

Supporting social inclusion of youth at risk using social software: impact, sustainability and evaluation, one year after pilot testing

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Abstract

Purpose – *The aim of this case study is to report on the experiences of four social work organisations in four different European countries and their efforts to integrate the use of social media as a means to support their work with Youth-at-Risk.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The case study reports on the activities of and challenges met by these four organisations undertaken in the two years they took part in the EU-INCLUSO (FP7) project and the year after the end of the project (2010). The initial findings were supplemented and updated based on recent, in-depth interviews with representatives from the four pilot organisations.*

Findings – *The use of social media to support the work of organisations working with Youth-at-Risk has much potential and has proven to be worthwhile, according to the experiences of the four organisations that took part in the EU-INCLUSO project. However, successful adoption within the organisation depends on management support, sufficient resources and staff coaching and training. The choice of which tools can be used in a particular situation is largely influenced by the preferences of the young people involved, putting emphasis on co-designing social media strategies together with the intended target group. Finally, most organisations report that currently available social media tools, while useful, are not always ideal; this makes the case for custom-built tools.*

Originality/value – *This case study offers a unique view into the experiences of four pioneering organisations working with Youth-at-Risk and their experiences with implementing social media tools in their organisation.*

Keywords *At risk, Social software, Social inclusion, Sustainability, Youth organisations, Young adults, Europe*

Paper type *Research paper*

Introduction: The INCLUSO project

INCLUSO (EU-FP7) aimed to deliver a verifiable proof that information and communications technology (ICT), and more precisely, social media tools, can facilitate social inclusion of youth at risk. INCLUSO made suggestions for future research and development, based on desk research, expert input, pilot projects in four countries, the development of a measurement tool to screen evolution in social inclusion/exclusion and a business and sustainability model for organisations working with ICT in the area of social inclusion. The pilot projects were initiated in strong, existing organisations with little or no experience in the use of social software, but already working with youth at risk.

Feedback from the pilots enhanced an “INCLUSO Manual” that presents implementation scenarios for ICT as a tool for social inclusion. Pilot feedback strengthened business and sustainability models and the development of a measurement tool that screens social inclusion/exclusion. A game supporting the introduction of social media in organisations working with youth at risk was designed to facilitate the process[1].

The INCLUSO project concluded that social media tools can support the social inclusion of youth at risk if chosen, implemented and supported correctly.

The pilot projects in four countries tested proof of concept implementation of social media aimed at fostering social inclusion by encouraging and supporting personal development on the one hand and encouraging and supporting social participation on the other hand. For sustainability reasons a focus was put on the use of existing and free or low-cost social media tools, from social networks sites as Facebook or Netlog to blogging or community platforms.

Monitoring the pilots resulted in positive but conditional support for the statement that social software facilitates social inclusion of youth at risk. The four pilots worked in different settings and on the encouragement and support of personal development by facilitating digital inclusion, improving educational attainment, increasing employability skills and improving communication skills. To encourage and support social participation, they worked on fostering social relations, promoting active citizenship and increasing community capacity.

Not all four pilots worked on all of these topics with the same intensity but they chose targets that fit best with their own organisational goals. All four pilots showed positive results but also provided recommendations that list conditions as well as possible pitfalls and suggestions to overcome them. These recommendations are elaborately discussed in the INCLUSO manual (INCLUSO Partners, n.d.) and accompanying quick start guide (INCLUSO Partners, n.d.).

An “INCLUSO game” (INCLUSO Partners, n.d.) was developed to support the introduction of social software into organisations working with youth at risk by offering a guided, yet playful kick-off discussion into the use of social media tools within the organisation and the ramifications this has on the organisation, its staff and its target group.

So the full answer to the question: “Does social software support the social inclusion of youth at risk?” is: “Yes, but ...”.

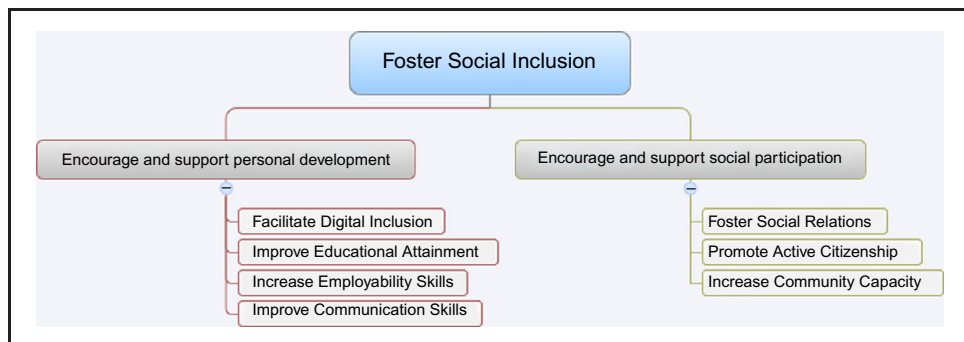
A closer look at the pilot projects

The pilot projects were at the heart of the INCLUSO project and ran between December 2008 and May 2010. All four pilot partners used the same scheme to define pilot goals: “the big picture”, a model that was developed based on a synthesis of research on the effects of social software use on the social inclusion of individuals. The Big Picture-model broke down the project’s overarching goal of fostering social inclusion into different activities or strategies that are known to be positively connected to the general concept of social inclusion. The model helped us to compare the activities of the four pilot projects and better evaluate the use of social media tools to support specific activities (Figure 1).

Pilot project in Brussels, Belgium – “Tonuso”

Tonuso is a government-funded non-profit organisation grouping initiatives in the Brussels area and the surrounding communities in the Flemish part of Belgium. Tonuso is an organisation with some 80 employees offering coaching, counselling, guidance and shelter to young people, children and young people, (all subject of the Flemish “Special Youth Assistance” – act or the Belgian “Child Protection Law”) and their family.

Figure 1



At the start of the pilot, different tools and platforms were tested, evaluated and selected. The INCLUSO goals were matched against the goals of Tonuso and appropriate social media tools were selected to support and expand on the “offline” work that was already being done. This approach, rather than simply using social media for the sake of using it, turned out to be paramount in all four projects. Training was given to staff members and a project team was created, consisting of social workers with sufficient ICT skills.

The general conclusion, according to Tonuso, is that the use of social media is indeed beneficial for social work and that it is worth to further invest in its use.

In order to increase the rate of participation, social media tools now support activities once labelled by young people as “boring”. Many young people are keen to make use of social media and often feel more apt to interact with others and express themselves through these tools, part of which can be ascribed to the disinhibitive effects of online media (Suler, 2004). Online interactions also often bridge periods without the possibility for face-to-face contact, keeping the line between social worker and youngster open.

The bottleneck, according to Tonuso’s experiences, was convincing both middle management and the social workers themselves. Continuous effort is required to overcome fear to use such tools and ICT illiteracy. Staff members need to be persuaded that using social media really has an added value, but once that is achieved, many positive results are obtained. Social media have become a full part of the everyday work at Tonuso and the organisation is creating sustainability for this work by transferring its expertise to other organisations that are interested in acquiring the same skills.

In two years time, Tonuso evolved from a “paper-based” organisation to an organisation that is now in a leading position in Flanders concerning the use of social media for support of young people and their families.

Pilot project in Vienna, Austria – “Verein Wiener Jugendzentren”

The non-profit organisation “Verein Wiener Jugendzentren” (VJZ) is the largest provider of professional youth work in Vienna with almost 300 people running more than 30 centres and clubs and provides youth and community work for the City of Vienna. VJZ uses the model of Open Youth Work as basis for the day-by-day business and is constantly trying to integrate the very latest developments and innovations from the field in their work with children and teenagers. Together with the Vienna University of Technology the “VJZ” carried out the Viennese pilot project.

Three VJZ youth centres were chosen for the Austrian pilot, each selecting five teenagers aged between 13 and 19 years coming from poor and/or migrant families. Each of the young persons received a small computer (a so-called netbook) with mobile internet access.

Early project activities included showing young people how to make good use of the different netbook’s features, how to use open source software and explaining and setting up the communication structures via social networks such as Netlog.

Two common activities were carried out during the pilot: a Christmas card competition and the creation of a PowerPoint presentation for job application. Both activities turned out to be less successful because of their school-like character and for them not coming from the young people themselves. However, activities coming from the young people either directly or indirectly proved to be more successful.

With access to a personal netbook, some kids explored the further potential of the netbook’s potential, some even developing some programming skills, a process which Ito *et al.* (2008) refer to as “geeking out”. Others discovered and developed their creative talent using image-editing software. Communication with young people, who came only sparsely (or even never) to the youth centre, evolved and improved and the contact with some others, who removed to a distant location, remained intact.

Owing to the positive feedback and results for both the young people and the youth workers VJZ definitely will continue using social software in their everyday work.

Pilot in Krakow, Poland – “U Siemachy”

The “U Siemachy” Association is a non-profit organisation operating in three regions in the South of Poland. It developed a compact system for working with children and young people and their families. It runs a network of 18 specialised institutions, including eight daytime socio-therapy centres, three family foster homes, three institutes of psychotherapy, two self-sufficiency groups, one youth club and one huge sport and development centre. All of the mentioned institutions mainly help children from socially and financially disadvantaged families. At present, the Association supports more than 1,500 children and young people aged 3-25 on a daily basis.

The Polish pilot lasted over a year and gathered up to 35 young people from six different day care institutions. It was a combination of real-life and online activities. The participants were involved in the development and organisation of thematic youth events, addressing local communities. The events happened in real life, but communication and the planning process were online based, as well as promotion and advertisement. Throughout the pilot 6 social events were organised: a survey on internet use, a team-building workshop, a big ecological event and three flashmobs/street happenings. A wide range of social software tools was in use: social networking portals (ex. Ning), online forum, instant messaging tools, YouTube and others.

The Association confirms the positive impact of social software on young people’s social inclusion and has seen a gradual adoption of social software in the throughout the organisation.

Pilot project in Aberdeen, Scotland – “Station House Media Unit”

Station House Media Unit (SHMU) is a community media hub, based in Aberdeen. It works across seven neighbourhoods in the north, south and central areas of the city – all of which are designated as official regeneration areas. These have been identified as being amongst the most disadvantaged communities in Scotland. SHMU works with more than 100 volunteers each week to produce more than 120 hours of live radio programming for its 24-hour radio station, SHMUFM. Volunteers are supported to produce six quarterly, community magazines in print and online and others contribute to a thriving video production unit. The organisation also offers free internet access to one target community through its Wi-Fi initiative, and it also runs 12-week SHMUTRAIN courses, four times a year, which aim to give disadvantaged young people opportunities in education, employment or training.

SHMU selected four projects to become pilots for the INCLUSO research. Two were internal projects run by SHMU (Youth Radio Project and SHMUTRAIN) and two were run externally, alongside partner organisations (MYF and TYP). According to the methodology established by the consortium at the very beginning, we selected outcomes by which to measure the activities of the young people interacting in the pilots. These were selected from the Big Picture model. SHMU chose to use the free social network application called Ning. Using that application, we created a closed social network for each pilot and conducted our research activities within that site. In order to produce evidence to measure activities, staff engaged young people with a range of activities, beginning with learning how to sign up to a social network, create a profile and customise it. More complex activities were then introduced including uploading media (photos and videos), participating in competitions, discussions and surveys and all of this was on the Ning social network platform.

In conclusion, SHMU found that young people’s communication levels improved, and in some cases closer interaction with staff was a result from participation in the INCLUSO project. Although there was less compelling evidence, SHMU staff believes that the social networking tools helped the young people become more confident as it allowed some shy individuals to interact more easily, and helped other young people take more responsibility over their lives and activities. Participation in the project also increased the ICT skills of many young people, who were either introduced to the benefits of this kind of activity, or were able to advance their knowledge and experience.

Reflecting on the key research objective: can social media benefit the lives of marginalised young people? SHMU concluded that it can, but that it is essential it is not seen just as a

means in itself. It is essential that it is recognised as one of many tools that a youth work organisation utilises in order to realise its outcomes (i.e. running alongside offline activities). SHMU also underlines the importance of staff involvement, both management and frontline, when introducing these kinds of activities into an organisation.

Lessons learned across the four pilots

June 2011, a year after official termination of the pilot projects and the end of the funding of the pilots, we contacted the pilot project partners again, to find if the conclusions they presented last year are still valid and what has changed.

First of all, even though EU funding for the INCLUSO project and the four pilots officially ended in September of 2010, all four of the organisations still make use of social media tools today. Even more so, social media tools have become more widely adopted throughout most of the organisations, often making the move from isolated chain of experiments to fully embedded toolkit for the organisation. The continuous rise in social media adoption by more and more people around the world make the use of such tools for professional purposes less of a taboo on the work floor than a few years ago and thus makes the adoption less of an issue both for management as for the social workers themselves. Young people often even insist on using such tools, so one might say that organisations today have little choice if they want to make their services appealing to their target groups. Improving the delivery of digital competence training of staff and stakeholders for social innovation by mapping, supporting and getting inspiration from existing and useful support initiatives is very important (Haché, 2011).

All four organisations underline the importance of choosing the right tool for the right task at the right moment, in close collaboration with both staff as well as target group. One key advice is to support and strengthen already on going processes and activities resulting in cheaper and more time efficient outcomes.

A range of social media tools should be used alongside many other more traditional tools an organisation has to interact with its target group. Room for experiment allows for innovative new approaches and methods to interact with youth at risk, while an organisation should be ready to learn from mistakes and adjust its approach accordingly. Moreover, the list of tools that are useful and connect well with the organisation's target groups is in constant flux, stressing the need to stay informed and be able and open to adjust accordingly. For many organisations this way of working is new and challenging.

This of course implies that an organisation needs to actively pursue the discovery and use of these tools and make this process an structural part of the organisation's strategy, with the right people receiving the time and resources to do so. When left to unsupported, bottom-up initiatives, an organisation is often left with a series of isolated hits-and-misses and very little knowledge transfer.

Most organisations also report the importance of measuring and reporting results. In order to get management and funding bodies to fund a structural embedding of social media tools within the organisation, results need to be able to be measured. Some social media tools have logging or statistics functionalities, allowing to keep track of the amount and nature of interactions, which can be used as a basis for such reporting. Nevertheless, more research is needed on more precise means of measuring the contribution of different social media tools to the goals of the organisation and an individual's social inclusion. This confirms the recommendations made by IPTS, the Institute for Prospective Technological Studies, one of the Joint Research Centres of the European commission (Haché *et al.*, 2010), that also stresses the importance of transferability and scalability of initiatives, the need for a better understanding of participatory design and the need for a better understanding of ICT use by Youth at Risk organisations and intermediaries.

Finally, some of our four pilot partners also stress the need for custom developed tools that go beyond the capabilities of today's popular and readily available tools. Existing tools are often a necessity because they are free or popular with the organisation's target group, but might also come with downsides. They might not perfectly translate the desired form of

interaction with the target group, lack reporting capabilities or lead to privacy or ethical issues. SHMU, for example, took the initiative to start the development of their own tools, built in co-design with their target group, in order to support the organisation's activities and need for reporting even more efficiently.

Note

1. More information on INCLUSO can be found on the INCLUSO web site: www.incluso.org

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