RadioActive101:
International Internet Radio as radical pedagogy for Inclusion, Informal Learning and Employability

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Introduction and rationale: Why RadioActive?

Addressing how disenfranchised young people can be included and engaged within relevant work-related vocational learning paths is one of the key challenges within the UK and across the globe. Weakening social and economic conditions linked to cut-backs in education is arguably producing a 'lost generation' of young people who are excluded from education and training, particularly within the UK and Europe. The challenge of including, engaging and educating these marginalised young people, in innovative and low-cost ways, so that they can become active and engaged citizens, who contribute to legitimate economies, is a substantive problem linked to research priorities within the UK and EU.

Our RadioActive initiative addresses these challenges directly, through two related Community Action Research projects, one focussed in London and the UK (RadioActive UK, funded by Nominet Trust), and the other focussed on the broader European landscape (RadioActive EU, funded by the EU Lifelong Learning Programme). Collectively, these projects present a radical pedagogy and a broad international application of internet radio for inclusion, informal learning and employability.

Linking the educational approach to socio-technical design

The project is implementing a radical approach to conceptualising, designing and developing internet radio and social media for informal learning within 'lived communities'. It embodies the key pedagogical ideas of Paulo Freire (1970) and his notion of transformational (or emancipatory) learning through lived experience. These ideas are articulated through a radical approach to Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Design, called Deep Learning Design (Boyle & Ravenscroft, 2012), which is a critique of, and development from, recent approaches to designing social media for learning within 'live' practitioner contexts (Ravenscroft et al., 2012a, 2012b). More broadly, this approach is a direct attempt to promote '21st Century Learning for 21st Century Skills', that was the key theme of European Conference on Technology Enhanced Learning, EC-TEL 2012 (Ravenscroft et al., 2012). The essence of this approach is that design is conceived as an *ongoing socio-technical intervention* within existing or developing digitally mediated and mixed-reality [i] cultures.

This approach is achieved in the UK context through embedding the radio and content production within the existing practices of established youth organisations. The internet radio is used to catalyse, connect and communicate technology-mediated developmental practices within these organisations. This in turn aims to promote rich personal and organisational learning, change and development, and also increased well-being and positive social impact. The Sub-Sections below cover some preliminary findings of the social impact of the project,

during a 'pilot' phase, before summarising an evaluation of the completed 'advanced pilot' phase.

Early insights into social impact of the pilot

Some early findings showing the impact of RadioActive101 during the pilot phase in the UK were particularly positive. One pilot implantation was a four month intervention within a youth organisation. During this time: the number of new young people attending the centre increased from 5 - 28 (approx. 560%[ii] increase); more at-risk young people were retained, increasing from 2 – 10 (approx. 500% increase); and, perhaps most striking was that the number of young people moving from 'NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) to EET (in Education, Employment and Training), increased from 3 – 24 (approx. 800% increase). The trend of these improvements also 'accelerated' during the later months as pre-recorded and live shows were broadcast. Although these numbers are relatively small, they are highly significant within a challenging youth work context, and clearly demonstrate the positive social impact of RadioActive101. Another study at a different youth organisation focused on the level of participation of the young people in the radio project. This showed clear improvements in participation as measured by Hart's 'engagement ladder' and also clear self-reporting of increased confidence with fellow youth club members and other new or older people.

Evaluation of the RadioActive advanced pilot

The evaluation of the RadioActive advanced pilot in the UK, addressed the project objectives:

1. To develop and implement an innovative advanced pilot internet radio-social media platform, RadioActive, that, building on existing digital cultures, will excite and engage young people, provide an informal learning environment (RadioActive) and promote active citizenship.
2. To give young people a voice around key issues, such as the recent disturbances, severe reductions in education and employment opportunities and crime.
3. To realize personal and community development and social change through enabling young people to increase their confidence, self esteem, aspirations, employability and personal skills, and, become active citizens who can effect social and community change through participation in the Internet-radio and social media features of RadioActive.

Summary of the evaluation and key findings

A relatively substantial evaluation was performed that is fully reported in Edmonds et al., 2013, so here we summarise the methods and findings for the purposes of this short paper.

The Evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach, deploying focus groups, interviews and several questionnaires with young people and youth workers within the youth organisations. The focus groups and interviews were analysed in NVivo and coded for themes and sub-themes that emerged. This detailed qualitative analysis was complemented by a quantitative analysis of questionnaires that covered the confidence and self-esteem, soft skills (e.g. communication and team-working), technical skills (e.g. recording and broadcasting radio content) and the social and organisational impact of the RadioActive intervention.

Generally, the evaluation data showed that not only were the aims of this advanced pilot (above) been realised, but they were exceeded in terms of youth worker, organisational and wider community benefits. Additionally the young people developed a range of skills they can continue to harness, particularly many of the softer skills which research shows employers are seeking largely over more specific skills. The range of positive social outcomes for the young people as a result of participation in this project appears unusually strong, and has arguably exceeded initial expectations.

To give an exemplary snapshot of our full discussion of the findings - the youth workers mentioned: 'confidence' most frequently (13 times); six other features ten or more times (Achievements, Engaging Young People, Having a voice, Improved work, Relationship building) ; and, five other features six or more times (Challenging perceptions, Developing discussion, Participation, Excitement, Support and training). The features highlighted in the aggregated young people's transcripts were slightly different, mentioning: 'Agreed development' most frequently (9 times); and, twelve other features six or more times (Developed confidence, Gives young people a voice, Young people take responsibility, Increased levels of participation, Increase responsibility, Team work, Fun, Wanting to continue the project, Awareness of technology, Publicise the radio, Engage more young people.

The questionnaires mostly support the qualitative findings from the Nvivo analysis of the focus group and interviews. They show the importance of 'Confidence', again, along with the development of softer employability skills. However, it was notable that the findings reflect lower confidence or competencies in the more 'hard core' technical skills. It seems the young people can develop the softer and social skills (such as communication and expressing their voice, negotiation and decision making, and, organisation and team working) more easily than the specific technical competencies (such as using specific technologies like the mixing desk, editing software and broadcast technology).

The implications of these findings for our ongoing work are given in detail in Edmonds et al., 2013.

The Online Educa 2013 presentation

The Online Educa 2013 presentation will provide a highly interactive exemplification of these projects, demonstrating the actual radio shows, videos and other content that provide the vehicles for learning and the expression of previously unheard voices.

References

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[i] Mixed-reality is becoming the prevalent term to convey the way in which social media etc., (the digital) are intertwined with everyday reality (e.g. digital communication linked to live events, via Facebook etc.) within our digitally mediated lives.

[ii] Please note that we are aware that numbers quoted are relatively small, so the percentages that are given are considered strongly indicative, not exact representative measures.