Editorial

Therapy, Education and Technology

INTRODUCTION

Psychological help and support for mental health problems such as depression and anxiety has infiltrated the world of technology, or is this the other way round? Perhaps technology has gradually become more acceptable to the world of counselling and psychotherapy? Certainly in the United Kingdom (UK), the Government's policy agenda to improve mental health and well-being, the '[1]Improving Access to Psychological Therapies' program, known with ironic affection as IAPTS, includes computer software that patients can use to alleviate their distress and lift their mood. Software programs such as '[2]Beating the Blues' are becoming a staple as part of a '[3]Stepped Care' approach for patients referred by their family doctors for treatment provided at the expense of the National Health Service.

The Hole-in-the Wall Project

Professor Sugata Mitra's work on minimally invasive education similarly puts valuable computing resources into remote and deprived environments with his [4]Hole-in-the-Wall program. This innovative program contributes to the [5]United Nations Millennium Development Goals and the work of UNICEF in improving the lives of children and young people in remote or rural and deprived environments such as the slums of Delhi, India and parts of Lagos, Nigeria. With 'Hole-in-the-Wall computer stations, freely accessible and without tuition or instruction, children have advanced their learning in relation to computing skills and also learning the English language (Delhi). Professor Sugata Mitra has become a media figure following disclosure that his work had a direct impact on the development of the ideas for the movie 'Slumdog Millionaire'. However, deprived environments are not exclusively found in developing countries, and young people are not necessarily happier in the developed world, as a major piece of research carried out by [6]UNICEF found. Professor Mitra is currently exploring the use of his minimally invasive education system in deprived areas of the North East of England.

Advances in technology and therapeutic applications

One of the papers published in this edition of the Journal explores the use of counseling in improving female participation in technical education in Botswana. In contemporary society, as part of the developed and the developing world, technical education includes the use of computer technology. Advances in such technology can send images underground along broadband internet cables at high speed, send signals flying through the air with wireless internet access (WiFi) and fire up laptops through the use of solar energy in remote, rural and otherwise inaccessible environments. Children of all ages engage with technology, which can open up a useful and almost infinite source of flexible imagery for children to work with in psychotherapeutic contexts, for example the traditional play therapy field for pre-school and primary school children. Metaphor based activity could be significantly extended, and theoretically, some children might find digitally based play easier to engage with. The [7]United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

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[1] http://www.iapt.nhs.uk/
[2] http://www.beatingtheblues.co.uk/
[3] http://www.iapt.nhs.uk/services/
[4] http://www.hole-in-the-wall.com/
[5] http://www.dfid.gov.uk/mdp/
[6] United Nations Children's Fund (2007) Innocenti Report Card 7: Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries. Florence, Italy. UNICEF.

[7] United Nations (1989) United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Geneva, Switzerland. Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

(1989) supports the notion of access to psychological help and support for all children. Through the use of advances in computer technology, both hardware through solar powered laptops and software programs tailor made for children and young people, as well as adults, therapy could be taken to areas where there is a lack of professional case supervision. Therapeutic work could be linked via satellite to the appropriate professional support for consultation and guidance. This use of technology is currently being researched and developed at Newcastle University UK (Sue Pattison, Sugata Mitra and Alan Holmes). The challenge is to further the work and take feedback from counsellors and therapists across a range of contexts, so watch this space!

Conclusion

The use of technology and computer science to enhance and extend the benefits of psychological therapy may offer solutions to some of the problems of access in a diverse range of contexts and provide professional support for therapists working in such environments. Professor Mitra's work on minimally invasive education and the use of his Hole-in-the-Wall technology may provide a way forward for innovative psychotherapeutic work in deprived environments. This is still an under-developed area and I welcome communications from others working in this field.

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