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THE MEDIA PRODUCTION METHODOLOGY: USING MEDIA PRODUCTION TO EMPOWER YOUNGSTERS WITH FEWER OPPORTUNITIES: THE EDITORIAL BOARD SIMULATION PRACTICE

Abstract: The focus of this research project is on how encouraging youngsters with fewer opportunities to experiment with different media production methods can help establish social inclusion. The results of the used methods are twofold: the development of transferable social skills and the improvement or acquisition of new digital skills. The target groups are children and youngsters in vulnerable households, youngsters under legal custody, newcomers and refugees. Deeper analysis of this experimental methodology indicates that, aside from an efficient practice, this is a fairly unique approach. Social skills are as such defined as attitudes that allow youngsters to fully participate in the society, stimulating them to take responsibility, work in groups, reach out to others, present themselves, etc. The eventual goal is the empowerment of youngsters as 'citizens that matter' through promotion of agency and ownership of their media products. Ideologically and scientifically, this practice stems from a strength-based practice and capability approach. The used media production practices involve various digital skills like sound- and video-recording and editing, smartphone reporting, interview and reporting techniques, live broadcasting, etc. These new abilities tend to provide the target group with an improved degree of media literacy and broadly applicable social and digital competences. An indispensable asset and added value in today's labour force, it more importantly has the potential to boost self-esteem and foster social promotion. The aforementioned projects are executed by the NGO Quindo, a Belgian media lab. The organization has three objectives in its mission statement: primarily informing youngsters on relevant local news, secondly, educational (predominantly through a partnership with Howest University College, and lastly, social inclusion (as the presented project demonstrates). Supported by the Public Centres of Societal Wellbeing (PCSW's), Quindo researches various approaches and methods for social empowerment and e-inclusion involving media production, to strengthen youngsters with fewer opportunities.

Keywords: media production, education, youngsters, practice

INTRODUCTION

Despite a vast body of research and numerous publications on e-inclusion initiatives and digital literacies, it is remarkable that practices involving youngsters with fewer opportunities are hardly included. Van Dijk (2005: 21) describes four access gaps: mental, material, skill-based and usage-related. This research focuses on the skills gap in youngsters with fewer opportunities in particular. The analysis builds upon the digital skills framework presented by Van Dijk and Van Deursen (2010: 5). This framework consists of four types of digital skills, namely formal skills, operational skills, information skills and strategic skills. Additionally, the social skills framework by Thompson (2015: xv) will be employed, which includes personal effectiveness skills, interaction skills and intervention skills.

Recognizing that mental, material and usage gaps contribute substantially to exclusionary implications for youngsters, this methodology focuses on the development of digital skills as well as transferable social skills, through the production of media. The practice of media production by youngsters with fewer opportunities as a way to enhance digital and social skills and establish social inclusion, as such, has received little to no academic attention to date. This paper investigates the implications of applying that media production methodology, within the context of the long-running social work project 'Radio Respect' by NGO Quindo, in Kortrijk, Flanders.

THE MEDIA PRODUCTION METHODOLOGY

Social work practice includes four levels of professional conduct. They can be thought of in a hierarchical manner (as represented in figure 1),
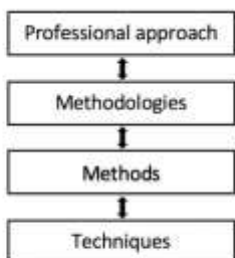

Figure 1: levels of professional conduct
Source: Abdallah, Kooijmans and Sonneveld, 2016 (own translation)

but are also subject to cross-level interactions. The highest level is the used professional approach, which often depends on the attitude and mentality of the individual social worker (Abdallah et al., 2016: 25). As described above, this is a strength-based, client-centred and empowerment-oriented approach.

The second level of the taxonomy concerns different methodologies. These consist of a coherent combination of specific worldview, perspectives on mankind, the set goals, used methods and existing scientific insights (Hildago and Baert, 1986, in: Abdallah et al., 2016: 26). The methodologies set predefined goals and select the most fitting methods, techniques and tools (Abdallah et al, 2014: 26). In respect to the case study at hand, the research methodology is called 'media production methodology'.

The method applied within the context of the underlying research study is the editorial board simulation (EBS). The EBS entails an interactive experiential groupwork simulation of a radio editing board, formalized as a workshop in which a group of youngsters make their own live radio show. This procedure is often used as a first point of contact with a group that has no prior experience involving radio. The workshop is essentially open-ended, in the sense that nothing is decided in advance: the group has to discuss name, content, roles and music. Longer projects can involve several EBSs.

Mariën et al. (2010: 8) recognize the so-called learning divide: youngsters with fewer opportunities are less likely to participate in formal education because of earlier negative learning experiences and lower levels of self-esteem. Mariën et al. (2010: 08) identify these lower levels of self-esteem and self-confidence as hindering to social integration and thus exacerbating chances of social exclusion. The target group involves 12-to-25-year-olds experiencing fewer opportunities, often in structurally disadvantaged and vulnerable households. This specifically includes minors under legal custody, newcomers and refugees. Mariën et al. (2010: 8) postulates that one of the main goals should be to engage youngsters in learning activities prompting positive learning experience. The aforementioned methodology does that by means of the described strengths-based client-centred and empowerment-oriented approaches, which aggrandize agency, ownership and success experiences.

SOCIAL INCLUSION AND EMPOWERMENT

The presented media production methodology presupposes an integrated approach to social work, as described by Healy (2011: 3). Effective social work takes into account three levels: the individual micro-level, work on mezzo-level with groups and working on macro-level with communities, signalling function to and interaction with policymakers (Healy, 2011: 3). Our

methodology has been developed and tested in the context of Flemish youth social work. The Dutch-speaking region of Belgium has a long youth work history, in which youth social work is the branch that targets youngsters with fewer opportunities in their leisure time (Van de Walle et al., 2011: 3).

On the assumption that the basic effectivity requirements have been fulfilled, the media production methodology does allow social workers to work on all three of the levels expressed earlier. This paper zones in on the application and impact of the EBS and RE-methods on the mezzo-level, working with groups up to twelve participants. During the fine-tuning process of the methodology, tests and evaluations have also been conducted on micro and macro-level.

In working with youngsters with fewer opportunities, the methodology aims at empowerment through the development of transferable social and digital skills. Positive learning experiences have a constructive impact in the growing of self-image and self-confidence, which in turn may break potential preexisting unfavorable experiences with learning, as well as (vicious circles of) negative self-fulfilling prophecies.

In using media production as a tool to empower youngsters with fewer opportunities, social inclusion is always the eventual goal. Though social inclusion has often been used as the perfect solution to the problem-centered concept of social exclusion, Schirmer and Michailakis (2015: 61) argue that both aren't necessarily good or bad concepts. Working towards social inclusion, on micro level, takes the form of (re)orientating the youngster towards being '*includable*' (Schirmer and Michailakis, 2015: 46) in society. Social inclusion, as conceptualized by Luhmann (2000) and explained by Schirmer and Michailakis (2015: 46-64) through social systems theory, is never established on micro level, as it sees the client as one actor in a complicated network of social relationships and different (complex) systems. Central to Luhmann's (2000) approach is the communications theory. He believes that society consists of different communicational structures, rather than groups of people or their actions. Luhmann theoretizes this as follows: *"Inclusion means that human beings are held relevant in communication, i.e. they are considered as communicative addresses, as persons, as bearers of roles, as accountable actors"* (Schirmer and Michailakis, 2015: 53; Luhmann, 2005: 226; Nassehi, 2002: 127).

According to these reference frameworks, inclusion is established through the reception of roles. The authors postulate the existence of two

types of roles: performance roles and layman roles. The first category contains roles of key figures in certain systems (entrepreneurs in the economy, politicians in politics, scientists in science…). The layman-category exists of the roles of consumers, voters, clients… (Schirmer and Michailakis, 2015: 54). As the role of the welfare state is to support and secure all its citizens, the capacity of social work can be seen as a fail-safe: everyone who slips through the uniform and general approach of the welfare state needs a specific and individualized approach. Social work, as such, may well be redefined as 'exclusion management' (Scherr, 1999: 2). The role of social workers is therefore not to include clients into society or specific systems – which essentially they would not at all be able to do anyway – but to support the client in (re)gaining communicative relevance for existing systems (Schirmer and Michailakis, 2015: 60). In other words: the target set to the social worker is to encompass empowerment of the individuals themselves and to ameliorate their aptness and attractiveness to the existing systems. Social workers have to meet the impact generated on the micro level with different efforts on mezzo and macro-level, to dismantle structural disempowerment systems.

Empowerment-oriented social work, i.e. gearing individuals towards taking control and ownership over one's own life, includes five key components: social action, political awareness, the entitlement to opinion and the ability to exercise that prerogative, recognition of competences and the use of power (Breton, 1994a: 24-28). Whereas Breton (1994a: 23-37) writes about empowerment of the oppressed, according to Freire (1970: 23), the components are transferable to individual work on the micro level in a group context. Breton, in turn, emphasizes the importance of addressing disempowerment structures at macro-level (1994b: 29).

The strength-based perspective recognizes, uses and develops the different strengths, interests, capabilities and skills of the client (Healy, 2014: 161). The perspective builds on a positive attitude towards the client rather than focusing on shortcomings, failure and deficits (Healy, 2011: 65). Healy (2011: 17) suggests that all methods of practice involve four phases: engagement, assessment, intervention and evaluation/termination. These phases are recognized in the media production methodology, but in contrast to Healy's phases, the methodology does not necessarily involve problem solving. Following through on the basics of the strength-based perspective, the discussed methodology provides clients with opportunities rather than focusing on problems. This is, of course, only possible in a context where

basic necessities have been fulfilled and the client is able to move forward in life. The strength-based perspective puts the identified strengths of the client at the center of that process, aiming at the realization of empowerment through promotion of competences (Breton, 1994b: 28). Breton discusses a number conditions leading to competence and empowerment. In the used methodology three of these can be recognized: trust in the client, recognition of skills and abilities and the creation of partnerships. Mutual trust is pivotal in this process.

In sum, the media production methodology builds upon **[1] a strength-based perspective** and capabilities approach: skills and abilities are recognized, used and developed (Breton, 1994a: 27; Healy, 2011: 14). The social professional focusses on talent development through the strengthening of knowledge, skill, quality and attitude (competences). Moreover, the media production methodology requires **[2] a client-centered and client-oriented approach**: the youngster is at center of the process and owns the content, the timing and medium. Additionally, the media production methodology assumes **[3] an empowerment-oriented approach**: everything that happens in the context of the long-running and overarching Radio Respect-project aims at the continued process of empowerment and the eventual empowered situation, by analogy with Breton (1994b: 28-29). Finally, the media production methodology draws on [4] **the context of a broad local network** (Breton, 1994b: 39)**:** involving individuals, communities, institutions and organizations, both in the context of the client, as well as in the context of Quindo and the city of Kortrijk.

DIGITAL AND SOCIAL SKILLS

The media production methodology aims at the development of transferable digital and social skills. The focal point of this section is on the used skills frameworks.

According to Van Dijk and Van Deursen (2010: cont5) digital skills consist of four types of transferable skills. First, the operational **[1]** and formal skills **[2];** these comprise the necessary abilities to use and consume digital media, consult interfaces to acquire information and to navigate to and through digital environments. The operational level combined with the formal skills constitute the medium-related skills. Then, there are the content-based skills to be considered: these encompass the necessary skills to navigate

towards and query information-based sources, channels and repositories. They can be subdivided into the **[3]** informal skills and the **[4]** strategic skills. These content-based skills are mainly concerned with the selection and evaluation of retrieved information, the further application of that information and the considered utilization of various media to reach a particular goal (Van Dijk and Van Deursen, 2010: 7; Deweppe et al., 2016: 12). The specific digital skills developed through the EBS-method focus on sound and video recording and editing, smartphone reporting, interview and reporting techniques, live broadcasting, etc. The methods contain the development of medium-related skills, but predominantly focus on the content-related skills. Even though a basic level of medium-related literacy is indispensable, in the EBS, youngsters have to search, select and process information that fits the concept of their radio show. They are stimulated to develop strategic skills and simulate the role of a professional media producer, including the available tools, contacts and privileges. As such, they *'orient, act and decide upon audiovisual information to reach a particular goal and eventually gain benefits'* (Van Dijk, 2005: 75).

Social skills, the skills that allow people to function in relation to each other, can be divided into three skill groups: personal effectiveness, interaction skills and intervention skills (Thompson, 2015: xv). Although Thompson (2015: xv) developed this people skills framework in the context of social professionals and so-called people workers, we believe the general framework to also be applicable to social skills in a broader context of everyday use. The first skill group, personal effectiveness, covers skills like social resilience, self-awareness, assertiveness and time management, all of which are continuously challenged and strenuously applied during EBS. The second group of social skills, the interaction skills, comprise communication skills, influencing skills, conflict management, disciplinary work etc. These are evidently practiced in interpersonal interactions (Thompson, 2015: 83), and are overtly provided in a natural way through groupwork methods as EBS. Correspondingly, as the used method requires the youngsters involved to research their own topics, they often find themselves in the need to interact with third parties in several ways. The third skillset contains several intervention skills, such as planning, decision making and reflection (Thompson, 2015: 181). These are skills easily associated with editorial settings where the processes of information gathering, restructuring, framing

and presenting are constantly at play. Youngsters ardently practice these in the EBS-session.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The empirical research of the media production methodology consists of an in-depth analysis of collected data from the past five years, in which the methodology was first successfully enacted with different target groups, focusing on the fine-tuning of different applicable methods and techniques. The resulting data includes a description of the involved group (numbers and vulnerable situation), the method used, the goals set, the amount of time the youngsters spent working on the project, the exact content of the workshops and sessions, the amount and type of media products produced, an estimation of the of the digital skill levels prior to the beginning of each project and the resulting skill levels at the end of it.

The involved target groups are: youngsters in special education programs (14 to 16 year old), early school leavers (14 to 18 year old), newcomers and refugees (9 to 22 year old) and youngsters under legal custody (12 to 18 year old). Drawing upon a simplified form of the measurement method of digital skills provided by Van Dijk (2005: 75), the youngsters' digital skills were quantified onto an ordinal scale, where 0 represents little to no digital skills, 1 represents basic operational skills, 2 entails formal skills, 3 indicates that also informational skills are present and finally 4 denotes that additionally, the subject can avail oneself of strategic skills. Their skills were rated both before the project and afterwards.

The development of social skills within the target group was documented by the professional social workers close to the group and its individuals. These evaluations were collected and qualitatively coded on mentioned social skills, using Thompson's division of personal effectiveness skills, interaction skills and intervention skills (2015: xv).

The results of five years of avid experimentation according to said methods, has resulted in a substantial matrix of quantifiable results. This matrix enables us to cautiously draw a number of preliminary conclusions. These will eventually be cross-referenced with testimonies, involving six focus groups with youngsters who participated in the diverse set of projects and were exposed to the researched methodology. The findings will bring

about a conclusion on the efficiency and effectiveness of the media production methodology.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Specialist assessment indicates that the overall progress in terms of digital skills for all the individuals in all of the participating groups evolved from an average score of 1,5 at the zero measurement point to an average of 2,9 as the value for the effects measurement after completion of the procedure. This means that, globally speaking, participants move from being able to operate the used devices (radio studio, computer, smartphone…) on a fairly basic level with some understanding of the medium to being capable to understand, interpret and process collected information with and through those media. With an average increase of 1,4 points on said scale, the smallest attested increment (1,1) was be observed in a project that contained only two EBS-sessions. The biggest augmentation was seen in a project that contained eight separate EBS-sessions, with a group score increase for digital skills with no less than 3.0 full points. Likewise, extensive advance can be observed in group scores for projects involving youngsters under legal custody, where the average amelioration of digital skills ranges around 2 points.

Similarly, in terms of the improvement of socials skills, the evaluations by the social workers show provide useful insights. The social workers involved mainly attest progress in personal effectiveness skills, continuing that self-confidence, broadening of interests and discovering of talents are among the chief areas of skill advancement. Social workers and custodians also corroborate progress in perceived self-image, reflection, stress management and social resilience.

As for the category of the intervention skills, the most commonly recognized progress is said to be 'reaching a common goal'. Moreover, multiple respondents hinted at various communication skills and the participants' increased ability to recognize each other's qualities.

Recognized interaction skills include "helping others", "listening", "respect for tools" and "respect for structures". When interviewed on their view on possible success factors of the method, the social workers identified the extraordinary atmosphere of the radio medium, the peculiar status of 'radio maker' the youngsters assign themselves, the relatively big amount of responsibility given to the youngsters and the use of their own music and

production of content of their own interests as being essential to the success of the EBS.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the collected data shows a positive impact on the development of the social and digital skills of the youngsters involved. Projects including more EBS have a bigger impact on the development of digital skills. Several social skills, specifically those in the category of the personal effectiveness skills, were also enhanced. The identified success factors can be linked to the professional approaches required by the methodology, hinting on the affirmation of the effectiveness. Several of the social workers involved mentioned impact of the acquired status of 'radio maker', which is a specific performance role within the aforementioned framework of Schirmer and Michailakis (2015: 54). First, it implies being a relevant communicator, which Luhmann (2000) recognizes as a basic requirement for social inclusion, and can be seen as being a crucial part of the empowerment-oriented approach. Secondly, the interviewed fieldworkers identified the great amount of responsibility given to the youngsters as being essential. This can be related to the applied strength-based approach, in which the capabilities of the youngsters are trusted, as indicated by Healy (2011: 14). Results also confirmed that the client-centered approach manifested itself greatly through the all-important use of their own music; this form of agency concerning content was mentioned as crucial to the success of EBS.

Even though demonstrable progress is made on the three different categories of social skills, it should be further examined whether (and how) these skills impact the self-confidence of the youngsters and the empowerment effect in a broader societal perspective. Further research into the stimulated and developed social skills is indispensable to identify the projects' ramifications in terms of transferable social skills. Analysis of the media production methodology could focus on the impact on the development of specific transferable digital and social skills of which the outcome, in turn, could improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the methodology, among others, within the process of empowering the youngsters involved and closing existing digital and social divides.

To research the complete media production methodology, other methods applied throughout the longstanding "Radio Respect"-project yet

remain to be analyzed. These include interactive games, storytelling and full participation projects. Extending the research to additional target groups might provide additional opportunity to test the validity of the methodology, as expansion into the context of divergent professional approaches should substantiate proof of its universality.

Finally, we acknowledge that there are still formidable opportunities to enhance the learning outcome of EBS through the implementation of thorough (individual and group-based) reflection on the learning opportunities and their own behavior. As the state of the research stands, we have only begun to scratch the surface of more advanced findings latent in the substantial body of data. Further research may help elucidate the impact of the method, and hopefully, through better understanding of its effects, EBS may well find more adoption and following in the field of social work.

In sum, to fully assess and establish the methodology's effects on the development of transferable social and digital skills, more data needs to be collected. Further research could involve adapted measuring methods of digital skills. The reduced ordinal scale- measurement based on the "four media skills"-model by Van Dijk (2005: 75) exhibits shortcomings and could be adjusted to ameliorate the evaluation's efficiency and precision, as is the case with the used social skills framework. Moreover, conclusions drawn can then be additionally validated, involving focus groups with youngsters who actually participated in the diverse set of projects and that underwent the researched methodology. These findings will bring about more nuanced conclusions on the benefits of the media production methodology.

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