
SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENT COUNSELLORS

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Introduction

Internet forced his way in to the most diverse areas of life nowadays. Students follow school activities through the electronic learning environment provided by the school, 'Dr Google' is our first source of information when we are sick and afterwards we schedule an appointment with our family doctor via his online agenda. But also in terms of human contact the internet plays his role as an important medium.

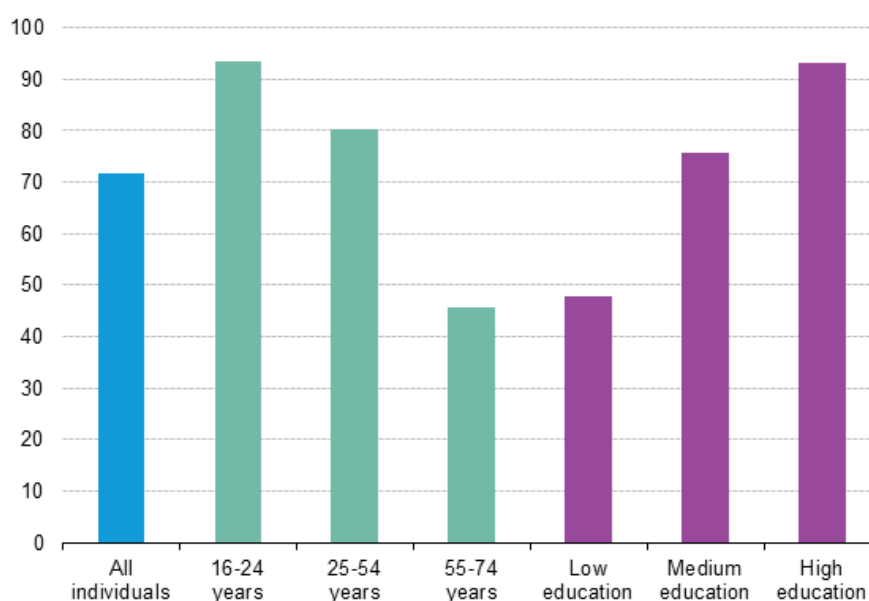


Figure 1. Internet use and frequency of use by individuals, 2013 (% of individuals) (Seyebert & Reinecke, 2013)

Internet access is available in 76% of the 'average' European households with a broad difference between specific countries. In Bulgaria 51% of the households has an Internet connection compared to 94% in the Netherlands (Seybert, 2012). Figure 1 shows that 93% of the European 16-24 year olds uses it at least once a week (Seyebert & Reinecke, 2013). Research from Grafitti and Jeugdwerknet (2012) shows the use of social network sites in Flanders by age group (Figure 2). Facebook is by far the most popular social network site used by youngsters (age 12-18). In this paper we will investigate the possibilities of the use of social media in educational environments, where it can add value as a prevention tool and as a

medium for teachers/student counsellors to fulfil their responsibilities in taking care of children with extra socio-emotional needs. The focus is not on the use of social media as a learning tool, which has longer practice based value. In this we focus on the possible role online tools can play in the care policy of an educational environment. As an inspiration for this assumption we can rely on our current research about the use and implementation of social media as a tool with students with special needs living in residential care units.

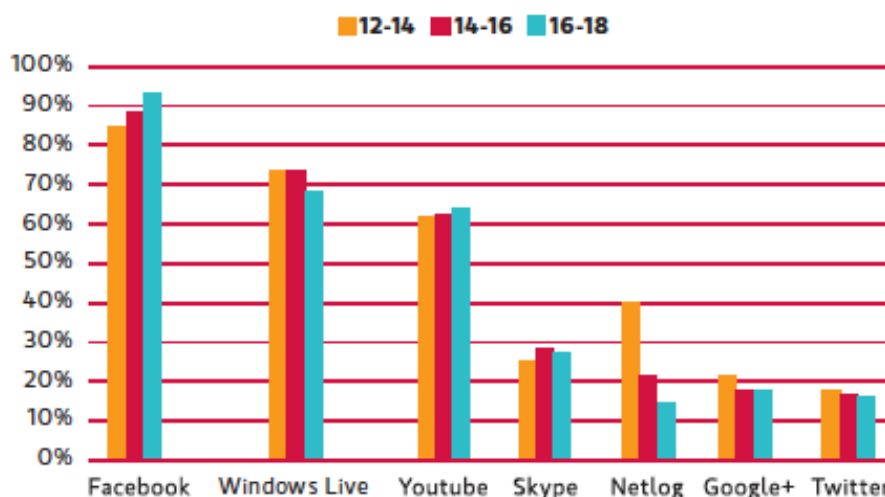


Figure 2. Use of social media by age group (Grafitti & Jeugdwerknet, 2013)

We describe these online tools as Internet based instruments that can be used before, during or after a student face-to-face contact. For example, an instrument where the student can choose from a range of counselling goals specified for every life domain. At the end of this instrument he and/or the teacher/student counsellor gets an overview of the chosen items. This can be a starting point for a counselling process between student and teacher/student counsellor.

Van Hecke (2012) points out the importance of social media in social care work and social care workers should be where children and young people are, and that's currently online. As young people spend a significant part of their time online, educational organizations should question the value of their presence in this hangout. For as it can be a tool for teachers and student counsellors to anticipate on obstacles threatening welfare and the learning potentials of youngsters. A small survey learned the willingness of schools for this kind of ambulatory (preventive) supporting of young people with care needs.

Online tools can be beneficial for both teacher/student counsellor and students. The supporting factor lies in the use of a different communication medium. We deal with children and young people who have grown up in a digital society, the so-called 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001). For them, digital communication is an important part of their lives. Young people consciously choose this medium to meet a specific need that they want to satisfy (Eighmey & McCord, 1998). For this reason it is no longer possible to ignore the benefits of using internet in the guidance of children and young people (Vancoppenolle, 2008). Students wish to participate in today's e-culture. Their caretakers often have a 'healthy' protective reflex

that restricts children and young people in their use of the Internet (Van Hecke, 2012, p.17). Therefore social media will not easily be deployed in care processes. This is a missed opportunity to prepare students for a digital society. Furthermore, it is a missed opportunity to make use of the advantages that online care has to offer.

Methodology

This year the Catholic University College Limburg (KHLim department Social Work) will end a 2-year research project (2012-2014) on the implementation and evaluation of social media in guidance of youngsters with special needs. The focus lies on two research questions: (1) what is the best way to implement social media (as a tool in guidance) in the practice of a social care organization? And (2) does the implementation and use of online tools in guidance in addition of direct life contact ameliorates the guidance process and the relationship and the satisfaction of this relationship between the social care worker and the youngster?

To answer the first question an implementation protocol was outlined using an international literature search. The protocol was developed based on the model of Grol and Wensing (2006). Several national and international experts on eHealth reviewed it. The online tools were implemented in the participating organization (Sporen vzw). We choose for a participatory process together with the social care workers. They were introduced in the use of online tools and were a major voice in the process. The second question was answered by using a pre-posttest design processing semi-structured interviews in which the methods were evaluated by counsellors and their youngsters in guidance. Furthermore, a quantitative pre-posttest design was implemented. Both the satisfaction and the social care worker-youngster relationship were measured from the viewpoint of the youngster and his/her social care worker.

Online Tools

The introduction mentioned one possibility online tools can have during guidance processes, to support the goal setting process every counselling process starts with. In this section we present two more examples on how online tools can be used as a tool in the guidance of youngsters with special needs. In our research we focused on those youngsters with behavioural and socio-emotional challenges. In this research we used the computer and a social medium as mediator between teacher/student counsellor and youngster. This indirect communication holds lots of possibilities to also being used in educational environments, where it can add value as a prevention tool and as a medium for teachers to fulfil their responsibilities in taking care of youngsters with extra socio-emotional needs. In the mediation sessions between teacher/student counsellor and youngster different aspects of their school lives and personal problems will be discussed, resulting in goals and practical actions.

But at first we remark some points of attention. The tools used are common available web 2.0 tools and all have a hidden commercial intention. This raises issues on privacy and privacy

settings. It compels for attention to media literacy both of the teacher/student counsellor and students when using them. Furthermore we advise to anonymize the data used in these tools, what should be an integral part of the guidance process using these tools.

Timelines

Students can be facing many difficulties during their academic careers and personnel lives influencing each other. To help them get a grip on their life and get a better understanding of these difficulties, we can use an online tool to create digital timelines. In these digital timelines youngsters can collect all the academic or personal events, which are positively or negatively influencing them and they want to share. These events can be illustrated by pictures, music, movies, etc. There are several scenarios in which these timelines can be used. Two examples to illustrate this

My life until now

In many cases students who get in contact with student guidance services have problems in personal home situations and already have got a turbulent and burdened past. With this tool the student can construct his or her own timeline. In several cases, writing down and constructing a timeline already has a therapeutic effect. Furthermore, it provides an overview of an often confusing past (Van Hecke, 2012). In the illustration below we see an example of a timeline made by a student. It gives a language for describing events often not yet possible to describe in words, but also a way to share it or co-create it with others.



Figure 3. An example of lifeline made by a student

My future

Another approach is to work towards the future with a student. With the digital timeline we can also construct 'the future life' of a student. He/she can illustrate the future he/she wants to life in. This future image can be a starting point in the student counselling towards concrete goals.

Google Maps

We know Google Maps as a geographical tool. It is also possible to create your own private custom maps. In these maps you can mark 'your locations' name them and add a comment. In this tool we'll let students create their own map. By using Google Maps with a student, he or she can create his own directory of relevant places. It may help him/her to identify his/her place in the world and to reflect about this. He/she can point out on the map places he/she visited or liked and mark them with a flag. Also, areas can be highlighted or streets where students walked by. This method can be a nice icebreaker at a starting relationship in finding someone's personal problems and defining the most important topics of the necessary guidance process. Through questions the teacher/student counsellor learns a lot about the student. This information can be presented in a visual map and re-used during counselling.

There are several approaches, which can be used and combined. We will discuss two of them.

1. Social environment:

One possibility is to work with the student to construct a map of its (social) environment e.g. friends, important family members, etc. This map gives several insights in the social network of the student. It provides an idea of the size and density of the network. It gives insights into the network-gaps (e.g. he marks only family and no friends or other persons) or network-possibilities. Further it can be a starting point to discuss places better to be avoided. This can be a major step forward in the support process.

2. Independency:

A second possibility is to work on independency. The map can be used as a preparation of an upcoming event or displacement. For example, we are thinking of preparing to major routes to school, internship, home, etc. Also Google street view can be a nice addition. This can give a visual image of the places, which are discussed. This enables students to discover unknown places (e.g. a new school) or let them show 'their' homes etc.

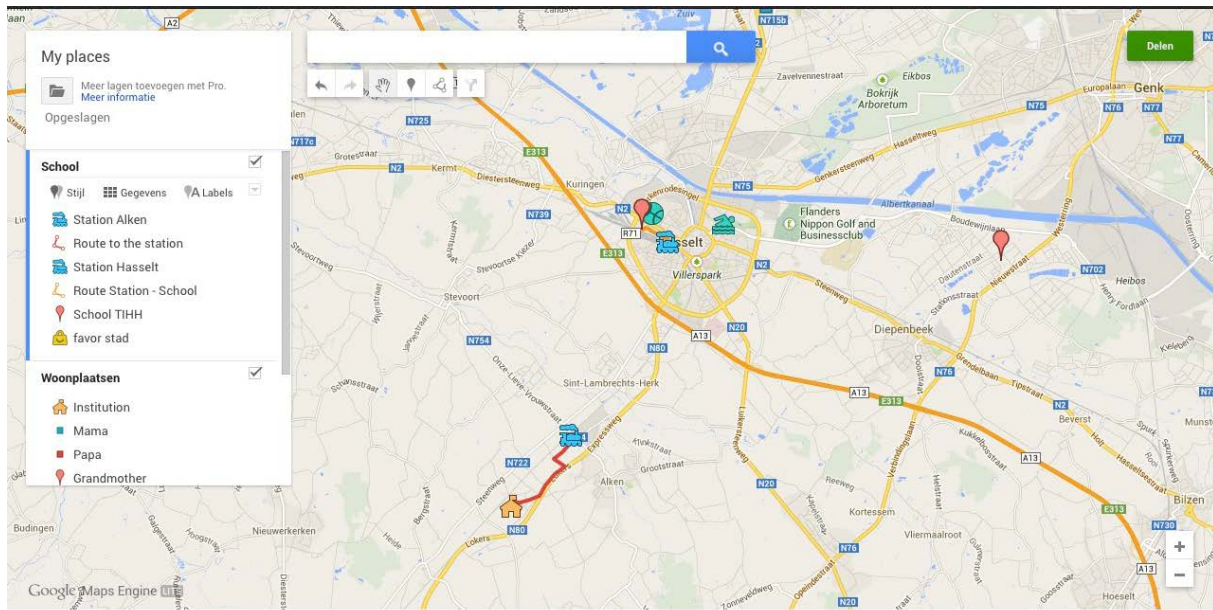


Figure 4. An example of Google maps made by a youngster

The benefits of social media as a tool for teachers and student counsellors

The broad use of Internet in education and care has already proven to have possibilities and hazards. Next to the possibilities to create a learning environment (e.g. blackboard) and to communicate with parents and pupils (e.g. Facebook-groups), social media can earn a place as powerful tool in student counselling in a school or care setting. Our research as described in this paper has proven the possibilities in residential care units for youngsters with socio-emotional problems revealing possibilities in other working area's as there are schools and other educational organizations.

In our research we have explicitly chosen for easy available 'free online tools' based on three reasons:

1. it lowers the threshold for students to get started with these tools,
2. an account created remains property of the student and
3. these tools are free to use.

We will elaborate the benefits of online tools in school guidance process on four advantages.

1. The tools are consistent with ‘their world’

As the introduction mentioned large part of students are active online. There is not a strict separation between their online and offline life as they are ‘inline’. It is an integral part of their lives. With the use of online tools we connect with this world and its (different) forms of communication. As we connect with them it could lower the difficulty to give – sensitive – information. This corresponds to an online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004).

2. Online tools as empowering tools

The use of online tools is a powerful choice to accompany youth in an empowering way. The students have their own account and manage their own data. They share this information with the people they choose to. Many tools have the possibility to invite other people to view or participate and co-create. This enables students to invite their own family, friends to collaborate with them, without losing ownership. Internet access is the only necessity to access their data.

3. Working independently and blended

A third advantage of these online tools is the possibility to use it independently of physical contact with teacher/student counsellors. Blended processes make it possible to combine face2face contact with online activities. It gives a lot of free ‘work time’ (use it in spare time or when they feel the need to).

4. Removing barriers via a different kind of communication

Internet tools use an asynchronous written type of communication. It is a language that is more common among youngsters and better reflects their world. This makes it possible to use it as an addition to the more known verbal method of counselling. Learners are used to work with social media. Using tools from their own context makes it less threatening. We take positive advantage of the so called online disinhibition effect. Suler (2004, p.321) explains it as “While online, some people self-disclose or act out more frequently or intensely than they would in person”. Online tools give the students the opportunity to ‘work’ via a new communication medium with their teacher/student counsellors. Furthermore because some complex emotions are almost impossible to explain in words, these tools have several opportunities to use non-verbal communication.

Discussion

At the moment of writing we only have preliminary results of our qualitative research on the perceived effects and the experience of youngster and social care workers with these tools. The initial results give us insight in the potential of these tools as confirmed by social care workers and youngsters. Some of them explicitly mention the importance to combine online tools with face-to-face counselling (blended counselling). All of the respondents see a potential for specific groups of youngsters who will benefit from them. Furthermore many social care

workers and some youngsters confirm the potential of online tools as part of a digitalizing guidance. Another group of youngsters perceive no specific added value for themselves.

Further research is required on the use of Internet as a medium for teachers and student counsellors to fulfil their responsibilities in taking care of children with extra socio-emotional needs. eHealth can be an extra platform to facilitate these counselling processes. We think some specific themes need further exploration. First of all an inventory of information on success factors and pitfalls of the use of social media within the counselling process in education is needed. As it is common in eHealth innovations sustainability is a big challenge. Organizations will have the need for a good implementation protocol to guarantee these tools to be used and outlined in their care policy.

We live in a digital society. Therefore it is important that both social care work and education embed digital media, tools and communication in their work. The use of social media as a tool can be one part of this (Van Hecke, 2012). Two online tools usable in counselling processes where it can add value as a prevention tool and as a medium for teachers/student counsellors to fulfil their responsibilities in taking care of children with extra socio-emotional needs are discussed. The tools are commonly available but will be used with a pedagogical 'twist' without loosing grip on privacy, media literacy and ethical issues. It can be a great help for teachers and student counsellors to connect with students. We can't ignore the Internet and social media as integral part of our professional toolkit.

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