such sites daily. This is almost double the amount for an adult, who spends on average 1 hour 16 minutes daily. The report goes on to prescribe 83% of the 12-15 year old cohort have access to their own smartphones to access the internet, with 99% of these going online for an average of 21 hours a week. Surely such statistics can inform youth work practice; they illustrate how accessible young people are through such technology. It is debatably hard to identify any other medium, venues or activities that allows such broad engagement of young people. Reflection on the 20% engagement target prescribed in Welsh Governments *National Youth Work Strategy for Wales 2014-2018*, seems a little unambitious in light of such figures. Returning once again to the Ofcom report, 90% of the 12-15 cohort access YouTube on a daily basis, a statistic that reaffirms what many practitioners have known for some time, those using this medium are no longer merely consumers of information, they are broadcasters in their own right. They have discovered a platform in which to build an audience, broadcast their views, share ideas. With empowerment making up one of the key pillars prescribed in *Youth Work in Wales*

Principles and Purposes (YWWRG, 2018)*,* ignoring a tool that young people have proactively used to empower themselves seems counter intuitive for those charged with promoting such aspects. Using these technologies just to improve communication and disseminate information ignores the abilities, desires and ambitions of those the youth work sector serves, to embrace what is their new reality.

Whilst statistics like those reflected on above arguably highlight the need to embrace these virtual domains, as well as some of the potential benefits of doing so, it is worth acknowledging that adopting a strategy that involves more proactively utilising these technologies must first tackle the problem of digital exclusion. Wilson and Grant (2017) produced a report for the *Carnegie Trust UK* in which it was highlighted;

- Not all young people have basic digital skills.
- High levels of competence in some digital skills may mask low levels of 'purposeful' digital skills.
- The professional and family support networks surrounding young people also need more opportunities to improve their digital skills.
- Specific consideration should be given to vulnerable young people.
- Opportunities to learn basic digital skills should be embedded into existing long-term skills development programmes in formal and informal education settings.
- Young people should be involved in shaping their own digital skills development projects.
- Self-report methods of digital skills measurement are not always appropriate.

The Welsh Government (2018) provide a range of information relating to such exclusion, identifying specific demographics at risk, offering reasoning for this and prescribing potential approaches to promoting inclusion in this context. Closer examination of the publication suggests the youth work sector is well placed to help tackle many of these issues. With those in social housing and who are unemployed being amongst the main groups to experience digital exclusion, and the sector actively engaging people from these cohorts, it seems reasonable to assume practitioners are well placed to have a positive effect. In fact, the document itself prescribes a partnership approach, involving local authorities and the voluntary sector, is needed to tackle the problem. It actually goes

further, offering examples of how Scouts, Young Farmers and Welsh Baccalaureate students can play an active role. Whilst initially seeming positive, recognising young people and those who work with them can proactively help address such factors, perhaps what is omitted rather than included in the document is of major concern. There is evidently no collective voice of the sector, no steer from those working in it suggesting how it can be best used to help. The specific examples referenced in the document like Scouts and Young Farmers can undoubtedly make a positive contribution, but the wider question seems to be, why not seek input from the wider sector?

These factors will need to be addressed if the ambitions for such technologies are to be fully realised. For those who may be focused on the pure economics of embracing such platforms to reduce a perceived financial burden, these points potentially negate such aspirations. Addressing such issues effectively and meaningfully will inevitably mean allocating the necessary resources and funding. However, as alluded to above, it is worth pointing out that young people themselves have skills in this area that can be utilised to serve such a purpose. A utopian concept for some, for others an opportunity to employ youth work principles; encouraging young people to share their skills, empowering them in order to help shape services, seeing them as part of the solution rather than the problem.

Roberts (2009) not only reflects on many of these approaches but suggests a central premise of youth work is its ability to develop social capital through association and reflects on some of the main elements which enable this; providing a domain for young people to meet, where youth workers play an active role in helping these associations go well. In making his argument he returns to the acorn from which the contemporary youth work oak tree has grown (according to many academic scholars) citing the *Albemarle Report (1960)* in which great emphasis is placed on such associations being a positive thing. What Albemarle could never have foreseen, and arguably what many in today's youth work sector are ignoring, is the fact that the 'domain' that Roberts refers to does not have to be a physical one and can at times, where appropriate, be virtual.

Whilst the youth work sector have debatably been slow to respond to the new emerging digital era, other sectors have not. In November 2017 Kirsty Williams, Welsh Government

Cabinet Secretary for Education, announced the roll out of *Google Education* and a renewal of the Hwb virtual learning platform, saying at the time;

> 'We want our teachers to have access to the best digital tools and resources...'

> 'This will give our teachers a much wider range of digital tools and resources and will lead to greater collaboration and communication'

<div align="right">(Welsh Government: 2017)</div>

Although arguably the comments made reflect on only one aspect of such technologies – the benefits these tools offer teachers – in reality the platforms offer so much more. Young people can access learning resources and lesson materials outside the physical classroom, in fact anywhere they use their device with internet capabilities. They can converse with teachers and classmates outside of the lesson times. They can store their own materials, even share it with others. Those with parental responsibilities can be engaged in the process too, with these elements accessible to them as well. Those practitioners who have studied at a higher education level will recognise such platforms and tools, having utilised them throughout their studies. As a sector that prides itself on aiding young people make the transitions from dependence, to interdependence and independence (even aiding their transition into employment, training or further education) surely embracing and utilising such technological advancements have longer term benefits in helping youth workers to equip young people to function in the emerging digital landscape and global economy. It could in fact be argued that the youth work sector has a responsibility to help address the digital exclusion referred to earlier. With other forms of education incorporating these new systems into the way they educate our children and young people, there is a real risk that those who benefit the most from them are the wealthiest in society. For those who do not fully subscribe to such theories an alternative argument is just as alarming, these technologies are reserved for those whose learning styles suit a formal construct.

It is not only partners in other education sectors that have been quick to realise the potential opportunities. The commercial sector has established a large monopoly on this virtual environment, which has commoditised the time young people spend on such platforms. Ferrell (2016) suggests social media sites are the new equivalent spaces to

'shopping malls, parking lots and bars', implying it is for this reason that marketing companies have been forced to dramatically change advertising strategies, away from print media and television. The author uses MySpace to exemplify why companies are so proactive in developing such platforms, with over 70 million registered uses in America alone, the majority of which are aged 12-17, targeted campaigns through this medium can prove very lucrative. Ferrell does however highlight a major issue: the dichotomy between protecting young people on one hand whilst exploiting the economic benefits they offer as consumers. If the youth work sector is to have a more proactive presence online, offering young people advice, support, guidance, information, sign posting to other services and social activities, it must arguably understand the role and responsibilities it has in working with partners from the commercial sector in ensuring this age group is safeguarded.

If the youth work sector in Wales is to act, it needs to act soon. The ever increasing advancements in digital technologies, the way young people are engaging with this new world and the skills needed to keep up, are evolving fast. The evidence reflected on throughout this article demonstrates where the sector is being left behind and how the commercial partners are filling the void. Other forms of education have responded faster and more effectively to the emergence of these technologies, which has had a knock on effect of further accelerating the development of the online offer. Those who feel threatened by exploring increased use of this virtual world should look at the examples set by all others sectors already embracing such change; this should not be a choice between either or; between traditional forms of youth work and a contemporary vision where money is saved through digital offers. We have an opportunity to expand provision for young people, complement the existing offer but work in different ways. Young people are already present, active and engaging in this digital sphere, ignoring this is to ignore their needs have changed and the sector's responsibilities to change with it.

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