

Cn I jus txt, coz I don wan 2b heard: Mobile technologies and youth counselling

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When integrating new technologies into practice, we tend to think of ourselves as designers or directors of our own practices. In contrast, this paper considers how technologies may be shaping practices and/or shaping us. In studying change as communication and computer technologies are integrated within a community youth counselling centre, I explore the web of relations where human and non-human actors have influence. The research presented in this paper is informed by actor-network theory (ANT), an approach investigating the material semiotics of what shapes, and is shaped. In this paper the particular and peculiar effects of text messaging for counselling are considered. The effects are not considered in terms of being *good* or *bad*. To this author, attempting such normative evaluation is like asking: is talking to strangers good or bad? The answer must be: *it depends*. Whether the changes that occur are anticipated, desirable, able to be enhanced or moderated requires a fuller picture of processes involved. Initial findings suggest there are implications for educators considering this medium whether providing pastoral care or in integrating text messaging as a medium for learning.

Keywords: mobile technology, SMS messaging, text messaging, text counselling

Introduction

In changing the ways people are talking, our relationships are altered, and this has impact on our work (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991) and even who we are, and how we are as people (Franklin, 1999; Haraway, 1997; McLuhan, 1964; Turkle, 1996, 2004, 2006).

Change related to the use of mobile devices has also captured the imagination of a number of educators, not least because such devices are a significant part of daily life (for example, Goggin, 2005; Pettit & Kukulska-Hulme, 2007; Turkle, 2006) and used to support online learning (see Armatas, Holt, & Rice, 2005; Attewell, 2005). With more educational opportunities being offered in blended forms and off campus, support services also need to consider flexible options. This paper therefore explores the application of mobile phones, and particularly text messaging, for counselling.

The site of this study is Youthline, New Zealand (named with permission). The findings reported are of research in progress. The research is based on participant observation, interviews and analysis of policy and text artifacts. While ethics approval has been granted by two University ethics committees, the ethical concerns of this study are ongoing. In making what is invisible, visible, there are risks. In leaving what is invisible, invisible, there are also risks. Star and Strauss (1999) provocatively ask, "Should the map simply be marked, 'here be dragons'?" I think not, but am careful in negotiating a path for this research. I align myself with their work and select what is made more or less visible informed by values of self-determination and social justice. In this paper, all data referred to is either with expressed consent, and/or has all identifying tags deleted, and/or may be altered to be representative rather than actual where there is any possibility of a person being identifiable.

This organisation chooses to relate to young people in the places where young people are, using the channels of communication that young people choose to use. To this end, Youthline New Zealand began text counselling in 2004 with good intent, enthusiastically, and naively. The use of the word naïve is not to imply a negative judgment; there simply was no evidence base for practice. This paper contributes to a developing evidence base for practice and provides a fuller picture of what's involved in the push-me-pull-you of changing practice. With changing practices, the only *certain* outcome of implementing a new technology is that things will change. In justifying new practice, or replacing existing practice a claim is made that things will be done better, faster, more efficiently. Such planned efficiency gains as referred to be Sproull and Kiesler (1991), justify the investment in the new technology. These authors also identify that in assembling a new mix of things, of technology and of people, people pay attention to different

things and depend on one another differently. This paper reports on some of these differences as they occur with changing technologies used for youth counselling by text.

The study is informed by actor-network theory, where the material semiotics of what shapes practice are explored (Law, 2007; Mol, 1999, 2002). Material semiotics involves mapping relationships that are simultaneously material (between things) and semiotic (between concepts). This places counselling as an outcome of relations, human and *otherwise*, planned and *otherwise*. This technosocial story of practice is not without a critical thread. In identifying the way practice is performed, an opportunity arises for the reader to consider things might be otherwise: Support might otherwise be unavailable. The mode of counselling previously offered was reflective; does a text base make it otherwise? In undertaking research, with the best intentions of enhancing practice, might it be otherwise?

A technosocial story of practice

Practice is shaped not just moment to moment but within contexts, and by paths laid down by previous performances. The paths laid down in this instance go to the heart of this organisation. The ability to alter paths is constrained as well as constructed by its charitable status and the philosophy espoused. This organisation's text counselling service was launched Christmas 2004, as the generous gift of a benevolent company opting to spend its Christmas card budget on a charitable trust so that a new SMS text messaging service supporting young people could be established. The use of text messaging was not planned, training counsellors in the medium did not occur. The funding of messages received and sent had yet to be negotiated, the establishment of the medium was contingent on goodwill. Contingencies continue; goodwill being dependent on the weather or such acts of God as sunshine as continued funding of this initiative was dependent on donations received through an annual large-scale event, "Christmas in the park". Paradoxically, goodwill, good intentions and sunshine, create a remarkably stable platform for practice.

The philosophy of the organisation is based on the work of Carl Rogers, a client-centred approach. The approach emphasises young people making meaning and working through solutions for themselves, a focus central within youth development espousing empowerment. Micro-counselling skills inherent in this approach include reflecting back what is heard, utilising active listening skills and empathy. Such skills are severely tested in shifting to text messaging. Nuances of verbal reflection are lost when the words are visible and self-evident. How then to maintain the integrity of the organisation and of the approach utilised? Remarkably, creative workarounds develop to reflect what these counsellors name as a strength's based approach where making contact is affirmed, the content of what is expressed is acknowledged, and empathy is portrayed:

G8 u cld call us.
sounds like ur
feeling down abt a
lot f thngs at th mo.
wt cn we do 2 hlp u?

Such workarounds develop out of patterns created in a past, and brought into a future; an ability to negotiate how things might be done differently, how skills might be "otherwise".

An actor-network account draws attention to the negotiations needed for a stable assembly of both social and technology actors being formed. The unruliness of these "actors" makes the task a difficult one for actors are both human and otherwise. The mobile phone as an actor places demands on human counterpart to act in certain ways to sustain functionality. Text based counselling is influenced not only by the persons on each end of a digital phone or computer, but also by the digital device. This is not to suggest that this actor has agency, but that it has influence. For example, it only works when charged; it therefore needs to enroll its user in maintaining its functionality. To act within this network, the mobile also needs a paid up contract with a service provider, be turned on, have sufficient memory space to send and receive messages, and be within reach of the provider's coverage area.

Service providers are also actors in this network. Service providers touting market share create the conditions where young people utilise texting because they can afford to. It could be otherwise, but present conditions create a pricing war and the preferred means of communications for a generation. The number to access the service is also subject to fragile relationships with major providers and their charitable commitments. The struggles of having one service provider charitably donating a free line produced costs for young people whose contract was with a competitor. Workarounds are creatively

engaged to minimise costs. A service contract to provide a community call centre becomes enrolled to provide further free access:

That sounds hard 4
her. She cn ring us
on 0800376633 so
we cn supprt her wit
this. She cn also ring
0800211211 jst ask
4 youthline

The means by which the organisation receives texts requires extensive commitment in enrolling human actors. Again this shows a technosocial application; the technology does not shape, deploy, or maintain itself and both young people and counsellors are in turn reconfigured by the technology at work. Having a 234 number is easily mistaken for a service providers "IOU" number (468), this provides opportunities for reconfiguring counsellors into advertising personal. However, not all counsellors take to having their work reconfigured. The lack of familiarity with the medium places some at a disadvantage yet to be bridged. For some there is the added work of conscious translation needed as the use of text is actively negotiated. For people texting in, a non-QWERTY keyboard needs to be negotiated. The use of a screen that only allows 160 characters in combination with a keyboard that makes frequent use letters such as s or vowels subject to multiple key pad entry inscribes more and less likely practice; a minimisation of time, effort and costs and/or use of texting that is deliberately cr8ive is apparent. Where predictive text is used, this too creates work requiring the human actor to attend to detail in checking words such as good and home, rain and pain. "I am nearly good" or "there is a lot of pain here" may not be what was intended. That "bal" is not new text speak but a request to Vodafone, takes tangential thinking. In getting a message across in 160 characters or less, the potential for distortion is considerable. There is effort involved in reshaping words to be recognisable as well as succinct. There is also significant work made to connect via a platform that allows fewer cues to be observed than might be the case in face-to-face or conventional telephone counselling. Deliberately entering into this subculture takes work.

Texting lends itself to certain ways of relating. The conversations are short and to the point:

I need s0me advice.
My parnts dnt knw im
sexually activ. How do
i tel them?

tht cn b a pretty tuff
topic 2 tlk abt wit
parents smtimes. ar u
unsure of hw 2 tel thm
coz u worried abt hw
thy wil react?

Maintaining the philosophical basis of being non-directive requires negotiations. The capacity to portray empathy, to affirm the text caller for making contact and to invite further interaction is no small feat in 160 characters and less, yet such negotiations occur. The lack of other cues creates tensions; there are no cues on the age of the person texting in. How then to proceed? The target age group for the service is between fourteen and twenty-four years, but texters may be otherwise. Such tensions continue to shape the practices involved. The answers to such dilemmas continue to be negotiated.

In attending to practice it becomes possible to see how texting as a medium is shaped, as well as shaping those who use it. The shape of text counselling is not given in the order of things; instead ontologies are brought into being. When I talk with counsellors such as Amy (a pseudonym), she identifies herself as being "a different Amy who text counsels to the Amy who does phones counselling, to the Amy who does face to face, and to the Amy who does emails." Even when each of these tasks may occur in the same geographical space, and where there is a rapid switch between the different media utilised. A sense of a distributed self emerges. The tendency to be more directive is evident in text messages inviting the texter to ring in, yet the same counsellor espouses a client-centred approach. This is a reshaping of what being client-centred means. Young people have a theme recurring repeatedly in their texts, saying:

Cn I jus txt
coz I don wan 2b hrd

Negotiations with an anonymous cohort of young people via text artifacts, is a different way of “listening” but provides an opportunity for practice to be shaped in ways that are responsive to what is “heard”. Creating an evidence base for such practice continues as a work in progress.

Conclusion

A lot occurs that is not clearly articulated by those involved. In giving voice through a technosocial story, relationships between actors shaping practice can be better known. I have presented some of the tensions and disquiets evident in an enactment of practice within youth counselling by Youthline, New Zealand. In articulating aspects of the technosocial story, there is opportunity for those words to travel, and for practice to be more widely reflected upon. In knowing what shapes, there is increased opportunity for knowing what might also be otherwise, and how practice might be shaped “for good”.

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