Building and Maintain Relationships with Young People Online: Wisdom in Intimate Spaces

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Abstract

Typically, pre-pandemic, many social-professionals avoided engaging in online relationship-based work with young people due to safeguarding concerns. With the rapid shift to working online with young people during the pandemic, many professionals (for example, inclusion officers, social workers and youth workers) moved towards greater levels of synchronous online work with young people. This rapid shift appears to have provoked predominantly risk-averse sets of policies that promote stringent safeguarding procedures while limiting the space for professional judgement. Therefore, this paper will consider the role of professional wisdom in the use of online contact with young people post-pandemic by learning from pre- and mid-pandemic practices.

This paper will present the findings of a systematic literature review of 90 articles from the past ten years that explore dominant practices in the developing and maintaining of relationships with young people while in online synchronous formats – including video and conference calling, and instant messaging. These professional encounters cross boundaries that many face-to-face encounters would not have to consider: the worker may be in the more intimate space of the home, the young person may also be accessing at home in family spaces or in their bedrooms where backgrounds and dress codes may be less formal or present implicit self-disclosures, the perceived informality of online contact, and expectations around contact out of normal working hours. These may soften the boundaries of the relationship, which could provide improvements for the service user, but also present a range of risks.

Therefore, this paper will consider questions of normative practices that developed through the pandemic relating to relationship-based online work with young people. It will seek to present gaps in the literature and areas for future research in the realm of professional ethics, safeguarding, and online relationship building. Recognising that there can be unique safeguarding concerns in our work with young people online, the paper is fundamentally asking “where is the space for professional wisdom within online relationship-based work?”. It will also seek young people’s voices in the midst of this discussion, recognising that young people often inhabit different online spaces to adults and professionals.

Introduction

What have we learnt about engaging in professional relationships with young people online, and where is the role of professional wisdom in this?

The inspiration for this paper begins in data gathered for a PhD in 2013. An ethnographic study into the relationships between young people and youth workers in centre-based work led to an awareness that most organisations. With the exception of one organisation where the workers would befriend young people online, any engagement online was viewed suspiciously by management and as poor boundary setting by workers. However the reasons *for* engaging online offered by one organisation were broadly persuasive: they allow youth workers to present a positive influence within a difficult online environment, they allow for an engagement with young people in their own spaces, and they improve the conversation in physical spaces as workers are aware of issues in virtual worlds.

A search of the literature suggests that by 2019, despite the possible opportunities for engaging in online relationship building work, the dominant model appeared to be predominantly information sharing and marketing of services by youth organisations with limited use of online forms of relationship building. However the Covis 19 pandemic and subsequent social distancing measures in 2020-2021, meant social professions that (by and large) had been sceptical as to whether benefits outweighed risks of online relationship building had to move some of their provision online.

This systematic literature review is a work in progress. It will begin by highlighting the problem of risk-averse organisations attempting to control online interactions, and the requisite effect that has on the capacity for professional wisdom by workers in those spaces. Then, it shall consider the normative practices around online work, before considering whether (and where) there's space for professional wisdom and the kind of professional environment required to facilitate the development of wisdom in online relationships with young people.

The Risk Society and 'Crowding Out Wisdom'

Since introduced by Freud, 'boundaries' has become the dominant metaphor used to describe the limits of acceptable behaviour in professional relationships. Discourses on relationships between members of the 'social professions' (e.g. social work, youth work, community development work, teaching, etc) and their clients are saturated with language that assumes professional relationships should be limited by semi-rigid and externally applied criteria. This is an assumption rooted in a deontological approach to professional ethics, that appears to be motivated by a commitment to safeguarding children, young people, and other members of society perceived as vulnerable, through removing the risk associated with the individual judgement of practitioners or the ability for those with malicious intent to use ambiguous rules to justify harmful behaviours. However, it can also appear to prioritise a controlling and homogenising tendency within managerial organisations that reduces the opportunities for decision making rooted in professional judgements and, therefore, wisdom.

The concept of the boundary dominates professional discourses on ethics and good practice, however there is both a growing dis-ease with the metaphor and an increasing awareness that the assumption that boundaries are fixed and rigid fail to reflect the realities of everyday practice in many social professions. For example, Meltzer, Muir, and Craig (2016) reported 'paid professional trusted adults' often referred to their relationship with young people as 'close' and described them as 'complex', and Murphy and Ord (2013) argue that self-disclosures are more complex than simply avoiding sharing personal stories, as everything from manners or speech to the way a professional dresses discloses

something of themselves. In the social care sector Bates, Smith, and Nisbet (2015) argue that some 'norms' in boundary setting are without concrete reasons, based on paternalistic assumptions about what is best for the client, and young people often expertly negotiate and maintain boundaries with youth workers (Hart 2016).

Boundaries reduce the perceived level of risk to young people while potentially reducing the autonomy of professionals. Despite the rise in interest around virtue ethics, deontic and utilitarian ethics are still dominant within social work and youth work (Banks 2006: 40; Bessant 2009). This is in part because there is a wider concern in society about managing perceived 'risk', particularly in the social professions and a lack of trust in professionals to use sound judgement (Dixon 2010; Banks 2004). This could be a well-founded concern, as writers on virtue ethics agree it is possible for an individual to have internalised the virtues and yet have and yet behave 'out of character' (Banks and Gallagher 2009: 60), or as Louden (1997: 206) phrases it, "even the best people can make the wrong choices". As such, virtue ethics can bring in a sense of unpredictability into the profession. Therefore, we have a system of training and management that appears to assume the judgement of practitioners should not be trusted, or at least there should be stringent safeguards in place to prevent misjudgements that may also prevent practitioners from engaging in positive activities.

Miles (2002) provides an explanation for this, arguing there is a tendency to portray young people as particularly vulnerable to the 'risk society' (Beck 1992b). Although young people are often viewed as passive victims of the structures around them, in reality young people's engagement with society is 'complex and sophisticated', and they are more adept at negotiating risk that often assumed. The assumption of risk is perhaps coming from a once dominant model of developmental work with young people: believing that they are to be 'worked on' by adults, rather than recognising they are 'able to be constructive agents of their own development' (Larson 2006: 677; see also Belton 2009: 57). Of course, some young people genuinely are vulnerable (as are some adults), but the default stance of professional boundaries is to assume they are all equally as vulnerable when the reality is many young people understand and mitigate the risks of relationships for themselves.

Beck (2000; 1992a; see also Douglas 1992; Boyne 2003) suggests contemporary society has become overly concerned with the idea of risk management and assessment to the point where any risk is deemed unacceptable, and those elements of society once assumed to bring safety, peace or prosperity (such as scientific discovery, or religion) are now seen cynically because of the public awareness of the dangers they may also bring. When combined with the psychological idea of the 'social amplification of risk' (Cieslik and Pollock 2002; Slovic 2000; Pidgeon, Kasperson, and Slovic 2003), risk avoidance is further heightened around the aspects of social life or particular values that are seen as being vulnerable, or that have a certain narrative quality about the risk (i.e. one newspaper story about child abuse is significantly more potent than any number of statistics). Here youth, both as a social ideal in decline (Holland 2004; Layard and Dunn 2009; Postman 1994; Quartz 2003) and young people themselves, are often seen as being particularly vulnerable (Mizen 2004; Batsleer and Davies 2010).

One way society deals with risk at this level is, according to Beck, to take the object *of* risk (i.e. social professionals) and move it as far away as possible from the object *at* risk (i.e. young people). This works on the assumption practitioners can pose a risk, through abuse or misjudgement, to young people. As it is not possible to physically remove the practitioners from the young person the object *of* risk can be reformulated slightly: to being the *judgement of the practitioner.* It is the behaviour and actions of the practitioner that pose a risk to the young person, therefore the managers further up the organisational hierarchy (or even the government/civil servants) dictate, through policies and procedures, what the practitioner should do in a given situation, thus moving the judgements and

decisions further from the young people. Online engagements are seen as particularly risky for young people, not least given concerns around the development of 'inappropriate' relationships, production and conception of harmful content, and the prevalence of 'cyber bullying' (Brewer et al. 2018; Brown, Sanci, and Hegarty 2021; Van der Hof and Koops 2011).

However a lack of professional wisdom (or at least, an inability to display it fully due to the context the practitioner is in), may prevent good work from occurring that would benefit young people, or worse may even endanger young people further. In "Crowding Out Wisdom", a report for the Scottish Children's Commissioner (Marshall and Mellon 2011), the authors gathered examples of social professionals who had followed their policies within an environment where professional judgement was minimised, that led to young people being in danger of greater harm, or the voices of young people being ignored in favour of organisational policy. Online encounters, not mentioned by that report, offer even greater opportunities that risk-averse systems may miss.

The premise of this paper is, therefore, that professional wisdom is required in all encounters with young people, but that's particularly true in online spaces – however, we hypothesised, that there would be even less space for professional judgement than work in offline spaces.

Discerning normative practices with online relationships with young people

In November 2021, one author (Oxley) conducted a systematic literature search. A total of 96 piece of literature were found across academic and grey literature, relating to the use of online spaces in relationship based practice since 2011. 96 articles were considered (44 from the grey literature, 52 from academic literature), six of which were later considered 'irrelevant', and of which 45 have currently been reviewed for the purpose of this study. These are presented thematically, below.

Of those 45, 20 were in the area of 'youth work', 13 'social work', six 'schools' and two were across multiple settings, and two were in therapeutic settings. The review was particularly interested in who was responsible for setting boundaries. Most articles appeared unclear as to who was maintaining boundaries, however 12 were written with the assumption workers were responsible for maintaining boundaries, five assumes leaders and managers, two assumed clients, and one each for co-created with young people, professional bodies, or the government.

Boundary challenges with young people in online spaces

A dominant theme in the literature are those specific challenges to maintaining appropriate boundaries within online spaces. Sometimes these were analogous to any form of lone-working with service users (Gibbons 2019, Barsky 2020), and other times the online space amplified the ambiguity of the professional/client relationship of the physical world (Eriksen & Seland 2020). However, there were some boundary issues that appeared unique to online relationships.

Confidentiality was perhaps one of the largest amplifications of boundary issues that already existed, and in some cases was unique. Cook and Zchomler (2020) reported clients were often less secure in talking about serious issues over the internet possibly because of the risk other household members could overhear (Hung et al 2021), there were issues with the privacy of apps being used and the ability for others to access private information or monitor conversations (Baker et al 2014, Barskey 2020, Chan & Holosko 2017, Gibbons 2019) although these concerns were relaxed in some contexts during the pandemic (CCCP 2020), and there was doubt over how to react to accidental disclosure of personal information that may imply a client was at risk (Schwartz et al 2014). Then there was the opportunity for the workers to self-disclose personal information (Gibbons 2019), perhaps

accidentally but may still affect young people's assumptions about the relationship and, therefore, should be avoided (Zaremohzzabieh et al 2016, k12teacherstaffdevelopment.com n.d., Rosenberg and Asterham 2018).

Self-disclosures were also considered to be amplified by online methods, as service users were reported sending 'mixed content' messages that had some information pertinent to the professional conversation alongside less formal information assumed to be peripheral to that relationship (Durgungöz & Durgungöz 2021), and in other ways clients may be more likely to attempt to create dual relationships with online methods (Reamer 2013).

The risk of miscommunication was also assumed to be greater, particularly as any misinterpretation of messages could not be rectified in real-time as easily as face-to-face conversations (Chan & Ngai 2019, Rosenberg et al 2020). There were also fewer paralinguistic clues that this was a professional relationship (tone, intimation, speed, etc) with online messages (and in some cases, video calls) compared to physical meetings (AASW 2016a, Cook & Zschomler 2020, Durgungöz & Durgungöz 2021, Hung et al 2021).

Normative practices in the face of these challenges

A range of practices appeared to be developed in response to online professional encounters. The medium of communication should be appropriate to the message, e.g. email for more formal demands (AASW 2016a). In the guidance by k12teacherstaffdevelopment.com (n.d., but presumed in response to the pandemic), teachers in the US were recommended to use group chats only and maintain appropriate formal language (c.f CCCP 2020), with conversations saved for transparency (c.f. Gibbons 2019, Barskey 2020). However, in other studies teachers were deliberately being less formal and using emoticons during written chats (Durgungöz & Durgungöz 2021)

In other professions, online contact was seen as an extension of online contact rather than a distinct form of practice in its own right (Melvin 2018), however the pandemic provided social workers opportunities for 'virtual home visits' (Cook & Zschomler 2020) and new opportunities to engage creatively with children and young people with personalised activities, backgrounds to video calls, etc (Cook & Zschomler 2020).

Activities that were explicitly mentioned as suitable for online encounters before the pandemic included included one to one teaching (Asterhan and Rosenberg 2015), monitoring pupil wellbeing (Asterhan and Rosenberg 2015), and for youth and social workers an increased awareness of services offered (Chan & Ngai 2019, MYA 2021b). This use of social media was already also being used for managing first contact with young people and recruiting new service users (Chan & Holosko 2017) and information sharing (Rosenberg and Asterham 2018). Online methods were also being used to conduct assessment of needs (Chan & Ngai 2019) and allow the early detection of risky behaviours (Rosenberg et al 2020). Specific interventions that were run online focussed on supporting young people in developing digital literacy and online safeguarding (Cohlmeyer 2014, Connolly 2014, Digital Youth Work 2020, Kiviniemi & Kriauciunas 2016, Melvin 2018, NYA 2020a).

From young people's perspective, a key benefit from increased online work was accessibility. Online spaces were perceived as accessible spaces (Chan & Ngai 2019, Conradie 2015a, Digital Youth Work 2020) not restricted by geography (Cohlmeyer 2014) or time (Hung et al 2021), with increased availability for service users in youth work (Cook & Zschomler 2020), although the expectation was to keep the same hours in teaching (CCCP 2020)

Typically, practitioners would avoid (or be prevented from using) personal accounts (CCCP 2020, Conradie 2015a, Reamer 2013) and often make use of non-personal hardware too (AASW 2016a). However young people are not afforded the same boundary and often engage with personal accounts that mean workers may have access to personal information that is not reciprocated (Conradie 2015a). Some practitioners were reported using personal accounts, especially where there are dual roles (Conradie 2015a)**.** Practitioners are also prevented from accepting friend requests as this will provide access to unintentional information and self disclosures (Reamer 2017)

How decisions are made around online work.

The literature review provided some evidence of how organisations are, or could be, making decisions in these online spaces. Banks et al (2020) recommend closer support from colleagues, employers and professional associations while navigating these, highlighting MacIntyre's (1980) notion that professional wisdom is collective as much as individual. Training and mentoring should also be ongoing to deal collectively with new boundary issues as they arise (Schwartz et al 2014), particularly if there is role ambiguity caused by the move to online work (Eriksen & Seland 2020).

However, there is a more general awareness that practitioners may lack digital literacy skills and technical skills to ensure they work on platforms appropriately (Chan & Holosko 2017, Höylä & Reponen 2019a, Kiviniemi & Kriauciunas 2016, Pawluczuk et al 2018). The shifting landscape of social media and the way young people consume the internet can mean we need young people's involvement when considering good practice online (Kiviniemi & Kriauciunas 2016, Boahen 2020), because knowledge becomes out of date quickly.

The development of boundaries in these areas are generally being maintained by practitioners, but set externally. For example, teachers, by applying school rules, not responding to messages outside the scope of the professional relationship, and encouraging independence are maintaining the boundaries set by the school (Asterhan and Rosenberg 2015, CCCP 2020). Governments (Asterhan and Rosenberg 2015) and organisations (Baginskey and Manthorpe 2020) have previously set the boundary on which apps and methods of online communication are allowed – however sometimes these were relaxed during the pandemic to allow workers to make use of methods young people were already engaged with (Baginskey and Manthorpe 2020). There is some evidence in the pandemic of social workers having greater discretion over when and where to apply national and organisational policies around digital social work (Banks 2020).

These boundaries are also set by organisations as part of their duty of care for staff, recognising online communication can be more invasive (Baginskey and Manthorpe 2020).

The space for professional wisdom in the setting of boundaries for online encounters with young people.

In this paper we have argued that the social professions are, typically, housed in risk-averse organisations that promote a homogenising of practise at the expense of professional judgement. The pandemic highlighted the need for greater thought around professional wisdom in online spaces partly because previously the opportunities for engaging with young people online were considered too 'risky'.

Where, then, is the space for professional wisdom during online encounters with young people? Our literature review suggests four key places: How to work with rapidly shifting online landscapes and advances in technology; being able to identify and work within any role confusion young people may

have while utilising online technologies; being wise to possible miscommunications; creating activities, interventions, and encounters that meet the aims of the relationship.

Allowing the manifestation of professional wisdom within these online encounters requires the self-regulating of behaviours (Stichter 2016) that may be common with online communications, but may perhaps harm the professional relationship. If a practitioner's usual approach to online communication is, for example, social communication they may become more informal - as the professional virtual space may feel identical to the social virtual space (i.e. using the same apps), and the other paralinguistic and visual clues (e.g. intonation, uniform, building, etc) are not present, it is understandable that a practitioner may draw more from their social experiences of conversation than their professional experiences. It may be that informality is intentional and leads to improved outcomes for young people or greater depth of relationship building, however this should be deliberate and regulated, and that requires, we contend, decisions rooted in an overt understanding of the aims of the relationship and how to achieve those aims.

The concerns around online encounters with young people highlights the relationship between technical skills and professional wisdom (Carr 2006: 172; Dunne 2011). It is wise to understand the modes of communication available online and the norms of online communication to limit the possibility of miscommunication or accidental and unhelpful self-disclosure through failing to properly protect private accounts. Therefore before engaging in this work sufficient training should be conducted – although as mentioned, in the literature review, this training requires the voices of young people who inhabit those rapidly changing online spaces and are experts in subtle and nuanced forms of communication. Equally, as recommended by some of the literature, overt opportunities to learn from experience and reflect on practice is important, particularly with service user perspectives informing our reflections (Banks and Gallagher 2009: 79, 91).

In fact, despite the best training and ongoing reflection, it is the rapid nature of changing methods of communication and 'memes' that may fundamentally shift the meaning of shared conversations online, so that it is particularly true that 'rules, protocols and prescriptions cannot cover every eventuality' with online encounters (Banks and Gallagher 2009: 72). Therefore an integrated approach to both rationality and 'artistry', to predictability and improvisation, is particularly required with online encounters. In this sense, professional wisdom includes "sensitivity to and the ability to perceive the ethically salient features of a situation, empathy with the feelings, values, desires and perspectives of the people involved and the ability to exercise moral imagination" (Banks 2013: 12). That is to say – social professionals will require the ability to discern potential ethical issues where others may not see them – where an understanding of a declined 'friend' request may predictably equate to feelings of rejection by a young person who is already dealing with rejection in other areas of life, or the ongoing conversation out-of-hours that may feed into a young person's less-healthy need for attachment perhaps require the ability to move beyond specific protocols and think holistically about the aims of the relationship, norms within the community of practice, and the potential consequences of any (in)action.

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