

Institution: Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh		
Unit of Assessment: 34 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management		
Title of case study: Critical dialogue in action: changing harmful cultural practices for young people in Scotland and Malawi		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Paolo Casteltrione	Lecturer	2016 - present
Chris McVittie	Professor	2001 - present
Magda Pieczka	Reader	2005 - present
Emma Wood	Senior Lecturer	1995 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 1 August 2013- 31 December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Y		
1. Summary of the impact <p>Drawing on our research, we co-created (with teenagers) a new, dynamic model of critical dialogue which inspires young participants to effect social change in relation to intransigent issues (where they have traditionally been hard to reach or influence). The impact of our work emerges from two projects focusing first on young people and alcohol and then on voluntourism. The model develops agency, as the teenagers lead critical dialogue groups without adults present. It enables young people who previously felt marginalised to use their voice, feel empowered, and acknowledge their accountability, thus confidently addressing personal challenges, and influencing peers and communities to do the same. This impacts their wellbeing, understanding, learning, participation and social welfare.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>Communications research shows that persuasive campaigns are often ineffective in changing teenage behaviour around harmful practices embedded in social norms. We have created a unique alternative approach based on dialogic principles of collective learning, critical reflection, and solidarity.</p> <p>The underpinning research developed in an iterative fashion over the last nine years, moving between conceptual and applied work and tackling different types of issues—excessive alcohol consumption and colonial legacies in development— in order to test the transferability of our model of dialogic intervention. The initial findings were produced using action research, blurring the sharp distinction between knowledge production and its impact (Pieczka and Wood 2013). The intervention drew on inter-disciplinary expertise, mostly from communication and psychology, and also from medical and justice system professionals.</p> <p>The dialogic approach developed in our research reframed problems in order to find a new way for their mitigation. Working with secondary-school aged participants in Scotland and Malawi, we first intervened in risky drinking culture and then in harmful voluntourism practices, treating both as problems that could be mitigated through peer-led inquiry, empowerment and collective learning. In Freirean terms, we expected change to be powered by critical reflection, shared</p>		

responsibility and development of skills for resilience, rather than by compliance with prevailing social norms or expert prescriptions that individualise responsibility and decontextualize learning.

Hepworth et al.'s research (2016) investigated how students aged 18-24 talked about alcohol and drinking. McVittie co-led the discourse analysis of the project, instrumental to the finding that talk about drinking is a discursive site in which participants negotiate their own identities and the social pressures exerted by their drinking culture. Another finding, that everyday social discourse within peer groups was constrained by thematic repertoires, echoed preliminary findings from our action research, cocreated with young people aged 14-18 in Edinburgh (Pieczka and Wood 2013). Consequently:

- we defined drinking as a social and cultural practice bound up with the development of young people's self-identity and discursive repertoires available to them
- we adopted a broader definition of knowledge, elevating the importance of experiential, relational, and reflective knowledge
- we worked to develop participants' skills in ways that support critical thinking, self-efficacy, and resilience.

The model we developed provides a method for tackling problems in communication, understanding, participation and social welfare with a unique configuration of four well-established communication strategies, including world café, culture circles, citizen's jury and praxis (see below).

The next stage in our research took a two-pronged approach in order to enhance the model's transferability across issues and social contexts. We reconceptualised our large-scale dialogic intervention as an institutionally embedded model of shared leadership (Pieczka and Casteltrione 2019), exploring how the dialogic design involved a reframing of the problem and the bringing together of informal and formal leadership, as well as collective leadership within a structured educational context. Secondly, by translocating the intervention from public health to development, from Scotland to Malawi, we aligned it more clearly with the UN Sustainable Development Goals to enhance its transferability (Wood 2020). On both continents, teenagers could be considered to be in a marginalised group because their life-stage limits their role in society and capacity to express their views. We rearticulated our theory of change specific to our intervention. This led to transferable skills and more predictable outcomes.

3. References to the research

1. Hepworth, J, McVittie, C, Schofield, T, Lindsay, J, Leontini, R & Germov, J. 2016. 'Just choose the easy option': students talk about alcohol use and social influence, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19:2, 251-268, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2015.1059928
2. Pieczka, M and Wood, E. 2013. Action research and public relations: Dialogue, peer learning, and the issue of alcohol. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 2: 2, 161-181. DOI:10.1177/2046147X13485955
3. Pieczka, M and Casteltrione, P. 2019. AlcoLOLs, re-thinking drinking: Developing a shared leadership approach for alcohol education, *Health Education Journal*. Online first. DOI:10.1177/0017896919883364
4. Wood, E. (2020) Using critical dialogue to create praxis: The AlcoLOLs project. In: Scandrett, E. (ed.) *Public Sociology Education*. Bristol: Policy Press.

In our estimation, the quality of the underpinning body of research submitted here meets the 2* criteria of international recognition in originality, significance and rigour. All research has been through a rigorous peer review process, with 75% published in established academic journals. Additionally, Pieczka and Wood (2013) were awarded Robert Heath Award for best paper in the Public Relations Division, at International Communication Association annual conference in 2013.

4. Details of the impact

Our key impacts are in **wellbeing, understanding, learning, participation and social welfare**, by enabling young people in two countries to challenge and change harmful practices embedded in social norms.

Our research showed that teenagers find it difficult to share authentic views with peers; “You don’t understand what you’re feeling, can’t speak properly for fear that you might be judged” (Source 1). Our impacts grew from understanding that we needed to address barriers in effective communication with and between teenagers who can feel alienated at this particular life-stage. We achieved this by developing our model of critical dialogue which a headteacher described as: “a really great tool for youngsters to help each other navigate adolescence...a jewel in the crown. One of the best projects I’ve been involved in in my educational career” (Source 1).

The four stages of our model are peer led and enable:

- 1) social norms to be disrupted so young people can develop a critical perspective on their ability to communicate openly and on cultural practices they previously viewed as normal (**impacting understanding**).
 - 2) the creation of safe / brave spaces for them to share stories around lived experiences and authentic opinions, without fear of judgement (**impacting participation**).
 - 3) the interrogation of ‘scientific’ knowledge selected from ‘expert witnesses’ (**impacting learning and participation**).
 - 4) praxis to be achieved through collective decision-making on how to bring about changes necessary for social impact (**impacting wellbeing and social welfare**).
- (Sources 1 and 3).

With a grant from the Robertson Trust we worked with 200 young facilitators in Scotland who ran critical dialogue groups for over 3,000 school pupils between 2013–2016. These focussed on alleviating the pressure on teenagers to drink excessively for social approval. Leading dialogue groups led the facilitators to develop strong self-regulation over alcohol consumption, ability to manage risk and to act with integrity: “I do drink but I am a lot more careful now...I don’t feel like I have to drink to impress anyone anymore” (Source 1). For hundreds of their peers, the impact of participating in just two group discussions, was clear in terms of learning: 76% rated this intervention as the most useful source of information about alcohol and 56% participants learned how to deal with alcohol (Source 1). From January 2017, we transferred the model to Malawi, working with 14 young care home residents who have run critical dialogue groups with 100 pupils from 6 visiting high schools (5 Scottish, 1 Malawian). More were booked but cancelled due to Covid-19. Here, our STEKAskills model of Critical Dialogue for Youth Solidarity addressed an embedded culture of donor dependency reinforced by a development narrative that disempowers local populations and reinforces limiting views in Scottish youth. This work was facilitated by a Scottish Government International Development grant, and the Government recommends the approach it in its report to schools (Source 10).

In **Scotland** teenagers learned how to communicate confidently and make informed choices about drinking. They also understood problematic behaviour and sought social welfare, as testified by this social worker: “The norm is that young people don’t want to talk about [alcohol abuse]. They close down. It was striking: her approach was so different. She knew exactly what she was talking about and was really making choices” (Source 1).

In **Malawi**, those taking part in the dialogue groups were both Malawian and Scottish teenagers. Both sides testified that because they were given the freedom to have profound conversations with one another, they newly understood complex issues such as power and equality, donor dependency and agency: “It really was life changing. It opened my eyes to different points of view.” They learned how to be resilient by overcoming the inability to express their challenges and developed confidence in speaking about serious issues” “we shared ideas without being shy.”

"The strength and courage they [young Malawians] showed was inspiring... we can learn a lot from them and help spread awareness to fight inequality" (Source 3).

Participating in dialogue with people who aren't like them also contributes to their social welfare. As two other Scots teenage participants attested: "It was massive. Our normal environment doesn't encourage honest conversations without judgement. I'm an introvert and the Dialogues helped me to speak out."; "It is going to affect my behaviour in the future because I have started depending on myself" (Source 3).

In both locations, teenagers were able to exercise greater control over their own development, and to hold decision-makers to account: A QMU based charity, STEKAskills, developed as a result of the Malawian dialogue work. Whereas Global North pupils used to visit Malawi as voluntourists, making donations and doing work which Malawians could be paid to do, the young Malawians at STEKA now charge these pupils a fee to take part in their Youth Solidarity Dialogue Groups. The earned income pays the young facilitators and funds the development of a vocational skills centre. In the Dialogues they learn from one another, developing praxis relating to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Godknows Maseko (children's rights campaigner and founder of STEKA) describes the impact in Malawi as "Very good: most of the girls feel that, no matter what they say, they can never be heard. [Now], they can plan, they can advocate, they can apply pressure on decision-makers. They know they can earn money and contribute to a sustainable Malawian future, to look after themselves while conveying a useful message to other people" (Source 3). Sarah Niven, teacher, says: "the dialogue experience made a big contribution towards their transition into adulthood – which can be a very isolated and painful process for teenagers... When they returned to Scotland, I feel that they were able to talk more to other pupils they wouldn't normally talk to because they were part of a different social demographic (our school is very diverse). So, sitting in those groups helped them understand what being a global citizen means – that we shouldn't isolate someone just because they don't have the same trainers as us and if we could open up a dialogue with everyone the world would be a better place...The experience completely transformed my views about how trips should be organised and communicated" (Source 3).

Where communication among teenagers about complex issues like alcohol abuse and donor dependency used to be individualistic and defensive, our model shows that critical dialogue encourages new, community-focused communication strategies. The increased mutual understanding, augmented learning and participatory communication, has improved social welfare among resilient young people. The freedom to communicate more authentically has lent these youngsters a sustainable and humanised agency that enables their development into a community of empowered global citizens. We will continue to organise them. In times like the present, when a global pandemic reveals the vulnerability *and* resilience of local communities, this dialogic model can enhance global emancipation of global teenagers at a stage of transition. As one of our young participants says: "I think that many more pupils should get the opportunity because it really was life changing" (Source 3).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Pieczka, M., Wood, E. and Casteltrione, P. (2016) The AlcoLOLs Project: The Final Report. Retrieved from https://www.qmu.ac.uk/media/5511/alcolols-report-2018_webres.pdf. [This document contains testimonials from a variety of stakeholders including](#) a social worker, police sources, the AlcoLOLs (teenage facilitators) and the teenage participants in the groups. Testimonials from a headteacher are also included; she is happy to be contacted to corroborate this impact.
2. An MSP who was involved in the AlcoLOLs project can corroborate how the approach related to policy and is a named corroborator.
3. Wood, E. (2020) An Alternative to Voluntourism: How youth solidarity groups in Malawi empower young Malawians and Scots. This report evaluates the Malawian Dialogues and includes

testimonials from a wide range of stakeholders. It can be accessed via the STEKAskills website <https://www.stekaskills.com/our-model-of-critical-dialogue-for->

4. High School teacher leading school trips to Malawi and advisor to NGO Classrooms for Malawi and Scotland Malawi Partnership, has testimonials published in a case study contained in source 3 and is a named corroborator.

5. A Malawian children's rights activist, founder of the children's home STEKA and board member of the charity STEKAskills also has testimonials published in source 3, and is a named corroborator.

6. The STEKA dialogue team, some young Scottish pupils who have taken part in their groups and their teachers talk about the impact they have had in this short [film](#).

7. A STEKA resident and dialogue facilitator, speaks in the film (above) and is a named corroborator.

8. Emma Wood and corroborator 5 took part in a filmed [TedX](#) talk to explain the impact of the approach.

9. An independent evaluation of the STEKA Dialogues was conducted by Dr Blessings Kachale who interviewed a range of stakeholders. This written from a Malawian perspective based on an analysis of interviews with stakeholders including the Malawian dialogue team, Godknows Maseko (founder of STEKA), Dr. Sydney Friendly, Senior Lecturer at the University of Malawi and Dr. Chisomo Kalinga, a Malawian Anthropologist and Research Fellow at Edinburgh University.

10. Emma Wood contributed to the research underpinning the Scottish Government's extensive report [School Partnership and school visits in a Global Citizenship Context](#). It focuses on pupils 'developing a critical reflection on development, power and poverty' and specifically recommends STEKAskills' "peer-to-peer dialogues" to help "schools develop a pupil visit that has impact on global learning" (section 7).