

#DIGIMPACT



SOCIAL IMPACT OF

# DITL YOUTH

WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR?

29 MAY 2019 // 10.00 - 15.30  
EDINBURGH NAPIER UNIVERSITY  
MERCHISTON CAMPUS



## About this research project

In recent years, the provision of out-of-school digital youth projects has become prominent in Scotland. The importance of informal digital education for young Scots was highlighted in the National Digital Strategy for Scotland, published in 2017. The Scottish Government's aim is to equip "children and young people with the increasingly sophisticated and creative digital skills they need to thrive in modern society and the workplace" (The Scottish Government, 2017, p.24).

While youth workers in Scotland have been provided with new funding and new digital tools to facilitate their work, the evaluation approaches have remained largely unchanged. There is limited knowledge of how digital youth projects in Scotland are being evaluated and how youth workers and young people experience the process of evaluation.

The purpose of this doctoral research project at Edinburgh Napier University was to develop knowledge of social impact evaluation of youth digital projects in Scotland. The data collection (interviews and focus groups with youth workers, and workshop with young people) took place in years 2017-2018. This research was carried out by Alicja Pawluczuk, supervised by Dr Gemma Webster, Dr Colin Smith & Prof Hazel Hall.

How do we experience  
impact evaluation of  
digital youth projects in  
Scotland?



"trying to force people to conform their work to pre-established numerical goals tends to stifle innovation and creativity"

(Muller, 2018, p.32)



This project provides evidence that problematic power dynamics play an important role in how youth workers and young people experience evaluation. It is striking that both groups feel the need to conform to the technocratic rationality of current social impact evaluation structures.

Evaluation requires youth workers and young people to perform their industry and socially imposed roles. In order to "pass" the evaluation and subsequently sustain/obtain future funding, youth workers tend to become "digital youth culture enthusiasts" and young people take on roles of the "grateful and improved versions of themselves".

Youth workers and young people believe that these structures do not work as they do not allow them to contribute authentic and critical evaluations of their digital youth projects.

Meaningful digital youth participation can and does take place in Scotland. However, this research indicates that their meaningful participation often ends when the evaluation process begins.

"Funders want to see it on paper. Even if you show them video proof, photo proof - all of it - that still doesn't make a difference. They want to see [us] as graphs and numbers"

(Adam, 18)



## Young people's experiences of evaluation

Young people struggle to articulate the exact purpose of the evaluation data collection. Whilst most young people acknowledge that their feedback is essential to justifying the project's funding, they also argue that the related anxiety and pressures of that process are barriers to fully examining and discussing the impact of their digital participation.

The results of this project indicate that young people:

- are more likely to talk about both positive and negative social impacts;
- believe that providing positive feedback is what is required from them;
- tend to describe evaluation as a formal 'exam-like' part of the project;
- perceive social impact as something that does not directly belong to them;
- view social impact as something that is externally managed and defined by adults in authority (e.g. youth workers, funders, teachers, or government bodies).

## Youth workers's experiences of evaluation

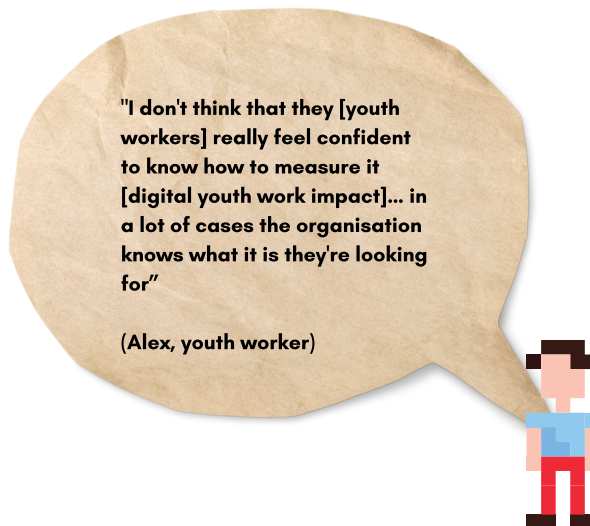
The analysis of the data indicates that youth workers' official understanding of social impact is largely influenced by the power dynamics in the evaluations system. Youth workers' interpretations of the real value of the 'change' associated with social impact revealed levels of both confusion and frustration in the digital youth work field in Scotland.

The results indicate that the digital youth workers:

- are under pressure to mainly report positive examples and stories of positive social impact;
- are concerned about the negative and often unreported impacts of digital youth projects.;
- often view social impact evaluation as a "box-ticking" exercise;
- believe that young projects participants are often over-evaluated;

"I don't think that they [youth workers] really feel confident to know how to measure it [digital youth work impact]... in a lot of cases the organisation knows what it is they're looking for"

(Alex, youth worker)



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## Youth and practitioner-led evaluation recommendations



# Youth and practitioner-led evaluation recommendations

## 1. Accessible

Both groups (youth workers and young people) indicated that current evaluation should become more accessible to young people, outlining that the language of evaluation is problematic. In the views of project participants (young people and youth workers), current evaluation vocabulary is difficult to understand and thus might exclude many young people from providing feedback. It is therefore recommended that evaluators consider the importance of acknowledging the needs of all young people, including possible learning difficulties (e.g. literacy, dyslexia) that might be barriers to evaluation form completion.

## 2. Anonymised

Young people's recommendation is that all evaluation data be anonymised. In their view, anonymity is an important element while sharing feedback. The results of this study indicate that anonymity is not only concerned with the provision of personal details but with providing a space where young people feel safe when completing their evaluation forms. As reported in this project, a safe space which respects young people's anonymity means having youth workers present to support the evaluation process but not monitoring its progress or its content over "young people's' shoulders".

## 3. Digital

Digital tools might be considered to supplement, improve, or replace some of the traditional evaluation tools (e.g. surveys, questionnaires). According to project participants, digital forms of evaluation (e.g. digital quizzes, dairies) could be particularly useful in the context of digital youth projects. Digital evaluation solutions are described as more appealing to young people for several reasons. Firstly, digital evaluation tools might provide a degree of participation and ownership of the process. Secondly, digital formats might offer more accessible and inclusive forms of evaluation (for example using different font sizes). Digital evaluation systems might provide an efficient system to collect and share data. Finally, digital tools were recommended as they might provide an extra level of anonymity during evaluation (e.g. a young person's hand writing style cannot be identified).

## 4. Encouraging critical reflection

According to project participants (young people and youth workers) evaluation should serve as critical and reflexive exercises. It is advocated that more emphasis should be placed on critical thinking and authentic analysis of impact. Young people should be encouraged to critically examine their experiences of a digital youth project - both positive and negative ones. As results of this project indicate, young people need extra support and reassurance to have the confidence to express their criticism. In the context of youth workers, it is recommended that external funders provide extra reassurance that it is okay to report young people's criticism of digital youth project in the evaluation reports.

## 5. Independent of funding

It is strongly recommended by project participants that evaluation should not be seen or serve as a tool to justify funding. According to the project participants, quantitative and monetary value centred evaluation of digital youth work should be avoided. It is advised that evaluation should serve as a learning and knowledge-sharing tool between young people, youth workers, and funders. The project has found that evaluation of youth projects should not function as a mechanism for financial reward and punishment, as this appears to have multiple negative impacts on all project participants.

## 6. Informed and accountable

Young people believe that providing them with additional information about the purpose of evaluation would be useful, particularly, the importance of how their data is processed and used. Young people suggest that currently it is not clear as to why their feedback is collected and what happens to it after the digital project has ended. As indicated by one participant: "it would be nice to know that things have been improved for people who go on to do the same things, so that they experience can always be improved" (Pat). This project has found that young people would like to get a better understanding how their views might or might not influence digital youth projects in Scotland. To improve the accountability of the evaluation process, they propose that a follow-up information about how their feedback was considered or used should be shared with them.

## 7. Participatory

Young people participation in the design and facilitation of evaluation process of digital youth projects is recommended. Youth workers and young people reported that involving young people into the evaluation design and its delivery would improve current evaluation practice. The analysis of youth worker accounts revealed that they are aware that involvement of young people into the evaluation process makes the result more meaningful and representative of young people's needs. The importance of a collective discussion on digital youth project aims and objectives was emphasised. Youth workers also talked about evaluation motivation and the fact that participatory approaches can create a sense of youth ownership of evaluation process and its outcome.

Young people indicated that providing them with opportunities to participate in the evaluation design and/or its implementation would improve their experience and understanding of evaluation. The analysis of this project indicates that there are two areas that young people would like to take part in during evaluation: (1) setting outcomes and (2) choosing or creating evaluation methods. When designing their evaluation methods in this research project, youth participants offered rich insights into how their involvement could improve the current power dynamics in the evaluation. For example, Group 3 noted ideas such "let us [young people do the forms]", "use discussion led by young people to of the activity to stimulate more open discussion in an informal way." In this project, young people clearly showcased their abilities to create evaluation methods that are both engaging and fulfil organisational functions of data collection. The results of this project provide evidence that young people are capable and willing to critically engage with evaluation design and propose evaluation designs that – in their view – would better serve other young people.

## 8. Playful

The results of this project indicate that both young people and youth workers would like to see more playful methods used in evaluation. Both groups indicated that traditional evaluation formats (such as surveys or questionnaires) do not provide them with opportunities to think creatively and consider various types of impacts. It was argued that interactive and playful methods allow young people to express themselves in different forms other than written texts. This was particularly important in the context of often highly-interactive and creative youth digital projects, where social impact can be noted while interacting with technologies (e.g. designing graphics, coding).

## 9. Serendipitous (no pre-set outcomes)

To improve future evaluations of digital youth projects, it is essential to acknowledge their multi-layered and dynamic nature. It is recommended the number of pre-set evaluation outcomes should be limited. Both groups indicated that working towards narrowly specific goals does not allow participants to reflect on other possible areas of impact. Thus, youth workers and young people advise that taking risks and making mistakes during evaluation is crucial for their learning. As suggested by the young people, failing and making mistakes should be considered, analysed and reported as important elements of young people's development, which might serve as basis for future innovation in the digital youth sector.

## 10. Well-timed

Both groups (youth works and young people) advise that the consideration of timing of the evaluation is crucial. For workshop participants to experience and possibly progress, youth workers believed that the process of evaluation should start at the beginning of the project.

Young people emphasised the importance of viewing evaluation as a multi-layered process which requires substantial time for reflection. Young people repeatedly indicated that choosing several points during youth workshop/s (e.g. start, middle, end) is essential to understanding impact. It is thus recommended that digital youth projects facilitators view evaluation as an ongoing process which aims to provides young people with multiple points for reflection and feedback. Therefore, it is recommended that more time is allocated to evaluation process.

### About the author



Alicja Pawluczuk is a PhD candidate at the School of Computing at Edinburgh Napier University & Data Literacy researcher at the University of Liverpool. She is an experienced participatory digital media practitioner and a founder of a digital literacy educational collective Digital Beez. Through a participatory, critical and multidisciplinary approach, her academic research examines the social impact of youth digital culture in the United Kingdom.

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