Developing a Technology Philosophy for Digital Youth Work

Dana Cohlmeyer
PhD Student and youth worker

Ask almost any youth worker their view on engaging young people via the internet, whether through social networking sites such as Facebook or via bespoke online communities, and the probability is high that any answer will involve a sigh, a look of uncertainty and a hesitant, 'Well…'. Ask the same youth worker a further question of, 'How confident are you to develop or deliver digital youth work?' and the answers become even more uncertain. With the explosion of social media and its impact on contemporary youth dominating headlines, most youth workers acknowledge the necessity of incorporating it to varying degrees in their practice; what is less agreed is what such work might consist of and how it might best be approached.

Often the biggest factors impacting on the development of digital media opportunities occur at a personal level and are simple: personal attitude towards technology and social media, confidence level of practitioners in using it and the ability to actually define digital youth work in a way that matters to them and their practice. A 2012 *Digitally Agile Community Learning and Development – Are We? (DACLD)* survey of Scottish CLD practitioners (of which 46% identified as youth workers) found that the vast majority self-identified as 'not competent' in using new technologies; the same survey found that 73% felt the potential impact of using new technologies to engage young people would be very effective (YouthLink Scotland 2012).

Clearly there is recognition of the possibilities digital media represents and an awareness of the current challenges practitioners face. Competency can be addressed in a straightforward manner with training and policy development, but equally as important is developing the confidence which comes from understanding and confronting one's own views on digital media and technology. I would therefore argue that the first steps for youth workers on the cusp of developing such work are

also simple: reflect on personal attitudes towards new media and identify professional development needs in order to develop a 'technology philosophy' (Ohler 2010, p. 99), consider how digital youth work fits alongside more traditional forms of practice and, lastly, develop a personal definition of digital youth work. In doing these things, practitioners will have a stronger foundation on which to begin building innovative digital youth work practice.

By critically reflecting on their skills, experience and developmental needs, youth workers will better understand what influences their decisions when developing digital media opportunities. Whether such opportunities involve using social media to communicate and generate discussion, private one-to-one support or group development in virtual worlds such as Second Life, it is important for practitioners to both locate themselves within a range of digital user competency profiles as well as reflect upon their personal feelings towards such engagement. Davies & Cranston (2008) set forth a range of profiles accounting for a youth worker's experience and digital confidence as well as the developmental needs to support each profile. These profiles are:

- **Experienced youth workers, on the new media margins** – generally recognise the importance of this type of engagement but lack the knowledge or experience to understand how their experience could support digital engagement and are unlikely to become champions of new media usage;
- **Experienced youth workers, cautious converts** – secure about their skills and have experience adapting to new situations but can still have concerns and be quite cautious while at the same see the most potential if partnered with more media-active colleagues;
- **Emerging youth workers, active experimenters and progressive converts** – already active users and may already be experimenting with digital media; may well be the strongest group because they are moving into positions of responsibility, interested in trying out new styles of work and can share their new media skills while benefitting from more experienced youth workers;

- **Emerging youth workers, uncritical networkers** – experienced digital users and enthusiastic in incorporating them into practice; while their enthusiasm is an asset, support is needed to ensure they do not miss risks and opportunities;

- **Experienced workers, ready responders** – early adopters of new technology and can use their understanding of digital media to identify solutions, challenges and opportunities. (2008, pp. 30-31)

They further argue for three levels of incorporation across organisations – **universal**, **widespread** and **specialist** – which range from being able to respond appropriately to young people online (universal level) through to specialists possessing the ability to design and run digital engagement projects or operate as online outreach workers (Davies & Cranston 2008). These profiles provide practitioners with a framework on which to locate themselves, both personally and within their organisation; by considering what profiles they most identify with they begin asking themselves reflective questions, which are key in developing a personal technology philosophy.

Without realising it, most practitioners already have such a philosophy. Ohler, in arguing for these philosophies among educational technology teachers, states:

> […] It shows up in the ways they use technology with their students and in the questions they ask about when, why, and how to use technology personally and professionally. If you want to know what your philosophy is, examine the decisions you make during the day that you don't have time to think about. They externalise what you believe with regard to many things, including technology (2010, p. 99)

I would further advocate talking with young people directly about how they use technology, how they feel about it and how they might envisage a youth worker engaging with them via various platforms (i.e. Facebook or a bespoke, secure online community). In doing so practitioners are not only broadening their field of knowledge but implicitly sending a message to young people that they value, 'learners' social and cultural ways of engaging with each other' (DeGennaro 2008, p.

15). By demonstrating to young people that they are reflecting on their own experience and encouraging them to do likewise, practitioners are also portraying themselves as positive digital role models (Ribble 2008). Such reflective work allows youth workers to develop a personal foundation on which to begin examining their definition of digital youth work.

Part of the uncertainty of digital youth work lies in the perception that because it takes place on the internet, it is not truly 'real.' However, if practitioners learn to think of that space in different terms much as Brian Donnelly does by arguing that, 'the internet is a place not a thing,' (2013) then the idea of youth work taking place in a tangible location helps to transform it into something more familiar and less daunting. Youth work can take place on the internet just as it can in a youth centre or on a street corner. When put in those terms, I would argue, it becomes much easier to draw comparisons and see connections to what youth workers already know and feel confident in delivering. Just as traditional youth work can be detached, issue-based or outreach, so can digital youth work. By looking at existing resources and opportunities in a new way, practitioners can find comfort in the familiar as they adapt and innovate in the emerging world of digital media.

Advocating such action for youth workers is hollow if I myself have not also undertaken the challenge. I consider myself to be digitally aware and proficient, capable of managing a positive online identify for myself and am aware of trends involving digital media use in young people. I am a skilled user of social media and an experienced youth worker though not necessarily an early adopter of new technology. According to the categories set forth by Davies and Cranston (2008) therefore, despite my experience, I would most strongly identify as an, 'emerging youth worker, active experimenter and progressive convert' (p. 31) because I am an active user and am currently experimenting with digital media as a method of youth engagement. My future development needs should focus on further developing the links between youth work ideology and digital opportunity development. As such, my basic technology philosophy is: *The use of digital media to engage young people is a positive. By attempting to engage on their terms, in a space of their choosing and with*

their input on opportunity development, I am seeking to create innovative digital youth work practice that is user-led and person-centred. In engaging young people online, I am conscious of the blurring of boundaries and, as such, work to develop personal practices and professional policies firmly grounded in ethical behaviour that adhere to the highest standards of ethics around privacy, boundaries and safeguarding.

I choose to call such work 'digital youth work' rather than 'online/virtual youth work' because it is a broader term. I view it as a blending of online opportunities such as social media and bespoke online communities to deliver one-to-one support or outreach with offline work that might involve incorporating hardware such as cameras and film editing software to give young people the opportunity to use technology to explore issues in their lives within a more traditionally accepted environment such as their neighbourhood. In my view, it is about supporting young people to develop their digital literacy, helping them to create a positive online presence and providing the support youth workers have traditionally done simply with the added facet of the virtual world – after all, risks and opportunities have always existed for young people and we have always worked to support them in addressing those challenges.

Many youth workers speak of a fear of incorporating digital media into practice. I have argued that a great degree of that could be alleviated by reflecting on one's own feelings about digital use, developing a personal technology philosophy and re-examining how one views the concept of digital youth work less in terms of something new and frightening and more in terms of youth work simply in a different place. In doing so, youth work practitioners can begin to relocate themselves in much more familiar terrain and feel more confident in developing new opportunities. It is hoped that few practitioners would turn away from developing traditional opportunities simply because they were too afraid of the subject matter or the challenges presented and, instead, would undertake a bit of reflection, do a bit of research and get stuck in to an exciting new piece of work. I am advocating for youth workers to do just the same around digital media and to begin developing innovative experiences that are built on a foundation of reflection and research placing the needs

of young people at their heart, not simply done because, 'Everyone else is doing it, so we should, too.' In choosing to share with you my personal viewpoint and definition of digital youth work, I have provided an example of a first step I feel youth workers should take as they begin addressing digital media in their practice. By no means is such a step limited to youth workers; as the aforementioned *DACLD* survey results indicate, this concern is one hanging over the entire community learning and development sector (YouthLink Scotland 2012). Therefore, no matter how you identify as a CLD worker, I challenge you, the reader, to begin writing your technology philosophy.

References

Davies, T., & Cranston, P. (2008) *Youth Work and Social Networking: Final Research Report.* Leicester, National Youth Agency. http://blog.practicalparticipation.co.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2009/08/fullYouth-Work-and-Social-Networking-Final-Report.pdf. [Accessed 19th October 2011].

DeGennaro, D. (2008). Learning Designs: An Analysis of Youth-Initiated Technology Use. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education.* Vol. 41, No. 1. pp. 1-20.

Donnelly, B. (2013) Speech. *PINS Scotland Digital Lives event.* Glasgow. 2nd May 2013.

Ohler, J. (2010) *Digital Community Digital Citizen.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin: A SAGE company. http://www.corwin.com/books/Book233501. [Accessed 7th May 2012].

Ribble, M. (2008) Passport to Digital Citizenship. *Learning & Leading with Technology.* Vol. 36, No. 4. pp. 14-17.

YouthLink Scotland (2012c) *Digitally Agile Community Learning and Development – Are We?* http://www.youthlinkscotland.org/Index.asp?MainID=14863. [Accessed 29th January 2013].