Chapter 1

Digital Technologies and Youth Work: Opportunities and Challenges for Models and Theory

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ABSTRACT

Within this chapter the authors explore the implications of ‘digital disruption’ for key youth work concepts like friendship, relationship, trust, and community and how changing everyday understandings of these concepts can be, or should be, adopted into youth work theorisation and praxis. Secondly, the authors discuss Freirean critical dialogue and the development of critical consciousness, and how this is challenged by the targeted disinformation found in social media. We argue that micro-targeted disinformation has profound implications for the practice of critical pedagogy. Finally, the authors provide an overview of the opportunities presented by digital technologies, particularly when integrated with existing methods, and some examples of successful practice.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the implications of digital technologies for youth work theorisation, models and practice. Digital technologies interact with youth work in several distinct ways. Digital technologies offer additional methods and new ways for youth workers to engage with young people (Rice et al., 2016). Digital technologies also change features of the social context in which youth work operates. This affects how young people see themselves and how they form and maintain relationships with peers, and the social context in which youth work operates (Boyd, 2007).

This chapter examines the implications for youth work theorisation and practice of both changes to the methods afforded by digital technologies, and changes to the social context mediated by digital technologies. The authors begin with a discussion of terminology and definitions, before moving on to an overview of how digital technologies have been adopted into youth work. This will be followed by a discussion of the implications of digital technologies for youth work theory, models and pedagogy. A central feature of the discussion will concern how changes in digital technologies have affected the use of Freirean pedagogy in youth work.

TERMINOLOGY

Varying terminology has been used to discuss the relationship between youth work and digital technologies. Terms such as “online youth work”, “virtual youth work”, “youth work and IT” and “digital youth work”, or even “digitally agile youth work” have all been used without any clear distinctions between categories (Cohlmeyer, 2014). In this article “youth work and IT” refers to youth workers’ use of Information Technology (IT) to support administrative functions, whilst “online youth work” and “virtual youth work” refer to youth services offered exclusively through digital media. Sinisalo-Juaha and Timonen (2011) used web-based youth work as an all-encompassing term, and used other terms to refer to particular approaches to youth work. Following the recommendations of the European Commission (youth), “digital youth work” will be used to refer to the use of any digital tool within any kind of youth work setting, whether face to face or virtual, as part of an approach that acknowledges the integration of real life and digital life for many young people (European Commission-Youth, n.d.).

Another term which is widely used is ‘digital native’. This term can be used purely descriptively to refer to the generation of young people who grew up with digital technology as present from their earliest memories (as a generational tag) (Connolly, 2017). Digital native applies to people born from the 1990s to 2000s onwards (depending upon where they grew up), and hence includes some
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