

An examination of theory and practice of a youth designed online social networking platform in Otago New Zealand

and other really big academic words that are generally meaningless to youth

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The Computer Clubhouse located in the community of Otago, Manukau City is working with youth and engineers at the University of Auckland to create a youth designed social networking platform called "The Haps". A constructionist design process is utilised in the development of the project. This paper explores both the appropriated pedagogy and youth participation that values personal & group autonomy, generativity, reflectivity, active engagement, personal relevance, and cultural pluralism.

The Computer Clubhouse is a creative and safe after-school learning environment where young people from under-served communities work with adult mentors to explore their own ideas, develop skills, and build confidence in themselves through the use of technology. Established in 1993 by The Computer Museum (now part of the Museum of Science, Boston) in collaboration with the MIT Media Laboratory, the Computer Clubhouse helps youth acquire the tools necessary for personal and professional success. The network is now based in over 100 underserved communities worldwide. The Otago Computer Clubhouse "Clubhouse 274" is the flagship for the New Zealand and Pacific region as a roll out of a further five Clubhouses over the coming two years.

Computer Clubhouse practice differs from traditional computer labs, and is modeled on principles fostered by the grandfathers of MIT Media Labs such as Seymour Papert, where a key to working with youth in each Computer Clubhouse is based on constructionist practice.

At Clubhouse 274 tools and constructive techniques are designed to support our young people in going beyond merely learning computers, accessing information, and beyond merely electronically communicating, to creating a public entity that says something about the person or people who made it.

Traditional education employs a democratic process where learning and curricular is set to accommodate the majority. Thomas Jefferson 3rd president of the United States of America rightly states that, "democracy is nothing more than mob rule, where fifty-one percent of the people may take away the rights of the other forty-nine". In communities such as Otago, where primarily all our young people are either Maori or Pacific islanders; it is of no surprise that the gifts, culture and talents of our youth are democratically modeled out!

It is these very cultural assets, when expressed in a social learning environment such as the Computer Clubhouse, that become the building blocks in the construction of infrastructure, software and digital objects by youth in the project. The Flagship community initiative in Otago consists of a set of four seamless whole learning and ICT solutions; (1) A purpose built community technology centre. Youth engaged the architect and contributed design, look and practical work spaces as a Computer Clubhouse. (2) A Community Wireless Network, providing free Internet and intranet access to over 1561 homes within Clover Park, Otago. Youth are engaged in negotiating with churches, homes and community facilities to site radio access points, and learn to maintain the equipment. (3) Laptops both from one Laptop Per Child and the Intel Class Mate are free for youth to access the Wireless Mesh and learn anytime

anywhere within the network. Youth are able to work with the Computer Clubhouses Digital Communities Development Centre at the University of Auckland hacking open source code as part of the growing network of global Sugar Labs, "Sugar" being the chosen operating system on each laptop. (4) "The Haps" and open source project where a youth development group from the Computer Clubhouse work with engineers to develop a social networking and learning site to operate over the community network, extending the learning environment of the Computer Clubhouse into the wider community.

The initial reason from youth to establish a social networking site was to allow digital objects being created in the Computer Clubhouse by youth to be shared, discussed and celebrated by the wider learning community. More than just a free-for-all chat site; this was a tool for youth to create a repository of digital media and narrative that truly said something about the creators, and the cohort socialisation of the digital media.

The Youth Development Team (YDT) developed three strands of work in the design and deployment of the HAPS site. (1) Look and design of the Graphical User Interface "What is seen on the screen" (2) coding widgets, software applications and plugins, such as video conferencing, white-boarding etc. (3) Online practice and safety resources.

The project is in its infancy but a process of facilitating generative ideas, "the allowance of youth to pitch and create any idea as a good one, new or hacked from other models, and a process of reflection by software engineers creating beta versions from the young peoples idea's, and then a wider peer group of Computer Clubhouse users providing feed back of their user experience to the YDT. There is a real sense expressed by the YDT that this project is truly being crafted by youth for youth. As high users of technology, which is a part of their every-day life, this has created a sense that they are the domain experts not the engineers, "This is just normal for us".

Creating a strong sense of personal and group autonomy through this design process has also allowed youth to explore both what is acceptable practice in terms of online safety and the ability of the group to peer moderate behavior. While the concept of Big Brother is watching your every move, and "you must obey the code of ethics", is the normative approach for online safety, the group is seeing the learning community of both the YDT and the Computer Clubhouse members as a "digital whanau", and instead of "Big Brother" to one of "tuakana/teina", based on natural whanau and peer relationships where there is a high level of trust resident, as a cultural asset within the group; seeing older members guiding and supporting younger members. The design team is considering how "tuakana/teina" can be facilitated digitally, so deliberation by the YDT to creating online safety resources such as video that is made by the youth themselves and in languages in situ of the community.

The Computer Clubhouse staff and teaching staff from the schools where the project is collocated believe the methodology utilised in "The Haps" project is more than just creating a social networking site, but the process of creation is building a stronger sense of pride and accomplishment in the participating youth. The Computer Clubhouse is running a longitudinal study to gain an understanding of what impact this learning style is having on youth in terms of their perspective on school and relationships with teachers and mentors. The initial data from this study supports the findings of the staff.

Above all, even beyond the love of knowledge, is this principle: If you love what you learn, you'll get to love yourself more. And this has to be the goal of education that each individual will come out with a sense of personal self-respect, empowerment, and love for oneself, because from that grows all other loves: for people, for knowledge, for the society in which you live

(Seymour Papert, 1990)