Across Borders: How technology enables international sharing of professional theory and practice

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As I prepared this presentation, I thought back to how things have changed, what was it like before Generation Y came of age in the workplace.

I thought back to my birth during World War II, when rockets sent to deliver bombs could only be targeted very generally, and how now someone can be sitting in a room in another country and target very specifically – and how this is a somewhat disturbing advantage of technology.

I thought back also to one of my first jobs, where I produced punched tapes of chemical usage that were subsequently run through a computer. That computer occupied a whole building, and I learned to read the holes punched in the tapes because any mistake, such as an unnecessary space that did not show on a print-out, was enough to stop the computer working altogether, and bells would ring throughout the building – with the costs, and embarrassment, associated with having computer engineers struggling to find my error and get the computer started again.

When I thought back to the 1980s, I recall standing at a fax machine, filled with wonder that someone in another country was feeding a piece of paper into a machine and seconds later I was reading the piece of paper.

Now, I welcome the opportunity to use a satnav that directs me to my destination, with speech and visuals, instead of wishing I had a navigator sitting beside me as I attempt to read a map whilst paying attention to driving the car.

Now, my phone has more computing power than that whole building – although I sometimes rely on my grandchildren to explain it to me ☺.

Now, fax machines are virtually non-existent, overtaken by our ability to send emails, and to send simple links to allow other people to access our documents. Even straightforward telephone calls have now been augmented through the various forms of social media, so that we can connect through Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn - the list of these options grows all the time.

I have operated websites for several years, I now have an employee whose full-time role is to manage social media, my own books appear as e-books, many of my articles are available as downloads, and I am the editor of a scientific journal that exists online only, allows free access worldwide, with communication with authors, reviewers and readers all conducted online.

When I look back, I see that I first wrote about the impact of technology in 2009, when I contributed a chapter on providing supervision online within a book entitled Virtual Coach, Virtual Mentor (Hay, 2009 in Clutterbuck). In 2011, I extended this, in another chapter in another book (Hay, 2011 in Bachkirova, Jackson & Clutterbuck) to cover the benefits and pitfalls of what was by then referred to as e-supervision.

By that time, in addition to providing supervision, counselling, psychotherapy and coaching online, I had been running teaching webinars for audiences in several countries. At first, the teaching webinars were supplementary to workshops, with my colleagues and I travelling several times a year to countries including Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Turkey and elsewhere, and interspersing the workshops with webinars. By 2011 these had become completely international webinars, being attended by participants who were situated in countries such as Armenia, Macedonia, Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Sudan and even the USA, where one participant joined webinars overnight so that she could have contact with her colleagues in Turkey. More recently, of course, I ran similar webinars for the University of Benha. Currently, I am running international webinars each month that cover the same material as for the regular workshops that I run in the UK, with either option or a mix leading to a range of qualifications that can include university accreditation.

The Benefits

An obvious benefit of technological communication systems is the opportunity they provide for raising professional standards, across a range of professions, where there might otherwise be limited access to professional development. In addition to the teaching, coaching and related activities that allow students access to experts in other areas of the world, those experts are also learning through their interactions with those who practice professions in different cultural environments.

Associated with this, there is the potential to 'make a difference' at a global level. Access to worldwide communication is challenging power structures. Governments attempt to prevent their citizens accessing the Internet. The US government sought to stop WikiLeaks from publishing classified documents, and WikiLeaks supporters were able to close down (albeit temporarily) particular websites by using software that allowed them to bombard such sites with access attempts. Whether we view such events as autocratic governments stifling e-dissent or rebels causing political mayhem, such uses of the Internet have a significant impact on the 'world order.'

Working as I do in terms of developing the psychological intelligence of people, this worldwide technologically-based contact can also contribute to the increased autonomy of people, particularly for those who have grown up within authoritarian systems. As professionals develop their own mindfulness and awareness, they in turn will encourage increased autonomy in their own clients, students and colleagues – leading in time to changes in the cultures of organisations and even countries. This opportunity comes with responsibility, of course, to ensure that we are encouraging people to think for themselves and not simply passing on our own political opinions.

Another obvious benefit is the ecological impact. For no extra cost, time spent travelling, or impact on the environment, those in one location can be interacting with those in distant locations. None of those involved needs to travel, and all can get the advantages of being in contact with other professionals, other training and development processes, and other perspectives. This also has implications for those in economically-disadvantaged areas of the world, where the costs of bringing in 'experts' from other countries may put this type of learning out of reach.

Ease of technological contact has practical benefits as well. Students can now use search engines to find information about any subject – although they do need to be warned that Wikipedia is not a good source for academic references without checking back to the original. Anyone can now attempt to make contact with professionals with whom they would not normally have any engagement – and many 'experts' are willing to respond to questions about their subjects. Mentors, professional supervisors, coaches and therapists can now be sought internationally – which can be invaluable when a profession is fairly new within a country so that in-country relationships would be too incestuous.

Another significant benefit is related to the availability of professional services generally. In 2016 there were 5.7 million calls to the Samaritans, a telephone-based service in the UK for those contemplating suicide; clearly access to counsellors face-to-face for so many would not have been possible. Evans (2014) found that young people reported that it was easier to talk about their suicidal ideation when they were accessing a counsellor online, and with complete anonymity: she pointed out how professionals need to learn different ways of relating for such contacts.

Yet another advantage is that organisations, and particularly professional associations, can now operate internationally more easily. One with which I have personal involvement is the Institute of Developmental Transactional Analysis (IDTA); although based within the UK, the majority of the IDTA members are based in other countries. The Council/Steering Group members are now an international group, made possible by the fact that meetings are run online or through emails instead of incurring the time, travel and venue costs associated with face-to-face meetings. Instead of conferences, the IDTA now runs two online Community Gatherings each year; these are also recorded for access later by those who could not participate on the day.

The sessions I ran for the University of Benha were also recorded for subsequent listening, as is this presentation. Many organisations now make conference and other presentation recordings available after the event.

The Challenges

Online access raises many challenges for professionals. Psychotherapy and counselling associations within the UK have extended their codes of ethics to include elements related to the impact of social media and the conduct of professional practice online. In terms of social media, professionals now have to consider how much clients can find out about them via the Internet. I take care that my social media contact with family members appears only to family members, and is not accessible through any of my professional social media accounts. We also need to take care that we do not react inappropriately to any information that we might gain about our clients through social media.

Another challenge is the protection of intellectual property. Information is now so readily available that it can easily be plagiarised. Indeed, in some areas of the world, and for many in the younger generations, the concept of copyright and/or ownership of intellectual property seems largely unknown. I have been flattered to see some of my books translated, for example, into Arabic, whilst at the same time frustrated that this has been done by publishers who have no interest in any contact with me – and even less interest in paying any of the royalties that enable authors to continue to cover their living expenses whilst they are writing.

The challenge to intellectual property extends to the way in which psychometric testing is often made available through the Internet. In these cases, there may well be an additional problem in that the layperson completing the questionnaire may need help in order to interpret the results. This can be particularly important when such testing results in a person being labelled with a diagnosis that generates anxiety and is poorly understood, such as learning that one is a psychopath or narcissist.

Another challenge becomes evident when the technology fails. We become completely reliant on the access that we expect to have. When that access is no longer there, whether this is through government actions, deliberate sabotage such as by hackers, disruptions due to natural disasters, or simply the impact of bad weather, many present-day activities cannot be conducted. When my files are hosted 'in the cloud', I may not be able to do any work if I have lost my Internet connection. If my cell phone battery needs charging, I may have lost all details of my contacts even if there is another phone available to me. It is somewhat ironic that, for a conference about Generation Y, I am sending this presentation as a recording because the previous webinars I ran for the University of Benha were plagued with frequent connection problems.

Comments on challenges about the problems of technological communication are not complete without us recognising that the availability of it has led to significant problems for society. Shorrock (2015) wrote of the problems of Internet addiction, which had by then become a recognised issue that clients bring to counsellors and psychotherapists. Online sex offending is another significant problem. As I was preparing this paper, I read that the UK police had pretended online to be a 13 year old girl, which had led to contacts from no less than 2000 individuals, and subsequently 27 arrests. This is a worrying indication of what is happening to real young people in terms of grooming on the Internet.

Understanding the Dynamics

Generation Y have grown up with constant exposure to technological communication. Those born before Generation Y have not. Goffman's (1974) material on frames and presence can help us understand the process. He proposes that we employ frames or schemata of interpretation that are socially shared and culture specific. Most of us will already have these frames about telephone interaction; we will have learned to include mentally the 'real' presence of the parties involved even though we are in different locations. In the same way that people now may struggle with Internet connections, people previously struggled when telephones were first introduced. The key is to add the notion of the Internet into our process of frame-making. We also need to add in something about

the ways in which the connections may be lost and reconnected. In this way, we can learn to relate through 'virtual reality'.

The concept of representational systems can add to our understanding. Familiar within the literature of neuro-linguistic programming, representational systems are the ways in which we take in information from the environment and represent it internally. Usually presented as visual, auditory or kinaesthetic, where kinaesthetic includes taste, smell and anything else physical as well as muscle memory, we can use this idea to understand how the virtual reality of the technological systems means that the kinaesthetic representation will be limited. For those in professions where they rely on intuition and feelings of empathy, there is a need to develop skills in picking up more information through what can be seen and what can be heard. Those whose preferred representational systems are auditory will have had little problem in communicating via telephone because they will 'hear' how someone is saying something in addition to the content of the words. This will of course transfer to most of the current Internet connections, where those who have visual preference will also be able to see much information. We need to keep in mind that these representational systems are preferences only – there is nothing to stop us from paying more attention to the ways which we may have underused in the past.

The lack of face-to-face contact that is often referred to as the challenge to e-working is also the dynamic that may be creating the most significant benefit. The lack of face-to-face contact encourages those involved to stay in the present rather than experiencing transference and/or countertransference (Casement, 1985). This process of relating to others as if they were someone from our past is often present because we are unconsciously communicating through the kinaesthetic representation system. When that is no longer available, because we are in different locations and using only auditory and visual representations, we are less likely to engage in the strong emotional reactions that is so often the outward signs of transference. We are more likely to stay grounded, to think for ourselves, and to take responsibility for ourselves. We are less likely to feel pulled into a parent-child or co-dependency mode.

Hence, whether we are working one-to-one with someone, teaching a group, or having a meeting, the usual physical reactions are filtered out, so that we are less likely to respond in ways that are influenced by unconscious processes – such as assuming that someone else will do our thinking for us, or regressing to childhood experiences of school whenever we sit in a classroom now, or expecting that the person chairing the meeting will have made up their mind already about what outcome they want and our job is to guess this, just as we have been used to doing within any typically hierarchical organisation.

An alternative explanation of this phenomenon is to consider how the online context provides an environment in which mindfulness can occur more readily. The "practice of being present with the immediate experience of our lives." (Aggs & Bambling, 2010) is more likely to occur when we focus more on visual and auditory stimuli, paying more attention to facial expressions when these are so obvious on a screen in front of us, and hearing the 'music behind the words' as we pay attention to tone of voice and how things are said as well as what is not being said.

In Conclusion

It is easy for those born before Generation Y to experience the current emphasis on technologically-based communication as cutting across the ways in which we have been used to creating and maintaining relationships. However, we would do well to remember how the advent of computers was regarded as the death knell for jobs and yet turned out to create more employment. If we are old enough, we might even remember the process of getting used to having a telephone – somewhat strange and yet now largely taken for granted.

Even if it cannot resolve the political issues around the world, the Internet enables us to create a worldwide community of professionals through which we can share learning, develop best practices,

incorporate the best from different cultures, and spread a commitment to continuous human growth and development.

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