

Which approaches and technologies can work well to deliver Digital Youth Work?

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Section 1

What is Digital Youth Work?

Youth work begins where young people are. This imperative makes youth work a vitally different practice for engaging with young people than any other medium. Workers are required to cultivate a viewpoint of the world through the eyes of young people and use that as a starting point to create meaningful empathetic engagement.

In a statement on the nature and purpose of youth work, YouthLink Scotland highlights a youth workers role too,

- Build self-esteem and self-confidence.
- Develop the ability to manage personal and social relationships.
- Create learning and develop new skills.
- Encourage positive group atmospheres.
- Build the capacity of young people to consider risk, make reasoned decisions and take control.
- Develop a 'world view' which widens horizons and invites social commitment. (1)

An expert group of 21 members made up from across the European Union were tasked to research and explain digital youth work. This definition became (*Productively using and addressing technology and media in any youth work practice*). It's about using traditional youth work approaches but adding in a technological viewpoint to augment/upgrade the experience. (2)

Blended Learning: Further reading and research reports when using technology as part of an educational experience the modes below can be shaped to fit with any educational experience.

Blended face to face sessions is identified as having a deeper impact on learning. Physical sessions can concentrate on the main body of work with a digital backup of engaging materials for further exploration, connection and communication with the worker. The main body of the work always takes place in a physical setting.

Blended Online sessions bring a group of young people together online and provide most of the content via that medium with the odd physical session thrown into the planning.

Flipped sessions require content to be watched online before a group comes together to complete projects or activities in a group.

The Self-Blend Model is empowering young people to partake in online programmes alongside traditional learning.

The paper highlights that any educational medium can use these modes to benefit collaborative learning, communication improvement, User feedback and improved accessibility to info and materials. It also discusses the delicate balance of face to face alongside digital as to not disengage young people and create a decreased motivation to take part or learn. (8)

Plugged in: Remote Australian Indigenous Youth and Digital Culture states that international research has identified the 'Digital Bedroom' as the best space for online engagement for those who possess access to computers, gaming consoles, mobile phones and social networking sites. Young people can lift content, engage with websites or online youth work communities when they need to. For those that don't, physical youth centres continue to be a way to let young people experience digital landscapes by loaning out technology such as VR headsets.

Below are a few examples of good practice happening around Europe taken from the European union work plan for youth 2016-2018. The highlight how traditional youth work practice can be intertwined with technology to provide information and digital learning experiences.

Social Media

Social media is a great tool to promote and provide information on any youth work opportunities being provided but they are only as good as the online community that has been cultivated on them.

Outreach youth work is a successful method for building relationships with young people in their own territory. This can be enhanced further by blending in various digital technologies to give the engagement further dimensions. Youth workers in Finland run a mobile youth work unit named Limo. The mobile unit presents itself at predetermined locations on set days fully equipped with activities for outdoor fun, learning and engagement. Young people have a chance to direct the location on other days by connecting with the team via social media and instant messaging applications. To add a further educational element the team created a competition day where the mobile unit is placed somewhere within the city and clues are sent out to the user base, these can include information about the city. The first person to crack the clues and find the van wins a prize.

Social media breaks down barriers and allows communication to allow users to feel like they have a relationship with your service, they can see follow a stream of updates they can interact with, creating a sense of shaping a service. Pairing your social media with a website for communication and education make online sharing more effective. Finland has partnered with other workers and young people to populate both using a character created by the team, this allows adults and young people to work together to highlight youth work opportunities while protecting personal identities online.

Virtual Reality

Virtual reality is finding its feet in the mainstream with the release of more affordable headsets such as the Oculus Quest 2 and could become a key feature in gaming journalism, entertainment and education. Youth Centres in Austria are using Virtual reality headsets to provide young people with this experience in a safe environment. Even though VR is a personal experience it can be shared with larger groups through casting to a larger screen allowing friends to participate in the experience with the wearer. It can be used for entertainment purposes in youth club/group sessions but also for themed/educational purposes such as the No Knives Better Lives game. These devices can take you deeper into a subject than you cannot replicate physically and will add to the foundations set up in face to face work.

These devices open youth work to a deeper online experience of communication with apps such as AltspaceVR and RecRoom open to anyone 13+. Inside these platforms, you can recreate replicas of youth spaces and engage with young people through the avatars created during the sign-in process. It's another tool to reach out to young people who may have anxiety about attending real spaces with large numbers attending. This medium allows them to participate and slowly transition to attend a real youth club.

Communication Platforms

Austria runs a Whatsapp Broadcasting service that provides information on a popular communication platform. A lot of youth services have consulted with young people about popular platforms of use for information and communication and come to a conclusion about which one fits the need for their service or young people. The common suspects are Discord, Twitter or Instagram.

Microsoft Teams is being used by the Moray youth work team with each locality having their own team created with the entire student body added via their glow accounts. This provides a way to promote local and national items of interest to all young people who then have the choice to interact or not.

Using platforms such as Microsoft teams or Discord allows youth workers to create safe spaces for participants and deliver sessions via video calling capabilities, paired with tools like Jamboard can re-create the experience from physical sessions.

Makerspaces

Youth clubs have long been a space to engage with youth workers, meet new friends and try new activities. Spaces like this can now be used as a Makerspace to provide more than just game and arts and crafts. Peer to peer learning takes place with whatever technological equipment has been provided, this may be work in robotics, web-designing and exploring electronics. The method is to learn together through trial and error. An example of this is taking place in Luxembourg. (2) This idea was taken further by Heart of Midlothian FC who are starting to provide Makerspaces as digital education programmes for young people across Scotland using video calling platforms.

Section 2

Key Points

- All practitioners in education need an agile mindset to try new things and learn from success or failure. A support network should be in place to achieve this.
- Collaborating While using technology is more effective than individual use.
- Short bursts of technical inclusion can boost learning during longer programmed activities.
- Lack of access to technology is an issue and requires the content provider to adapt for forms of access away from the traditional PC or Laptop. Content needs to be optimised for smartphones, tablets and gaming devices to provide more gateway access.
- Synchronous learning using a device has more effect on peers/workers in a physical setting. Asynchronous activity engages more during remote learning.
- Try pre-recording sessions that are accessible for all
- Have 1:1 meetings with young people to alleviate fears about taking part physically or digitally.
- Try facilitating youth-led sessions that are rotated amongst group members.
- Send pre-packs in the post to support and build excitement for the programme/sessions.
- Use breakout rooms to encourage quiet participants to take part.

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