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PSDP—Resources and Tools:
Digital by default?
Thinking about technologies, practice, and professional development in social work

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Introduction

This learning tool is based on the work of Dr Amanda M L Taylor-Beswick, who has specialist knowledge of and interest in the role of technology in social work and social work education, and is the founder of the social work book group (@SWBookGroup), a national project that uses fiction to support learning.

This tool has been designed to help you think about the relationship between technology, digitalisation and social work. In our 21st century world, technology and the internet have increasing significance in the everyday lives of children and families, and in the communications between social workers, organisations and children and families.

This tool has been written to provoke thoughts about where digital technologies fit within the concept of professionalism. It also aims to provide you with a context in which to consider how professionalism and professional practices have changed, or might need to change given the 'potentials' and 'perils' increasingly associated with online life (Schwab, 2017, p2), and is divided into three parts.

Part one prompts you to think about the interface between technology and practice.

Part two provides you with an opportunity to map your use of new and emerging technologies, and to reflect upon the choices you have made, and make, regarding your presence, your connections and your behaviours online.

Part three encourages you to examine your 'personal learning network' (PLN – Hitchcock, 2015; Taylor, 2019).

A PLN refers to the network of connections and resources you have built in order to keep up to date with research, literature and contemporary practices.

Thinking about 'the digital shift'

We inhabit the digital world in our roles as citizens, people who use services, professionals, researchers and learners. Whether we're booking a hotel, visiting the GP, looking up a recipe, staying in touch with friends or family, or supporting children and families, technology is likely to be present.

Social work, technology and social media, however, do not have a straightforward, or indeed comfortable relationship. Issues around identity, data sharing, privacy, safety and professional boundaries pose ever-changing and challenging ethical and practical dilemmas for social workers, children, families and carers. Digital platforms are places where the boundaries created 'in real life' are blurred, where private and public identities collide and cross over. Given the integral place the internet has in modern life, is it even realistic to say that our digital and real world selves are separate at all?

When considering the digital shift, whether through choice or necessity, each of us have, in various ways, become influenced by, and reliant upon new, internet-based technologies (Naughton, 2012). As illustrated in the work of Kellsey and Taylor (2016, p30), technological development is not new:

> 'We have innovations such as hieroglyphics, the Phoenician alphabet, the Gutenberg printing press and the telephone, to name a few, to thank for how far we have come... With each new invention came much excitement but more often than not much resistance, the latter on most occasions taking precedence.
>
> 'A comment elicited from the residents of a London suburbia captured by Stein (1996) in a study that considered responses to the introduction of the telephone aptly captures the historic and to a degree the ongoing resistance to technological change.
>
> 'The participants in this study believed that it was, "useless to fight against the inevitable" exclaiming that a "day... [would] come when we shall all be on the telephone" (Stein, 1996, p10).
>
> 'What is interesting here is that this type of reaction to technological advancement is not unique to the 1900s, it has been a feature across most, if not all of the generations (p30).'

However, what *is* new is the scale and rapidity of technological change associated with the current digital shift, and the issues this presents. Familiar issues of a social nature are now presenting in unfamiliar or less familiar forms. Issues that are unsurprisingly relevant to professional social work, such as bullying online, the scamming of vulnerable adults, and grooming and child sexual abuse.

In order to keep up with the pace of change, to understand risks and also take advantage of the opportunities that technological advances bring, a knowledge of and an aptitude in the use of new technologies in professional practice is required (NHS 2018; Taylor 2017).

The following exercises provide opportunities to consider the digital shift in relation to practitioner professionalism, and the steps that need to be taken before one can become further engaged with developing social work practices that maximise on the possibilities of the digital age.

Part one: technology and practice

In her blog post, 'The unintended impacts of *I, Daniel Blake*', Dr Taylor- Beswick discusses the effect of watching the award-winning 2016 Ken Loach film. She reflects on a shift in her thinking about digitalisation – how it can replace and reinforce exclusion when bureaucratic systems are digitised without an understanding of, or regard for, those who may need to access support.

I, Daniel Blake explores some of the barriers that can arise from digitised bureaucratic systems, and the impact on the way professionals and people seeking help may behave in response.

Take ten minutes to read the first three paragraphs of the blog post and, if you've not seen the film, watch the trailer. To further your reflections, you may wish to consider all or some of the following questions:

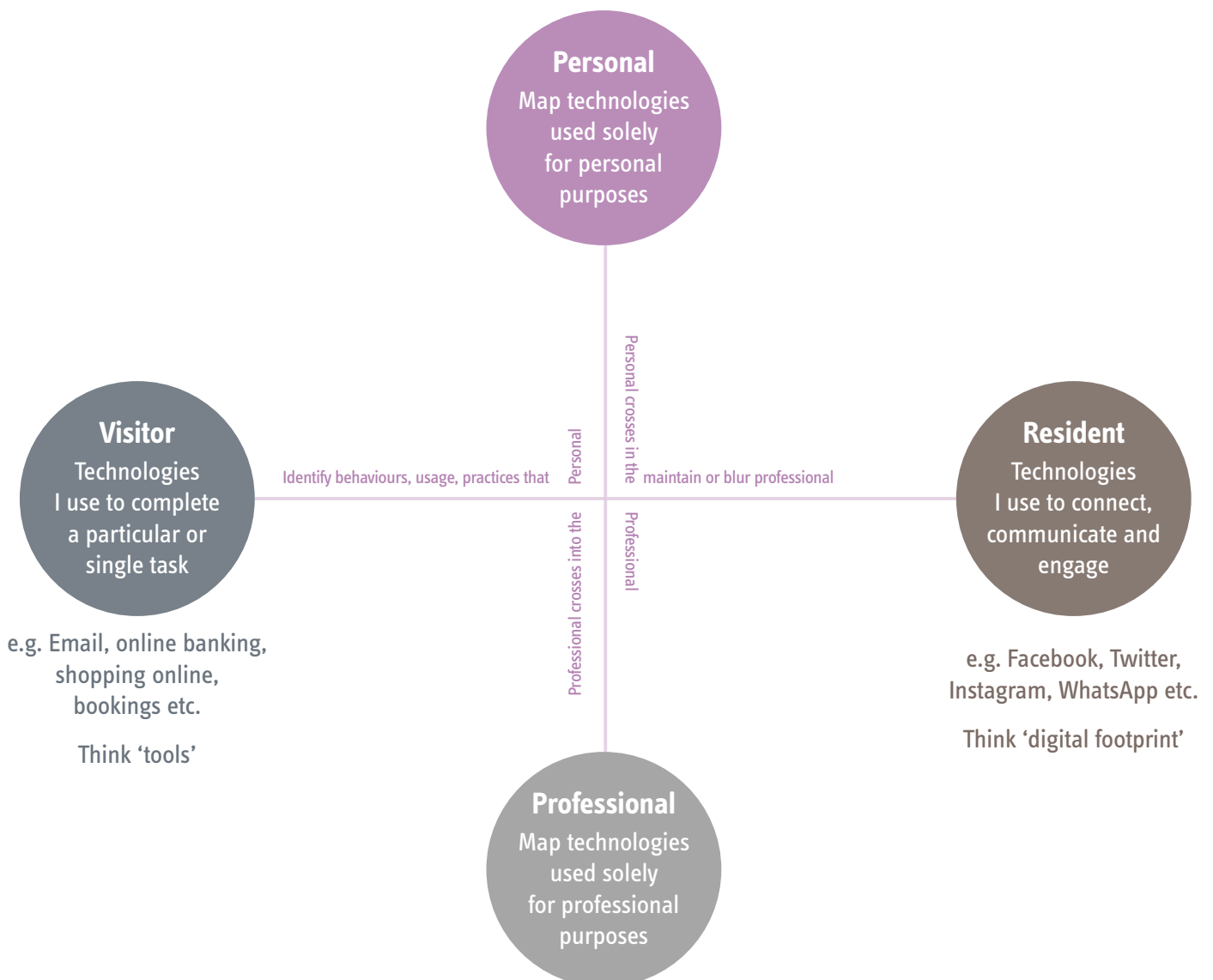|	
How did Daniel Blake's encounters with technology and other professionals agencies in the trailer make you feel?	Social work practice is underpinned by relationships, so how do you feel about technology in the context of your professional relationships and practice?
As a practice supervisor, how can you influence the systems and practices of your team and individual social workers to reduce barriers? How would you realistically redesign this process?	What opportunities can technology provide to improve social work relationships with children and families?

Part two: mapping your choices, presence and behaviours online

Now read the rest of the blog about how Dr Taylor has developed the work of David White, Head of Digital Learning at University of the Arts London, to create a tool to help explore and examine the boundaries and relationships between personal and professional uses of technology. You can find an interactive digital version of the tool and watch a short video on how to use it here.

Personal
Map technologies used solely for personal purposes

Visitor
Technologies I use to complete a particular or single task

Identify behaviours, usage, practices that

Personal

Personal crosses in the

maintain or blur professional

Professional

Professional crosses into the

Resident
Technologies I use to connect, communicate and engage

e.g. Email, online banking, shopping online, bookings etc.

Think 'tools'

e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp etc.

Think 'digital footprint'

Professional
Map technologies used solely for professional purposes

AML Taylor, May 2017

Using either the online tool, or by drawing the diagram above on paper, plot the apps, platforms or technologies you use on each of the relevant quadrants. You may find that some are relevant in more than one area. For example, you may have a personal Facebook account where you are also linked to practice colleagues or where you share or connect with things relevant to the profession:

Would you deem this usage personal or professional or both?	If both, what implications might that have for you as a digital professional?	You may run another social media profile on behalf of your organisation or for something you do outside of work. Ask yourself if this is a purely professional space?

When completing the mapping exercise, you might find it helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

|		
Which apps, platforms, technologies do I use and for what purpose?	Is there any crossover between the professional and personal and, if so, what are the benefits or ramifications of this?	Which codes of conduct guide my social media / technology choices and usage? Are there any different 'rules' or codes of conduct between my different social media uses? Are these personally or professionally defined?
Do the people I supervise adhere to the same codes? Are they aware of the codes that exist?	What has this mapping of my online behaviours and practices shown?	How might I address any knowledge gaps for me and my team?
Is there anything I need to do to make sure that the boundaries between my personal and professional life are clear?		

Part three: reviewing the PLN

Please look at the CoActED learner map below, which, broken down, means:

Co: connections or collaboration.

Act: what actions have I taken, or will I take, to ensure that I have a learning for practice network in place?

ED: education – I am committed to lifelong learning as a professional practitioner.

Thinking about your current professional role, use the map to plot the resources you use to support your development, refresh your knowledge, and keep up with current research, literature and policy. This might be people, tools, training, journals, trade magazines, mailing lists, professional online groups or spaces etc. This is your PLN!
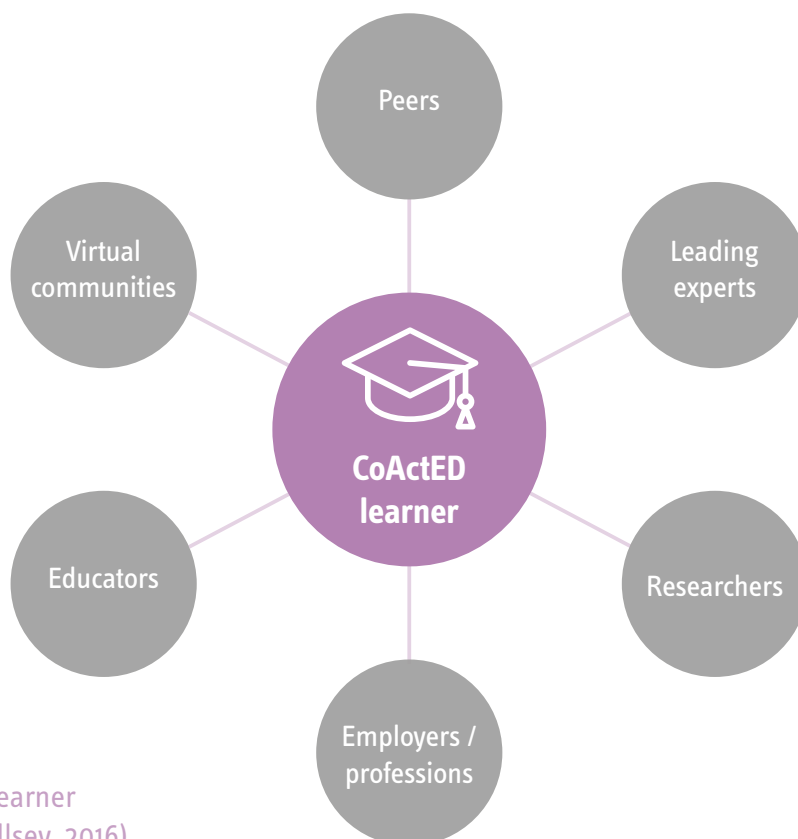
The CoActED Learner
(Taylor and Kellsey, 2016)

Now you have a map of your interests and resources, you may find some of these are already technology-based.

Through completing the CoActED learner map, have you:

Identified areas of your network that you would like to develop?	Ideas about how technology can help you make new connections?

Developing your network

Social media presents a huge opportunity to broaden your connections and build what Kellsey and Taylor (2016) term a 'virtual community of learning for practice' (VCoLP).

A VCoLP is not restricted by distance, time or geographic boundaries in the way that traditional networks may have been. Importantly, it enables conversation and collaboration between practitioners, people with lived experience, researchers, academics, policy and decision makers in a way that has, traditionally, been hard to achieve. It can certainly be a way to supplement your existing strategies for keeping up to date.

However, it can be hard to know where to begin. Please read this blog by US academic Laurel Hitchcock (2015), who is influential in thinking about the use of technologies in social work practice.

Laurel offers some further ideas of how to go about creating a professional social media presence, including setting up specific accounts for professional use such as Twitter and LinkedIn, and using your real name and photo, 'in the same way that you would going to a meeting.'

The blog suggests some good starting places to find people to follow so that you can begin building your own virtual network. If you have a particular area of interest, or an area that you would like to find out more about, try putting some key words in the search bar and see what comes up. Or, seek out an organisation or person who also has an interest in that topic and see who they are linked with. Failing that, put up your first tweet or post asking for some help to find your way. After all, like social work, social media is all about building relationships.

You can listen to a podcast of a practice supervisor talking about the benefits of building a virtual network on Twitter in this section of the website.

Having worked through this learning tool:

What will be your first step in developing your PLN?	How will you support people you supervise to try using technology for continuing professional development?	Are there any technology enthusiasts in your team or organisation who can help?

Other ways you can use this tool

Use some of the ideas and links in this tool, or this interview with Dr Taylor-Beswick, to initiate discussion with the wider team at a team meeting or away day, for a student or practitioner induction, in group supervision, appraisals or team training, or at a professional development event.

Enable conversations between people who feel confident with technology and those who are more fearful (e.g. get young people to teach their social worker about where they go for information or what they think is useful to know about social media).

Use the tool to help your supervisees plan direct work with children and families to begin conversations about technology and social media.

Map out the purpose and limitations of having a team presence on social media, or a team WhatsApp group. You might want to explore this alongside your organisation's protocol on the use of social media. Can it work for your purposes?

We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

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