Palya-Net: Facilitating and promoting safe online practices through participatory research involving Anangu young people

Abstract

Palya- Net: Technologies for Socially Inclusive Communities is a project that evolved in response to the need for research that addresses increasing cyber-safety concerns for Indigenous communities in Australia. The project adopted a transformative, participatory design approach to co-design/co-creation of an online application, Palya-Net, which aimed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in creating and taking responsibility for positive messaging through digitally creative practices. The methodology employed adopts a transformative participatory design approach in which the users are also the designers who benefit directly from their involvement in the design process. The approach sought to challenge the hierarchical relationship between researchers and the researched, and change the role of participants from 'subjects' or 'objects' of a study to 'agents' of change. This paper provides an overview of the relevant literature, the design process and the *Palya-Net* application developed through the project. The paper explores some of the challenges in undertaking research with young people from remote communities as well as the benefits of transformative participatory practices

Introduction

The *Palya Net: Technologies for Socially Inclusive Communities* project responded to an identified need for research involving participatory research design that could empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth to create and take responsibility for positive messaging through digitally creative practices. The project aimed to facilitate their capacity to promote positive online behaviours and build upon their strengths through the co-design and co-production of media, capitalising upon their existing online practices and modelling appropriate messaging to disrupt negative online practices. The project builds on existing exemplary Indigenous cyber-safety education initiatives, bringing together teams of researchers, industry, Indigenous organisations and youth to collaboratively explore and design ways to harness Indigenous knowledge, creation, dissemination, and media use, empowering participants to become agents of change within their own communities. The project also builds on the outcomes of another Young and Well CRC funded project, Safe and Well Online, and the 'Appreciate A Mate' app and website in particular, which were evaluated as a component of sub-study 3 of the Safe and Well Online project (see Spears et al, 2016).

The project sought to disrupt negative online practices by engaging participants as co-designers/co-producers and curators of a web portal, providing online information that is relevant and sensitive to the culture and traditions of participating Indigenous communities. Information about being safe and smart online, co-generated and co-created by Indigenous youth, aimed to capitalise on existing positive online practices, such as 'sharing', to promote sharing of culturally relevant positive messages. It built on existing, largely adult-led, cyber-safety initiatives through its participatory action research approach, moving beyond simply employing youth voice. In this way the project sought to co-design an online tool modelled on the 'Appreciate-A-Mate' concept, which would enable the Anangu participants to inform the

design, content and functionality of the tool, while also developing a greater understanding on safe online practices and demonstrating their capacity to become and act as agents of positive change. More specifically the project aimed to:

- Explore the potential of participatory co-design/co-creation as a methodology for introducing app Anangu young people to strategies they could employ to engage in safe online practices
- Improve the social emotion well-being of Anangu young people engaged in the Wiltja residential program
- Demonstrate the potential for ICTs as a mechanism for providing peer and external mentoring options, including the use of social media as a means for ongoing remote city based social development exchanges within a safe online environment.

The title of the project, *Palya-Net* was chosen because the word 'Palya' is used frequently in Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara as an expression of being 'good' or 'well'. We therefore called the online tool, 'Palya-Net'; combining the meanings of 'good' and 'net' representing being safe through online networking. The project was informed by the findings of another Young and Well CRC funded project, *Experiencing Wiltja!,* which explored the experiences of young Aboriginal people, particularly those from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands of South Australia, who have attended the Wiltja program, a program for secondary students from the APY Lands.

1. Context of the project

Remote Indigenous communities in Australia are reliant on telecommunications, and information and communication technologies (ICT) for accessing essential services. ICTs are also the preferred medium of social communication for Indigenous youth in, and between, communities. Research shows that where coverage is available, mobile phones are the

preferred communications device for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Issues Surrounding Cyber-Safety for Indigenous Australians, 2013, p. 16), and mobile phones and social media can be a positive and protective mechanism, both socially and culturally, for Indigenous people (ibid, p. 22). The Game On report (Burns et al, 2013, p. 12) identifies mobile devices and other technologies as having the potential to 'build communities focused on wellbeing'. Digital literacy is also a key component of engaging individuals in lifelong learning and contributing to social inclusion (The Smith Family, 2008).

Kral (2013) notes that access to digital technologies for Indigenous Australia has improved in recent years noting that young people benefit from employing these technologies as cultural tools and such technologies are increasingly being used by Indigenous communities for the promotion of health and wellbeing, education and archiving of cultural material. Lack of access to ICTs therefore results in both economic exclusion and denial of the skills required for active participation in the information society (Fuchs & Horak, 2008, p. 102). Although as Kral et al (2013) identified, access to digital technologies in remote communities is improving, Rigney (cited in Holderhead, 2011) reports on the many challenges facing Indigenous children and young people whose digital literacy needs are not being adequately addressed within the current education system.

One such challenge noted by the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation's submission to the inquiry into issues surrounding cyber-safety for Indigenous Australians (2013) relates to increasing cyber-safety concerns for Indigenous communities in Australia. The Community Safety and Wellbeing Research Study (Shaw, Shaw & D'Abbs, 2011, pp.106-82) found that internet and cyberbullying on mobile phones and in chat rooms is a major factor contributing to conflict amongst young people in remote Indigenous Communities. These issues are accentuated in remote communities such as the APY Lands,

which is one of the most disadvantaged Indigenous regions in the nation (Biddle, 2009) and relative to other Indigenous region its socio-economic disadvantage worsened between the 2001-6 censuses. The APY Lands has a very young population, with over 40 per cent of the population being aged less than 20 years, and some 78 per cent aged less than 40 years compared with national figures of 27 per cent and 54 per cent respectively. According to a recent review of Anangu education (Lea, et al 2008) school attendance, retention and completion remain of concern across the Lands and urgent action is called for in relation to secondary student pathways to further skills and tertiary education. National press articles (Martin, 2014) further highlight issues of cyber-safety concerns in the remote communities of the APY Lands due to Anangu teenagers using social media to 'regularly threaten suicide, prostitute themselves and talk about substance abuse' (p. 2). Community leaders have requested urgent assistance to understand how best to stem this practice and its deleterious impact across the extended family networks of the dispersed, but culturally interconnected communities in Indigenous communities. The Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety recommended further research into options 'to develop empowering and culturally appropriate education' to address these concerns.

Against this backdrop, the Palya-Net project sought to address the identified need to improve the digital literacy skills of Anangu youth in the APY Lands through a co-design/co-creation project engaging the participants as co-designers of an online tool modelled on the Appreciate A Mate app, that would be culturally appropriate for the Anangu youth and embed features that would complement digital literacy training, leadership skills development and mentoring involving 'both-ways' reciprocal capacity building that is sensitive to Anangu culture and adjusts demands to meet cultural practice in respectful and meaningful ways to engender more cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships – be these social, workplace or educational relationships (Vickery and Greive, 2007, p. 9)

This next section of the report describes the methodology employed in the Palya-Net project undertaken with Anangu youth who are current boarders at the Wiltja program located in Northgate, South Australia.

2. Research approach

2.1 PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

The project has employed a participatory approach to the co-design/co-creation of the Palya-Net online tool. For the purposes of this research, we have adopted the following definition of the participatory approach adopted in this study: A transformative, participatory research approach involving researchers and members of the target population collaborating to bring about change that benefits the participants directly and their communities (Kindon et al, 2007). Such approaches enable the target audience/participants to be authentically involved in the co-construction of knowledge and ideas, and as co-designers of solutions (Schuler & Namioka,1993) from which they directly benefit. This approach challenges the hierarchical relationship between researchers and the researched, and change the role of participants from 'subjects' or 'objects' of a study to 'agents' of change (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012).

In undertaking this research, we were very conscious that we are non-Indigenous researchers working with Aboriginal youth. Therefore, we were acutely aware that we needed to employ methodologies that involve a subjective interpretation of the unique worldview of Indigenous communities to occur, research with these communities needs to focus on methods that are inclusive and beneficial to the participants involved. As Guenther et al (2015) argue, Indigenous researchers must strive to accurately represent indigenous

participants and communities, and to ensure that dominant Eurocentric paradigms are not perpetuated due to their worldview, language, expectations and values being different from their participants. They argue further that positivist research methodologies previously utilised by researchers in remote communities, have tended to amplify the researchers philosophical position, rather than focusing on the epistemology, ontology and axiology of the participants involved in the research process. In order to address these dilemmas in intercultural research, several methodological responses have been developed.

One such approach calls for the development of new knowledge which is neither Indigenous or western, but develops a collaborative 'partnership of knowledge systems' (Chilisa, 2012). These collaborative knowledge systems develop when researchers operate in a manner which is respectful of, and compatible with Indigenous needs and goals. Mertens (2012) suggests that it is appropriate for researchers to use a transformative paradigm in order to increase social justice and focus on the strengths of communities experiencing oppression and discrimination. The transformative approach does this through engaging with the complexity of research in culturally diverse situations, particularly when unequal power relationships are evident. Transformative methods are particularly relevant to research in Indigenous populations where power differentials are noted due to factors including colonisation, race, ethnic status and cultural values. Participatory processes are effective when the topic in focus is presented in the language and cultural context of the participants, brings together the key stakeholders in the community and is a reflective and transformative experience. In order for this to occur, dynamic, tailored approaches should be utilised (O'Mara, 2012).

Our research aimed to use transformative practices, particularly Participatory Action Research, to develop information technology and mentoring skills in Anangu youth aged 15 – 18 years who were attending the Wiltja program at the time this research was conducted.

2.2 PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study were eight male and eight female Anangu youth aged 15 – 18 years. The participants were all currently attending Wiltja, a program for secondary students from the APY Lands, in which students from the APY Lands board at Northgate in metropolitan South Australia and participate in a range of recreational and educational programs while attending either Woodville High School or Windsor Gardens Vocational College for their education.

2.3 PROCESS

Once ethics approval had been obtained, senior students attending Wiltja were invited to view their Facebook pages through a menu option which allows them to see their page as 'others' on Facebook. 'Others' in this regard were described as peers who were not accepted as their 'friends' on Facebook. Examples of 'others', such as future employers, members of their community, or public, were given. Students were engaged in a discussion re the security settings and previous posts to their page, and all students stated that they were not aware, or happy with what 'others' could see on their page. The students were also made aware of the ability to block other users, should the need arise, and the processes around altering their Facebook security settings.

One of the male students did not have his own Facebook page. This student stated that he would like to establish a page, but demonstrated limited computer literacy. He observed another student's profile for the duration of the exercise. Following the discussion about individual student profiles, the groups were shown animations on Cyber-Safety from www.esafety.gov.au. The 'Be Deadly on Line' animations were designed for Indigenous schoolchildren and communities, and have a particular focus on cyber-safety in an indigenous context. Viewing of these animations flowed into a discussion of what is appropriate to be shared online, and the benefit of sharing positive messages. Students agreed that they wanted to be positive on line, but felt that they could not speak up against negative comments or bullying, as "it might come back on you", and "you don't know who else that person knows". Students were then introduced to a method of sharing positive images online, the 'Appreciate-a-Mate' application, an award winning application developed through funding provided by the Young and Well CRC with a group of young people in the target age group (12 – 18 years). Its focus is on addressing issues identified by the young people as having major impact on their lives, namely negative body image, and self-perception. In a two-year period post-launch, over 50,000 positive images addressing these concepts were created on the application and shared on social media (Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, 2015), and researchers involved with the project concluded that the greatest potential for behaviour change online is brought about by targeting attitudes, rather than focusing on behaviours.

'Appreciate-a-mate' was demonstrated to the students, with all students indicating positive regard for the application. The researchers enquired whether students would be interested in developing their own application representing Indigenous perspectives as co-creators. This activity was designed to offer the cohort an opportunity to demonstrate their leadership and mentoring capacity, to increase their use and competency with digital technology, and to offer

them the opportunity for their own indigenous voices to be heard. Students were offered the opportunity to utilise their own artwork or photography or other personal means to incorporate sharing positive messages online.

Palya-Net Online Tool

Payla-Net extends on the 'Appreciate A Mate' app by incorporating key features aimed at facilitating the development of participants' safe practices online through co-creation of the content of the application, which is reviewed and curated by a group of the participants themselves. In this way, the application, and in particular the process of peer review by the participants themselves, involves the participants who are representatives of the end-user target population and engages those end-users in a more authentic way.

Although the 'Appreciate A Mate' application was developed through the authentic engagement of young people, the content of the App available online allows limited modification; while the style of the safe messages can be altered, the images and text messages themselves are fixed. In contrast, Palya-Net aims to develop the capacity of the young people to make informed decisions as mentors and peers about the appropriateness of the material to be published online.

The key distinguishing features of *Palya-Net* (Figure One) are: the built in editing tools that allow the users to add their own images (a), the ability to add their own text messages using the overlay "speech bubbles" (b) and to create or edit their own images using the built-in drawing tools (c). The finished messages can be saved (d) and submitted (e) for peer review. There are built-in instructions available to the user via the 'Help' link. Once approved, the messages can be shared via Facebook, Twitter, Google + or Pinterest.

The leadership group have administration access to login and view all submitted images and determine whether to then approve the images for subsequent use by the creator of the message and as available content for other users to access from the image library available within the application. If the image is deemed inappropriate, the leadership group contact the creator and discuss their concerns, while also mentoring the young person about strategies for adapting their image to be a more positive and affirming message. The peer review group also review submitted content for potential copyright infringement.

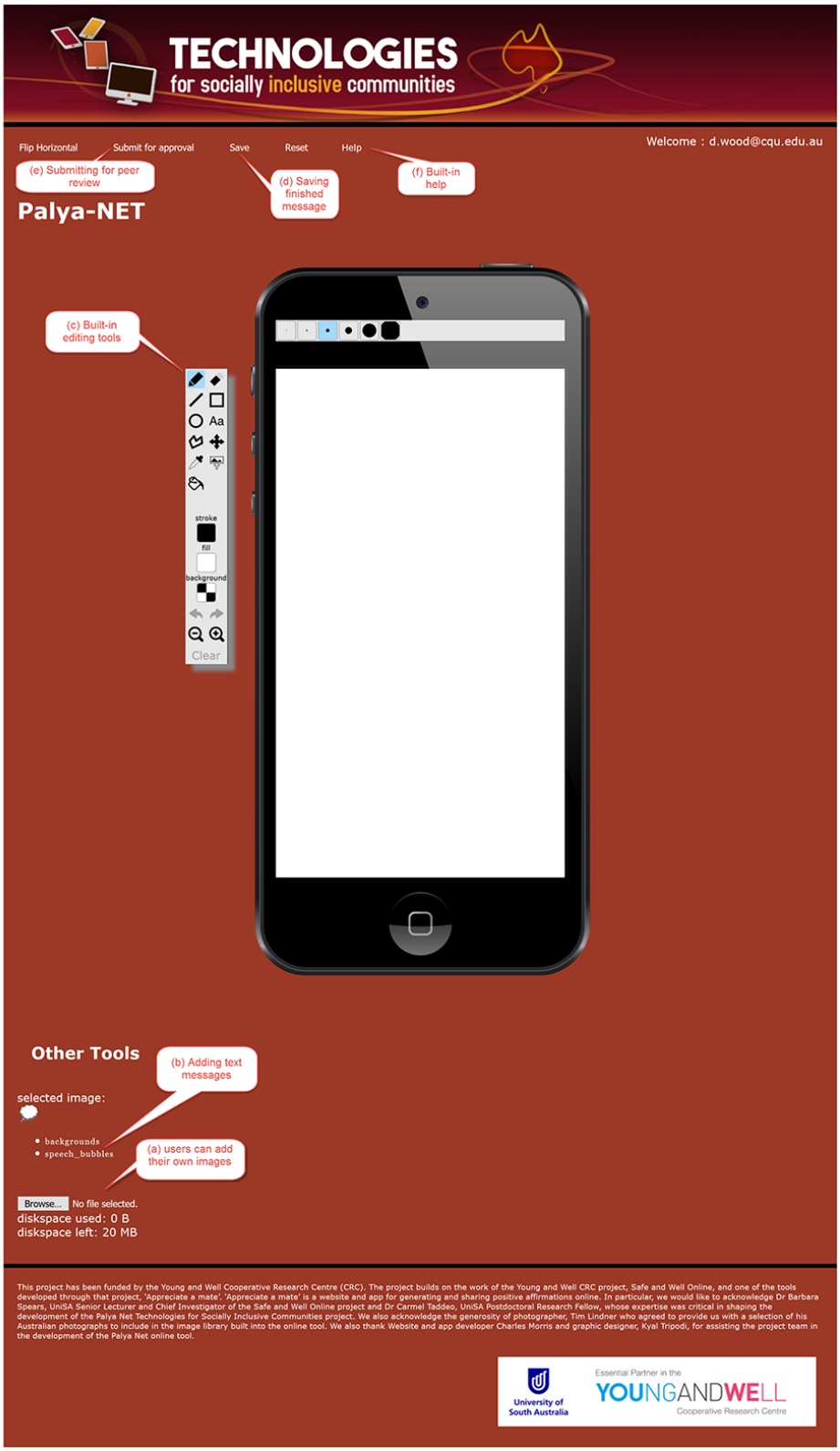

Figure One: Palya-Net Features

3. Discussion and Conclusion

Palya-net is an online tool designed to promote safe online practices by facilitating young people's understanding of cyber-safety and facilitating the development of peer review and peer leadership skills.

The application has been developed through co-design/co-creation processes involving Aboriginal young people from the APY Lands who are boarding at Wiltja while undertaking high school studies in metropolitan Adelaide. The project responds to an identified need to authentically engage the young people in the design of an application that enables them to send safe, culturally appropriate messages using a variety of social media platforms. Critically, the application extends beyond previous work by building into the co-creation process the development of the leadership skills of nominated members of the target audience who review and curate submitted work and provide mentoring support to their peers.

The methodology employed adopts a transformative participatory design approach in which the users are also the designers who benefit directly from their involvement in the design process. As non-Indigenous researchers, we have attempted to accurately represent Indigenous participants and communities, and to ensure that dominant Eurocentric paradigms were not perpetuated by our worldview, language, expectations and values, which are different from those of the participants in the project.

The project was not without its challenges. Ethics approval involved many months of consultation with the relevant stakeholders including the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee, Wiltja staff, and The Department of Education and Child Development in South Australia. The project team also needed to work sensitively with the participants,

avoiding intrusion on their already busy lives and working with Wiltja staff to ensure the project was not disruptive to the young people's existing school and recreational commitments.

The project is ongoing. As with any co-creation project, the application developed remains a work-in-progress as the users gain greater confidence in exploring the potential of the tool and identify new features that they would like incorporate. The process of working with the participants in this process aligns with participatory design principles in that the design process has involved researchers and members of the target population collaborating to bring about change that benefits the participants directly and their communities (Kindon et al, 2007). The approach has enabled the target audience/participants to be authentically involved in the co-construction of knowledge and ideas, and as co-designers of solutions (Schuler & Namioka,1993) from which they directly benefit. We hope that the approach we have adopted in this approach has challenged the hierarchical relationship between researchers and the researched, and change the role of participants from 'subjects' or 'objects' of a study to 'agents' of change (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012).

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Palya-Net is available from http://draw.experiencing-wiltja.net