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Content :

THE DOUBLE BIND SITUATION: USING CHAT TO EXPLORE HOW YOUTH WORK PRACTICE IS EVOLVING IN A DIGITAL AGE

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Young people's lives have been significantly (though not uniformly) affected by the growth of digital technologies and the modes of, and fora for, communication and interaction which these make possible. This raises the question of how effectively youth work and its associated practices respond to young people's needs in this emerging and fast developing context.

Set within the context of informal education, the specific core values underpinning the youth work curriculum focus on aspects of empowerment, equality, participation and voluntary engagement. In youth work contexts, informal learning is 'facilitated' by the youth worker primarily through the "medium of conversation" and requires the young person to be an equal and willing participant. Youth workers use a variety of means including relationship-building, discussion, and sporting or practical activities (and these take place in a variety of locations and contexts), to support and develop young people's experiential learning. How is youth work practice changing to make use of new technologies and if so how?

Using cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), this research aims to explore how youth workers' practice might be responding to young people's 21st century context and to identify the role of digital technologies in this response. A survey of 36 'digital resident' youth workers identify the range of engagement with digital technologies and how these relate to youth work objectives and outcomes. In the context of interviews with a sub group of survey respondents, use of the CHAT framework enables identification and recognition of 'contradiction' within youth

worker 'activity systems' and the potential of these as a dynamic principle shaping social practices. Of particular interest is how these contradictions lead to new practices and new ways of responding to the particular needs and challenges of the 21st century. The research demonstrates some of the interactions of materialities and virtualities in professional learning and practice in the youth work context.

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