

Application of Technology Framework:

The Mockingbird Society's Youth Programs

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Modern technology and media are now considered a part of everyday life for those living in industrialized communities. In fact, young people in the United States between the ages of 13-18 spend an average of almost nine hours on various media activities each day (Rideout, 2015). Since modern technology and media are a significant context that young people today interact with and within it is important for youth development professionals to understand the impact that technology access and technology use has on the development trajectory of the young people they serve. The purpose of this paper will be to evaluate The Mockingbird Society's Youth Programs integration of technology in respects to positive youth development practices. In addition, recommendations for improvement will be provided.

Summary of Theory

Several theories, models, and frameworks exist that connect modern technology and positive youth development. The co-construction model posits that the online environment is connected to the offline/physical environment in a bi-directional manner (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). Furthermore, this model outlines that an individual's offline/physical life will be mirrored in their online activity (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). Another useful framework is the Positive Technological Development (PTD) framework which is described by Bers (2012). This framework outlines the connection between personal assets, technology behaviors, and the context of practice as a theoretical model for the use of technology in positive youth development (Bers, 2012). The PTD framework was expanded from the concepts of technology literacy (mastery of skills) and technology fluency (capacity to use technology easily) to include the idea that technology can also impact the psychosocial, cultural, and emotional development of youth (Bers, 2012). PTD utilizes the six C's of positive youth development (PYD) to describe the desired individual asset outcomes. The six C's of PYD are competence, character,

connections, confidence, caring, and contribution (Lerner et al., 2005). The second component of the PTD framework is six C's of technology mediated behaviors which include content creation, creativity, choices of conduct, communication, collaboration, and community building (Bers, 2012). Through the technology mediated behaviors which can occur in a variety of contexts, including both school and out-of-school time programming, individual assets can be developed (Bers, 2012).

Description of Setting

The Mockingbird Society is a non-profit advocacy organization in Washington state that works to improve the foster care system and end youth homelessness. Mockingbird's Youth Programs work with youth and young adults with lived experience of foster care and/or homelessness between the ages of 13-25, helping them gain skills and advocate for the supports they need to thrive in life. Mockingbird operates seven regional chapters throughout the state. While technology may not be considered integral to the programming, it is nonetheless utilized in three key ways. First, Youth Programs Staff utilize various technology strategies including text, email, and Facebook to outreach, engage, and connect with program participants. Typical social media interactions include meeting reminders. Second, program participants are supported in writing for The Mockingbird Society's online blog. In writing blogs, participants may use various word processing programs. Finally, in the past year Chapter Leaders, who are program participants employed part-time to provide leadership for each of the program chapters, have been encouraged to set up professional Facebook accounts for peer-to-peer outreach, engagement, and advocacy education.

Evaluation of Setting

Overall, Mockingbird's technology integration strategies exhibit several attributes of Positive Technological Development. The first area, staff utilization of modern technology to outreach and engage with program participants, includes at least two of the six C's of technology mediated behaviors. Specifically, the interactions result in youth participating in communication and community building activities. These activities are linked to the PYD C's of connecting and contribution. Blog creation also includes several of the technology mediated behaviors. Youth work on content creation and in a creative way. They are also participating in communication, collaboration, and community building activities as they work with staff and other participants to brainstorm content ideas and then to create and edit the content. These activities are related to the positive youth development aspects of competence, character, confidence, caring, and contribution. As the participants create more content, they grow in their competence in written and/or oral communication. Since the content is usually around participant's life experience in foster care or homelessness and the desire to make positive systemic changes, youth are developing their sense of character, caring for other, and contribution to the community. Through all of this work, youth are gaining confidence in their skills and their ability to be an expert in what needs to be changed in the system. Finally, for the participant staff engaging in professional Facebook accounts, all six C's of technology mediated behavior can be observed. This activity is similar to blog creation in the technology mediated activities and developmental asset outcomes. Of particular importance, this activity also includes the choice of conduct. Through their Facebook posts and personal messages, Chapter Leaders explore and learn to have professional interactions through social media. This opportunity allows the participant staff to develop in the character, connection, confidence, and caring aspects of positive youth development.

Suggestion for improvement

In evaluating the technology utilization of Mockingbird's Youth Programs, the overall suggestion for improvement would be for program staff to be more intentional in their technology integration efforts. While some positive practices are being utilized it is not with any real intention. Currently, modern technology is viewed as a tool for program staff to use and not as a context in which positive youth development can occur, which does not fit with the co-construction model or the PTD framework. For example, Facebook is generally used as mode of communicating program reminders. However, there is potential for the social media platform to be more fully utilized as a place for collaboration and to build community. Each chapter has its own private Facebook group which could be utilized to post questions for program participants about their common experiences and thoughts on potential advocacy ideas. This would allow for greater communication and connection of participants with each other. Another suggestion for improvement would be to include improved technology literacy and fluency as part of the program outcomes. Currently, the only stated outcome for supporting participants in completing blog posts is to increase their written communication skills. By including improved technology literacy and fluency in the outcomes, Youth Programs staff might be more intentional in providing youth opportunities and support in learning to use word processing and other content creation tools and platforms. Finally, clear guidelines should be created and provided to staff for their social media presence. Participant staff who are present in both a personal and professional capacity with other program participants need clear guidelines and perhaps training on the impact that different uses of social media can have on their personal and professional offline lives. This improvement would focus on providing the Chapter Leaders greater support in the choice of conduct activities currently provided by Mockingbird.

Conclusion

Modern technology should be considered a context in which youth exist and development (Bers, 2012). As such, youth development professionals should be intentional in their utilization of modern technology in youth programming. The Positive Technological Development framework serves as a useful model to evaluate youth programs integration of beneficial technology activities to encourage positive youth development. The Mockingbird Society's Youth Programs serves as a prime example of the need for youth professionals to think critically about the integration of social media for participant outreach and engagement. As social media platforms are utilized by more young people it will become more important for youth development professionals to be intentional in their use of these platforms.

References

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