

Understanding Community Learning and Development Practitioners' Engagement with Information Communications Technology

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Abstract

Community Learning and Development (CLD) practitioners in Scotland have been responsible for supporting people to use Information Communications Technology (ICT) since the 90s. The ubiquitous nature of ICT means that the people and communities we work with, and ourselves, need to understand how we engage with this. However, there is a complex policy landscape and limited research around ICT in CLD and this is affecting how we can use this effectively. Since the term CLD includes different professions, it can be described as pluralistic and there are different philosophies that inform practice. This would indicate that there are shared epistemologies which can form a broad body of practice research, but this is not yet fully realised. This research explores models which can be used to identify shared epistemologies and start discussion about how we practise, specifically around using ICT. The research used mixed methods under a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm to understand how CLD practitioners at Dundee Carers Centre engage with ICT. The findings from this research are not intended to give definitive findings, but to support CLD practitioners to reflect on practice and generate discussion around using ICT. Whilst this research was completed in 2014, it can be used to inform and develop practice during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction

This article is based on my Community Learning and Development MSc research dissertation in 2014. The research focussed on understanding community learning and development (CLD) practitioners' engagement with information communications

technology (ICT). The aim was to develop an understanding of how CLD practitioners at Dundee Carers Centre use ICT within their practice. CLD is described in *A Code of Ethics for Community Learning and Development* (CLD Standards Council, 2017 p.1) as 'a field of professional practice constituted by the adult education, community development and youth work professions'. For the purposes of my research, ICT is defined as an umbrella term that includes 'computer and digital devices that are used to access information, to communicate and collaborate' (Guile 1998, pp.10-11). This area of practice has interested me as I have been involved in developing and delivering youth work, adult education and capacity building using ICT since around 2005.

Within CLD in Scotland, using ICT can be described as a practice area which is still undergoing development and change. It is important to highlight that using ICT in CLD practice is not new. This was described as a part of community education practice during the 1990s (SOEID, 1999 cited in Tett 2002, p.10), was an explicit part of adult literacy when community education was reformed as 'Community Learning and Development' in *Working and Learning Together* in the early 2000s (Scottish Executive 2004, p.1), then the first ICT specific policy framework for practitioners was launched in the early 2010s (YouthLink Scotland *et al.* 2012a, p.4). However, as different professions come under the CLD umbrella (CLD Standards Council, 2017), there is an opportunity to move beyond the different professions and explore shared epistemologies (Tett, 2010) within 'community practice' (Banks and Butcher 2013, p.12; Glen 1993, pp.22-3).

Wenger (1998 p.48) argues that, whilst 'practice' can be sometimes used as 'an antonym for theory', it is the process where theory is generated and manifests when people socially construct meanings, act together and consolidate their constructed meanings. This view aligns with constructivism (Punch, 2013), whereby 'practice' (Wenger, 1998, pp.49-50) is social, experiential and dependent on the people involved. Using this basis, CLD practice can be described as having different epistemological, and therefore, philosophical stances.

In order to explore the roots of the shared epistemology in community education, Martin proposed a 'tentative theoretical analysis' (1987, p.18) for exploring different philosophical stances. He proposed that community education practice can be viewed under three traditions: Reformist, Universal and Radical (1987, p.24), and that these can be used in an 'explanatory and heuristic' (p.23) manner 'to clarify the relationship between *how* we think and *what* we think' (p.25). Martin's models are similar to those used in youth work (Coburn and Wallace, 2011, pp.13-5) and adult literacy (Papen, 2005, p.9).

Martin (1987 p.25) describes the 'reformist' tradition as a focus on people who are deemed by government as experiencing social and/or educational disadvantage. This is echoed by Coburn and Wallace's 'Functional' (2011, pp.13-4) tradition of youth work and Papen's 'Functional' literacy (2005, pp.9-10). As these three models are about being led by government policy, they suggest a selectivist philosophical root (Pratt, 1997). However, Gilchrist (2004, p.24) highlights that, within this paradigm, there is the assumption that communities are in direct competition with each other. This would suggest that within the reformist/functional traditions, CLD practice is based on selectivism (Pratt, 1997) but delivered within pluralism (Gilchrist, 2004). Martin describes the 'Universal' tradition (1987 pp.24-5) as based on the ideas of Henry Morris where local provision is open to everyone in the community (Reé 1973). Coburn and Wallace (2011 pp.14-5) also use this term and Papen describes this as the 'liberal' concept of literacy (2005 p.11). These are described by Pratt (1997) as universalism, where provision is for all and not targeted through government policy.

Martin's 'radical' tradition (1987, p.25) is where the community act collectively through political education. Coburn and Wallace's 'critical youth work' (2011, p.15) is based within dialogue to create shared understanding about how power and politics affect young people's lives. In addition, Papen's 'critical' concept of literacy (2005, pp.10-11) is to not only gain new skills, but to use them to understand, evaluate, question and challenge the world they live in. Ledwith (2011) describes this as

moving beyond the debate about universalism and selectivism (Pratt, 1997) and Gilchrist (2004, pp.24-5) notes that this model is based within a 'conflict model'. It is important to note that all three cite Freire (Martin, 1987 p.25; Coburn and Wallace, 2011 p.15; Papen, 2005 pp.10-1) as a central theorist in these models. These three overarching models appear to have shared philosophical roots, namely selectivism (Pratt 1997, pp.212-3), universalism (*Ibid.*) and Freireanism (Freire, 1996). Furthermore, as there appears to be more than one epistemology operating across the different professions, this further suggests the pluralist (Gilchrist, 2004 p.24) nature of CLD practice.

Within policy, ICT has been identified as an area of work since 1999 in *Circular 4/99* (SOEID, 1999 cited in Tett 2002, p.10) and reaffirmed in *Working and Learning Together to Build Stronger Communities* (Scottish Executive, 2004 p.1) under 'Achievement through learning for adults' (Tett, 2002 p.10). This was broadened between 2011 to 2014, following the recommendations of the Christie Commission (Scottish Government, 2011b) and the McLelland Commission (Scottish Government, 2011c). ICT broadened out from adult learning (Scottish Government, 2011a) to community planning partnerships (Scottish Government, 2012), community learning and development (YouthLink Scotland *et al.* 2012a; YouthLink Scotland *et al.* 2012b), youth work (Scottish Government *et al.* 2014), and community capacity building (Scottish Government, 2014), with all using different terminology to describe ICT. Despite covering more areas, the policy context can be described as complex due to the different foci and changing terminology. This would affect reformist/functional models as there has not been a consistent policy driver to support this area of practice. Moreover, as ICT can be described as a combination of devices and new practices (Sharpe *et al.* 2010) that permeate and affect everyone (Dawson, 2000), this suggests that the universal and radical/critical dimensions have a role too as we assume that ICT requires new skills, affects everyone, and poses challenges.

From this context, the scope for practice and research within CLD around ICT usage would appear to be broad. However, there are limited examples of research within CLD (YouthLink Scotland *et al.* 2012a; YouthLink Scotland *et al.* 2012b). Using a broad body of research into ICT across the different professions, this is still in early stages as examples are mostly based on theoretical discussion (Cockburn, 2005; Jandrić, 2015), quantitative analysis (Eynon and Helsper, 2010; Eynon and Malmberg, 2011; Gorard and Selwyn, 2005; Hussain and Howard, 2013; Klein, 2015; Littlejohn *et al.* 2012; Székely and Nagy, 2011) and one ethnographic study in formal education (Krumsvik, 2005). In order to develop this further, we need to find a starting point to make sense of how we use ICT. Cohlmeier (2015, p.6) highlights that the CLD sector can address using ICT in practice by developing a ‘technological philosophy’ (*Ibid.*).

To do this, it is important to discuss the underlying rationale (i.e. methodology) behind the mechanics (i.e. methods) (Punch, 2013 p.15). Whilst different professions inform the literature review, it can be said that ICT usage is dependent on the setting, use, and people involved, which can broadly be described as constructivist (Punch, 2013 p.18). Since there is not a consistent definition for ICT within CLD (Scottish Government, 2011a pp.19-21; Scottish Government *et al.* 2014 p.21; Scottish Government, 2014; YouthLink Scotland *et al.* 2012b pp.2-3), interpretivist meanings need to be defined and explored (Punch, 2013 p.18).

Using this as the basis for the research, to understand how CLD practitioners engage with ICT I would need to undertake ‘explanatory research’ (Wisker, 2008 p.73) which Punch (2008 p.297) describes as a feature of mixed method methodology. Because the phenomenon requires identification first, and exploration second (Punch, 2008 p.296) these stages will be used to frame the research. In explanatory design (Punch, 2013 pp.296-7), the first stage collects quantitative data about the whole sample followed by qualitative data about a subset of the sample. In this case, a short paper questionnaire is used to discover if staff at Dundee Carers Centre use ICT personally or professionally. As we need to account for different philosophical bases for

practice, questions were framed using the models of Martin (1987), Coburn and Wallace (2011) and Papen (2005). These are used heuristically to identify potential shared philosophical grounding for the participants' practice. Paper is used instead of electronic means, as using online methods could exclude people who are not confident or able to use ICT. The questionnaire uses a simple yes/no structure to create a 'status survey' (Punch, 2013 p.223) to identify participants for the second stage.

Stage two of the research used qualitative data to generate in-depth data from a selected group of staff at Dundee Carers Centre (Punch, 2013 pp.296-7). I chose a semi-structured focus group (Punch, 2013 p.147) where participants discussed how they use ICT. I framed the focus group questions around Wenger's components of social learning (1998, p.5), where the group are asked about four domains: 'Meaning; Practice; Community; Identity (*Ibid.*). Since the data can be described as an account or 'story' that stems from the participants' understanding, perception, and experience of reality, this will be analysed using narrative analysis (Punch, 2013 p.191) within a 'constructivist/interpretivist' research paradigm (p.18).

It should be noted that there are vested interests in the results of the research. As the research involves colleagues at my place of work, my role as a researcher and a peer will affect how participants engage and take part in the research. However, the aim of the research is to generate wider discussion around the use of ICT within CLD practice, not to provide overall recommendations for CLD practitioners. Therefore, the findings are not intended to give a definitive or generalisable set of recommendations for the field, but an opportunity for reflecting on practice.

This research followed the University of Dundee Research Ethics Committee Guidelines and was assessed as containing no significant ethical implications (University of Dundee N.D.). Punch highlights ethical considerations as: confidentiality, subsequent use of data and data protection, and informed consent (2013, p.45). All participants were given a unique identifier and are not discussed by any identifiable means. All participants completed a consent form and received an

information sheet prior to data collection at all stages. Participants could withhold information at all stages and were reminded that they can withdraw consent for any reason during the research process. All collected data is anonymised and used only for the purposes of the research, which includes future longitudinal research.

Stage 1

All staff were sent paper copies of the participant information sheet, consent form, and questionnaire. All 48 members of staff were approached to take part in the research and 31 gave consent and completed the questionnaire. For the responses, basic percentages are presented as a status survey (Punch, 2013 p.223). The first set of questions asked respondents if they use any of the following personally or professionally:

Question	Personally		Professionally	
	n	%	n	%
Use ICT?	31	100	31	100
Websites	31	100	30	97
Social Media	24	77	17	55
Computers	27	87	30	97
Smart phones	28	90	22	71
Apps	23	74	9	29
Console Games	5	16	1	3

This suggests that, of the 31 participants, all use ICT and the types used are generally similar personally and professionally.

The second question was intended to identify potential shared philosophical roots in the participants’ practice. The three statements presented were based on Martin's (1987, p.24), Cockburn and Wallace's (2011, pp.13-5), and Papen’s (2005 p.9) traditions, and participants could select any of the options:

Statement	n	%	Inferred philosophy
I think that I have to prioritise my work based on needs	31	100	Selectivism
I think that I have to provide education and learning opportunities	11	35	Universalism
I think that I have to challenge power imbalances in my work	6	19	Freirianism

For this sample, there appears to be a focus on needs-based practice in lieu of learning or power. Whilst a smaller number of respondents identified learning or power as affecting their practice, all identified 'needs' as the main driver. This suggests that selectivism (Pratt ,1997 pp.196-213) is the main root but, as participants agreed with more than one of these statements, pluralism (Gilchrist, 2004 p.24) also exists.

Stage 2

Using the completed surveys, unique identifiers were given to each respondent, and these were compiled in batches for the three philosophical roots. This was used to make sure that the focus group included at least one respondent with a different philosophical grounding. 15 participants were identified and 4 (27% of the sample) were able to take part in this stage of the research. The focus group was held at Dundee Carers Centre in a private room and sound was recorded digitally to allow a transcript to be made afterwards. The four participants were asked questions collectively and were only asked for further explanation if their answer was not clear.

The focus group questions used Wenger's four domains of social learning: 'Meaning; Practice; Community; Identity' (1998 p.5).

Meaning

If someone talks about information communications technology, what does that mean to you?

When asked this question, all participants named specific websites and apps that they use in their personal and professional lives. This would mean that whilst not specifically giving a definition of ICT, the sentiment of what can be an ICT is understood by the participants in this sample.

When someone says 'information communications technology', what does that make you feel?

Participants appeared to give positive responses, saying that it is 'gradually getting better' and qualified this with recent examples where they are 'more comfortable now'. However, this could mean that their initial experience of using ICT was negative. This was confirmed, with participants describing ICT as 'scary at first' but emphasising that it is 'more comfortable now'.

If someone said 'digital literacy', what does that mean to you? What would 'digital literacy' include?

When asked about 'digital literacy', participants were unsure about what this meant. One participant with a background in adult learning drew comparisons with literacy in general and clarified that it can change 'by who is involved and by what learning is noticed'. In addition, they drew particular focus to the 'critical' aspect (Papen, 2005 pp.10-1) and emphasised that 'you should always be questioning what you find and use; there's always alternatives and don't take it at face value'. They added that it is about 'which tool is useful for this job, what its limits are, and if you can use it'.

Practice

What does information communications technology mean for your practice?

When discussing ICT in practice, participants reflected that it can positively affect their practice. Despite describing ICT initially in negative terms, they said 'we couldn't do our jobs as well without it'. Participants also discussed the role of the Communications Team at the Centre, and that they can '...ask them to send it out there', but that 'we're building our knowledge on this'.

Would you say that information communications technology helps or hinders your practice? How would you say that digital literacy affects your practice?

Participants gave accounts of where they found positive and negative aspects of using ICT in practice. One participant reflected that '...there tends to be a lot of fear around using ICT'. They discussed specific concerns around data protection and online safety, and one stated 'I don't know what really happens... after I click 'send' and 'online safety for young people is a massive issue'.

Community

For CLD workers, would they have the same meanings for information communications technology as you?

Participants all agreed that ICT does not mean the same thing for everybody. They cited access as a 'major problem' as '...how are you meant to use it if there's no connection?'. One participant commented 'if I was doing this job up in a rural area, it would be very different. I would probably nip out to folk more than sending emails'.

Learning

When you use information communications technology personally or professionally, do you stop and think about your learning?

When asked about their learning, participants were unsure and one commented 'I've never thought about this before'. Participants reflected that there are 'transferrable skills' in using ICT, and at times it can appear as a 'another language' and that '[we] can't learn enough about this'.

Do you think that information communications technology should be developed? If so, how do you think this should be developed? What can help you develop using information communications technology?

In order to address the gaps, the participants highlighted specific actions that would support their use of ICT. Suggestions around 'better and easier access', 'training' and 'safety and data protection' would be beneficial. One participant emphasised that '...we must remember that there is a choice in using it or not', but another said, 'it's still something we need to better understand'.

In this case, some staff use ICT personally and professionally, and choose to use it in different contexts. When exploring potential philosophical roots for practice, there is a tendency towards selectivism (Pratt, 1997 pp.212-3), but there are different stances amongst the participants of the research which suggests pluralism (Gilchrist, 2004 p.24). This would mean that policy is a key driver for practice, but as this is still developing it is challenging for practitioners to use this to best effect. Practitioners appear to engage in 'learning conversations' (Moon, 1999 p.84) around using ICT and use Papen's critical concept of literacy (2005, pp.10-1) to question its use. Participants also identify key issues around access, safety, data protection, learning and training opportunities. However, these findings are only relevant to this instance (Rubin and Rubin, 1995 p.34) and might not apply to others (Punch 2013 p.18), but hopefully this can be used as a starting point for considering how wider CLD practitioners use ICT in their practice. By doing so, we can all start to deepen understanding of our own practice and develop our own 'technological philosophies' (Cohlmeyer, 2015 p.6). Whilst this research was completed in 2014, these themes have come to the fore for us all during the COVID-19 pandemic (Community Learning and Development Managers Scotland N.D.; YouthLink Scotland N.D.). I hope that this can help support practitioners to develop their practice, and find ways to support themselves and others during these uncertain and challenging times.

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