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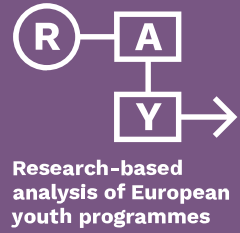
Exploring successful approaches to digital youth work

2021 – 2024

Key findings

October 2024

EXPLORING SUCCESSFUL APPROACHES TO DIGITAL YOUTH WORK

RAY-DIGI

RAY DIGI:
KEY FINDINGS

WRITTEN BY

ANDREA HORTA HERRANZ
FRIEDEMANN SCHWENZER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
DARIA RÜTTIMANN

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10 LESSONS ON DIGITAL YOUTH WORK

RAY DIGI is our research project exploring dimensions of digitalisation in European youth work. As part of this project, we conducted more than 60 case studies of digital youth work projects across Europe and beyond. In focus groups, young people and youth workers explored key aspects of digital youth work, such as motives and inspirations, experiences, success factors, and visions for digital youth work. Next to the 10 lessons on digital youth work and key recommendations below, you will also find two reflection & planning tools for digital youth work practice in this document. Enjoy reading!

1. Digital technologies attract people to youth work!

Digital youth work attracts both youth workers and young people with a similar appeal as non-digital youth work. For instance, young people are particularly motivated to join digital youth work by the prospect of spending time with friends or making new ones. However, some youth workers and young people highlighted that they might not have engaged in youth work if it were not for the digital technology aspect.

2. Successful digital youth work is inextricably rooted in non-formal youth work!

All digital youth work projects studied as part of our research can be described as great examples of non-formal youth work. Key features and values of non-formal youth work, such as being a relational, youth-centred, and empowering practice, are also pointed out as successful pedagogical features of digital youth work. Our research showcases that digital technologies and non-formal youth work can build meaningful synergies.

3. Successful digital youth work practices can be defined!

Successful digital youth work practices a) apply approaches, attitudes, and values of non-formal youth work to explore digital technologies and phenomena with young people b) utilise digital technologies to strengthen features and goals of non-formal youth work and c) translate aspects of non-formal education into digital environments.

4. Digital youth work ≠ online youth work!

Digital youth work can happen in online environments. However, many successful digital youth work happens face-to-face. For instance, both young people and youth workers value offline settings when creatively engaging with digital technologies in a hands-on manner. Further, digital technologies often foster positive group experiences on-site, e.g., when gaming or recording a podcast together. The meaningful combination of online and offline is often described as a key success factor of digital youth work.

5. Not just insecure!

In discussions around digital youth work, youth workers' insecurities in using digital technologies are often described. However, to explain the reluctance of some youth workers to engage in digital youth work, one must go beyond the notion of insecurity.

Most of the concerns raised about digital technologies are related to core youth work values. For instance, many fear that online environments might hinder building trust with young people or exclude some from participating in youth work offers. Youth workers' training needs to take these concerns seriously.

A focus on how digital technologies can be used to strengthen features of youth work and on how to alleviate the limitations and risks they present for non-formal learning could result in more youth workers embracing digital youth work.

6. Successful digital youth work relates to and expands young people's digital realities!

Young people and youth workers agree that digital youth work should relate to young people's digital realities. However, they also agree that digital youth work should not simply replicate these realities but has to reach beyond them. For young people, the added value of digital youth work often is having access to digital technologies, gaining new competences, or the experience of using digital technologies purposefully.

7. Successful digital youth work strives for a holistic approach!

The notion of going beyond just using digital technologies is often stressed when discussing digital youth work. Youth workers, for example, aim at fostering attitudes such as a critical mindset or awareness. Another topic highlighted is the distinction between using digital technologies vs. actually understanding digital technologies. Therefore, we suggest the use of the concept of digital competences as defined by DigComp, the European digital competence framework for citizens. It describes digital competences as a combination of skills, knowledge, and attitudes.

8. Focus on information and data literacy, privacy and safety, and digital well-being!

Young people indicated a need for support with regard to information and data literacy, privacy and safety, and digital well-being. At the same time, our research suggests that these are competences that are not given high priority within the European youth programmes.

9. Do not forget about the structural dimensions of digital youth work!

Adding a meaningful digital dimension to youth work requires investments in digital infrastructures and capacities as well as new types of funding schemes. Digital technologies and products are typically not a one-time investment but require long-term maintenance. Another main structural challenge of digital youth work is the lack of digitally skilled and confident youth workers.

10. Overcoming Covid-19 in digital youth work: Building back stronger!

The Covid-19 pandemic was a decisive moment for digital youth work. For many, it was the first encounter with digital technologies in youth work. However, the pandemic does not provide a blueprint for successful digital youth work.

Understandably, going online was often merely an ad hoc reaction to pandemic restrictions. After the pandemic, however, there is a need for strategic planning. While the involvement of digital technologies during the pandemic aimed at ensuring access to youth work in times of social distancing, youth work should now aim at providing young people with access to digital technologies and skills.

In addition, digital youth work spaces need to be diversified. During the pandemic much of youth work moved online; however, both youth workers and young people are expressing a strong desire for on-site encounters. Furthermore, the pandemic led to a high degree of digital fatigue. Overcoming this fatigue will be a major challenge to digital youth work's near future.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

If you are a youth work practitioner, we hope this report inspires you to...

- add more meaningful digital dimensions to your work with young people by using non-formal education to explore digital technologies and phenomena with them and by using digital technologies to better achieve your youth work goals.

- keep up and translate the spirit of non-formal education into digital environments and think of (creative) ways to alleviate the limitations online spaces bring about for non-formal youth work.

- diversify your youth work spaces by using both online and offline spaces and by purposefully combining both.

- let young people participate at all stages of your digital youth work project.

- build and contribute to diverse teams and networks for digital youth work.

- reflect and relate to young people's digital experiences and needs and also focus on the added value a digital youth work offer could bring to young people.

- aim for a holistic understanding of digital competences that goes beyond just using digital tools.

- give young people more opportunities to learn and discuss information and data literacy, digital safety, and digital well-being.

If you are a youth work strategist, we hope this report inspires you to...

- understand and promote digital youth work as an opportunity to attract new and more diverse people to youth work.

- work towards a shared understanding and recognition of digital youth work; e.g., on the organisational, local, national, or European level.

- promote additional and increasingly tailored training offers for youth workers on digital youth work.

- contribute to and advocate for adequate structural conditions necessary for digital youth work to thrive.

- support more projects that engage young people with topics in the areas of information and data literacy, digital safety, and digital well-being.

- champion a strategic approach to digital youth work within your organisational, local, or national context as well as on the European level, taking into account the additional challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

If you are a young person, we hope this report inspires you to...

- take part in digital youth work activities.

- be aware and spread the word about European youth work as an opportunity to foster digital competences.

- participate in critical discussions about the future of digital youth work and how to better align it with young people's digital experiences and needs.

DIGITAL YOUTH WORK PLANNING TOOL

This digital youth work planning tool invites you to strategically and holistically plan your digital youth work offer – either as an organisation or when working on an upcoming project. If you think about the 5 dimensions of digital youth work, you will have a solid basis for strategically planning digital offers of your organisation or the project ahead of you!

STRUCTURAL DIMENSION

What are desirable circumstances, resources, and frameworks for our digital youth work activities? How can we improve and influence these structural circumstances?

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CONTENT DIMENSION

Which digital topics or issues do we want to address in our digital youth work activities? Which (innovative) digital technologies do we want to include in our youth work activities?

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PEDAGOGICAL DIMENSION

What are the pedagogical approaches, values, and features we want to apply when engaging young people in digital youth work?

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SPATIAL DIMENSION

Where should our youth work activity happen? Which digital spaces will we use? How will we combine offline and online spaces?

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EXPERIENTIAL DIMENSION

How should our digital youth work offers feel like for a young person? How should digital youth work feel like as a youth worker?

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DIGITAL COMPETENCE REFLECTION TOOL

The competence reflection tool on the next page is intended to assist you in planning or evaluating digital youth work projects. It can be used by both youth workers and young people. It invites you to reflect on the following aspects:

1. **Activity**: Describe the activity you are about to implement/ you want to evaluate / you took part in.

2. **Competence area:** Which digital competence areas of DigComp is/ was the activity addressing? The DigComp[1] competences are: Information & data literacy[2], Communication & Collaboration[3], Digital content creation[4], Safety, Problem solving[5].

3. **Skills:** What are the skills young people improved/ will improve/ you improved by taking part in this activity?

4. **Knowledge:** What knowledge or experiential knowledge did young people gain/ will young people gain/ did you gain by participating in the activity?

5. **Attitudes:** Which attitudes would you like to impart by the activity you are designing/ you implemented? Which attitudes did you acquire by taking part in the digital youth work activity?

6. **Modes of acquisition:** How are skills, knowledge, and attitudes acquired? How did you acquire the digital competence? For instance, explicit, implicit, experiential, hands-on, theoretical, discursive, on my own, in a group.

7. **Objectives:** Which desirable effect on young people did or do you want to achieve? What are the positive effects this activity has had on you? Where should the competences acquired be applied?

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[1] You can access DigComp here:
https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/50c53c01-abeb-11ec-83e1-01aa75ed71a1/.

[2] Covers how to find, filter, assess and manage data and information.

[3] Covers how to use digital technologies for teamwork, discussions, and decisions.

[3] Covers how to mix and remix, and make your own things digitally.

[4] Covers how to protect yourself, your data, your devices, and the environment.

[5] Covers how to deal with technical trouble, and how to learn this skill

DIGITAL COMPETENCE REFLECTION TOOL

| ACTIVITY	DigComp COMPETENCE AREA	SKILLS	KNOWLEDGE	ATTITUDES	MODES OF ACQUISITION	OBJECTIVES

Questions to reflect upon

- Competence areas: Does the project cover a diverse range of digital competences? Or does it deliberately focus on a specific competence area?

- Skills, knowledge, attitudes: Does the project (equally) address the dimensions of skills, knowledge, and attitudes? Does it privilege one dimension and if so, why?

- Modes of acquisition: Does the project offer diverse approaches to acquire digital competences?

- Objectives: Does the activity contribute to the objectives of the project? Which other competences would be needed to meet the objectives of your project?
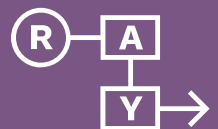
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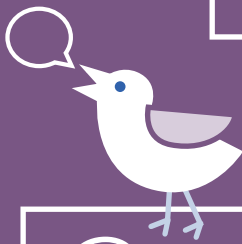
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Research-based analysis of European youth programmes