

YOUNG PEOPLE IN DIGITAL ERA AND YOUTH WORK

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Summary

The report sheds light on the impact of current trends concerning usage of digital technologies by young people on youth work practice. This report starts by discussing data on young people's patterns of internet usage. The lack of any reflection of these changes in youth work manuals is discussed before going on to analyse group dynamics theories and research on the possible impact on participation of young people in youth groups. We look at the two issues: one is the process of joining the groups or group formation processes; and the second is group sustainability. Finally, the role and tasks of a youth worker in the digital are discussed. The desk research shows that there is much statistical information on usage of digital technologies by young people, however there is not enough research about how this changes youth work practice. The good news is that recently there are some emerging projects (notably through Erasmus+), which take on this issue and produce new knowledge for youth workers.

Young people facing new challenges resulting from technological change

The central trend that particularly shapes the lives of young people is the use of virtual technology: young people are being called Digital generation or Net generation. As data reveal, most of young people today have daily access to the Internet and use it extensively. In 2014 about 90% of young people (16-29 years old) in the EU have used the Internet on a daily basis compared to about 75% of the whole population (Eurobarometer 2014). Also other country studies confirm this trend, e.g. Shell study (2015) shows that 99% of German youth have access to the Internet and, on average, they spend 18.4 hours per week online. Moreover, most (90%) young people connect to the Internet using a mobile device (Eurobarometer 2014) that makes the Internet constantly accessible to them.

Most young people belong to online networks: 82% use social networking web sites compared to 36% of the whole population (Eurobarometer 2014). Technology is changing the way the communities and bonds are created, as young people are balancing both: global communities and local connections (Sefton-Green 2004:2), as well as both online and offline communities (Lehdonvirta, Räsänen 2010). While they are still strongly embedded in local communities (such as schools and families), they have access to global communities and international networks through online access. Another important change concerns education and learning: technology changes the way children perceive and relate to teachers or other knowledge providers, as knowledge is freely available in cyber space (ibidem).

Don Tapscott, in the book "Growing up digital, rising the Net generation" (1998), underlines that the young generation today has some distinguishing features from the older generation (TV generation). Usage of the Internet changes the way young people live, as it is an active space, interactive, allow communities to build and to express oneself. The author believes that young people today:

- create communities in a new way that is more open, egalitarian and democratic;
- engage in playful learning, non-linear, learner-centred and interactive;
- need to possess different skills to navigate the Internet and online world – digital literacy;
- create identity in a new way (high in self-esteem, one can be actor at a younger age).

His vision is very optimistic and stresses the positive side of Internet usage. As other research shows, young people are often very passive recipients of information and their usage of the Internet is characterised by banality (Buckingham, Willett 2013: 10). There is also a discussion concerning the commodification of Internet use and the issues of young people becoming customers rather than active creators of Internet space. Additionally some research shows that young people who use the Internet extensively become alienated and actually create fewer friendships, feel more lonely and suffer more often from depression (Spitzer 2013).

How to build groups? How to motivate young people to join youth work activities?

Kate Sapin (2013: 91) suggests that to be able to bring young people together you need, first of all, **to recognise young people's interests**: the motivations can be enjoyment (fun, adventure, expressing oneself, socialising), participation in a specific activity, cause (to effect change), to learn or get support, to address one's needs (e.g. gain confidence). One of the most important reasons to be active in social networks in socialising with other young people is the fact that it's happening without the close supervision of adults. But online relationships did not provide substitutes for relationships in the real world. According to a Polish study (Lange, Osiecki 2016), interactions taking place in offline settings are still the most important. Young people relate to two groups: the first is their friends and peers and they seek for support within this group for personal problems and school matters. The second group consists of adults who support them in relation to education, personal matters and usage of technology. As the report authors claim, personal relationships did not 'migrate' to virtual world, but they coexist or support face-to-face interactions. Possibly then youth work can constitute an important space for young people to be together and socialise. In this light, a full transition to virtual space of youth work activities would not be attractive to young people.

Kate Sapin stresses also four other aspects:

- Use different methods to bring young people together
- Work with individuals
- Recognise barriers to participation
- Discuss options with young people (Sapin 2013, p. 91)

She suggests a lot of ways of bringing young people together, but does not discuss in detail the role of Internet technology. Still some of the hints could be used both online and offline (see picture below). A very important point is the importance of working with individuals: while online technology to a large extent supports the idea of 'sending a message to the crowd', we need to remember that an individual approach is critical – young people need personal contact with a youth leader and his/her attention.





Ways to bring young people together¹

As the Internet can ease the communication of young persons with adults, it should become an effective starting point for communication between youth worker and young people. As research reveals: "Most youth perceived that using computers and the Internet reduced their anxiety concerning communication with adults, increased their control when dealing with adults, raised their perception of their social status, increased participation within the community, supported reflective thought, increased efficiency, and improved their access to resources" (Valaitis 2005). While, youth workers should allow usage of digital tools in recruitment, but this should be considered only with some groups. The research indicates that "an adolescent who can critically understand and effectively evaluate online information is more likely to become an active civic participant than one who lacks such skills" (Kim, Yung 2015). This is an important clue for working with disadvantaged groups, as they may lack digital competences. Furthermore, some research suggests that the Internet is not an effective tool for engaging disengaged groups, but when it comes to those already interested it can constitute a good tool (Levine, Lopez 2004). Nevertheless, possibly when it comes to disadvantaged young people, the Internet can be used as the second step of recruitment: after gaining some interest from young people, online tools could be used to encourage their participation.

Very importantly the Internet becomes a space where the experience of growing up is articulated. As research shows this experience is also "lived" in the virtual world where, for example, transitioning from one social network to another marks an important moment in young person's life trajectory (Robarts 2012). This is why it is important to understand which sites are popular for young persons of a certain age and what needs are being fulfilled (e.g. belonging, fun, socialising, building relationships).

¹ Sapin 2013, p.85

How to build strong youth groups?

The question for youth work in the era of expansion of digital technologies is how to make the youth groups more sustainable. Kate Sapin lists four main expectations of young people that need to be met through youth work (cf. Sapin 2013):

- Give fun experiences;
- Allow to deal with oppression;
- Ensure growth within the group;
- Create bonds and affiliation.

If we look at group dynamics two aspects are critical for life of the groups: processes of building group cohesion and group culture. We could then think how to use the Internet for strengthening the cohesiveness of the group, and how the Internet supports cultivation of group culture. The question for youth work is how to build connections between young people so they really feel a part of it and identify with it strongly.

Online groups are becoming for young people a strong source of identification; possibly then usage of the Internet can strengthen identification with youth groups. In the UK, Spain and Japan young people “identify as strongly with their online communities as they do with their own families, and stronger than with offline hobby groups” (Lehdonvirta, Räsänen 2010). Moreover, in the UK and Japan, it revealed that an online group could be “a more socio-demographically inclusive source of identification than traditional leisure-time formations (Ibidem). It was suggested that online groups can offer “emotional support, friendship, categorisation, social comparison and other processes that are associated with traditional offline groups” (ibidem).

Online communities can be especially important for oppressed or marginalised groups. The research concerning members of the LGBT community shows that “the online community operates as a space for young people to understand and potentially overcome their experiences of egoism and marginality” (Hanckel, Morris 2015). So while being a space that brings young people together, the community not only provides a sense of belonging for the participants and reduces their experiences of isolation, but also connects them to resources and networking opportunities that foster political participation.

Another valuable thesis that applies to the sustainability of youth groups is optimal distinctiveness theory, which states that people have a tendency to feel that they are similar to others but at the same time they want to be different. They seek a balance and seek optimal distinctiveness (Brewer 2003). This tendency is especially visible among young people. They look for groups of people similar to themselves (e.g. subcultures), in contrast to those who are not in their group. Thus, the sustainability of youth groups depends a lot on identity with the group and, to some degree, on similarities between members (similar interests, goals, values).

Group creation and group life cycle is most commonly explained by the stages of forming/storming/norming/performing/adjourning (also referred to in manuals for youth workers). Forming is the beginning of group life. At this stage the objectives of the group’s existence should be set and all members should be aware of them. During the storming phase members of the group

develop a structure and relationships within the group. During the norming stage the group works on their tasks and members take responsibilities and roles in order to achieve goals. Performing is a phase when members achieve aims and when group work should make them happy and satisfied. Adjourning is also an important phase, which gives a space for celebration of the successes and in some cases reflection about dissociation of the group, and future plans. It is also a time for evaluation and view on contributions and future improvements. A good leader can help the group achieving their goals on every stage of group dynamics.

Main factors influence forming and sustainability of the groups are defined rules and structure, attractiveness of the group and at the same time members' attraction to each other, sense of unity, teamwork as well as common values of the members, norms of behaviours and roles in the group influence on both - forming the group and its sustainability (Kelly, Hunter 2016).

Andrew Malekoff presents "strengths based group work model" of working with adolescents, which is an approach based on practice and consists of seven principles of group work that youth worker should take into the consideration:

1. "Form groups based on members' felt needs and wants, not diagnoses.
2. Structure groups to welcome the whole person, not just the troubled parts.
3. Integrate verbal and nonverbal activities.
4. Develop alliances with relevant other people in group member's.
5. Decentralize authority and turn control over to group members.
6. Maintain a dual focus on individual change and social reform.
7. Understand and respect group development as key to promoting change." (Malekoff 2014, pp. 43).

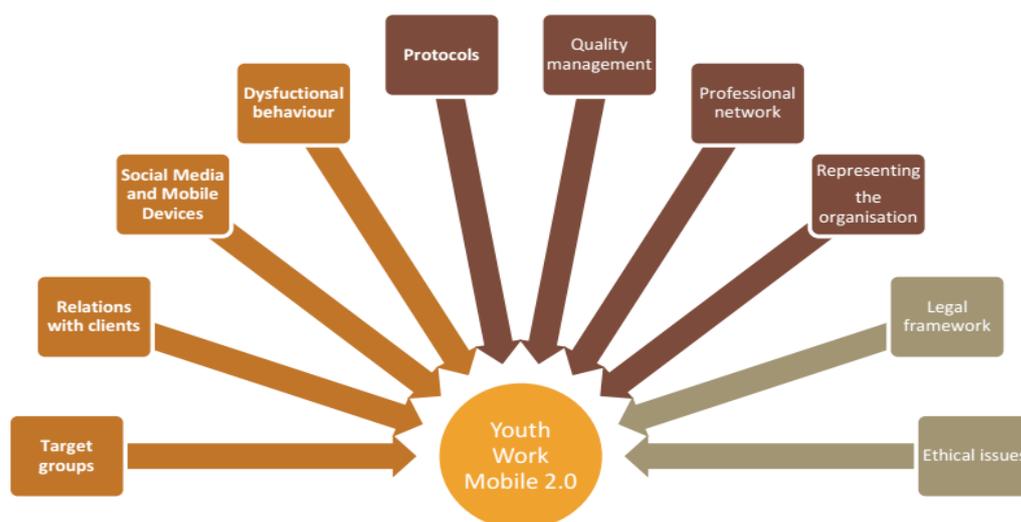
Those are the "critical components for competent group work practice" (Ibidem). If all those principles are met, there is a higher chance that group will be sustainable and successful. The role of a youth worker (author names him/her a group worker) is especially underlined. He/she is the person principally responsible for maintaining the group through the above stated principles with non-judgment, patience and acceptance and has to deal with the many obstacles in group work.

Youth workers in the digital era

The last question concerns the competences of a youth worker who shall work with young people, the digital natives. What are the skills and knowledge needed for a youth worker today in an era when both offline and online interactions co-exist in the lives of young people?

The project Youth Work Mobile 2.0 (YOWOMO2.0) is a European Partnership developed a framework for Vocational and Educational Training (VET) of youth workers facing the growing significance of smartphones and social media for young people. As the introduction to the framework underlines, the youth workers need today to acknowledge that usage of technology is a great opportunity for youth work that may facilitate dialogue and deepen engagement of young people. Besides being aware of dangers and negative effects of using mobile technology, youth workers needs to develop a positive attitude towards it in order to be able to relate to the world of young people and build meaningful relationships.

The first segment of competences is critical as it relates to work with young people: “to the online interaction with different target groups, the relation and network building with young people, to the use of social media, mobile devices and apps in the work with young people, and to the handling of dysfunctional use of social media. The second segment – work within an organisation – includes the competences to handle protocols for using social media and mobile devices, to improve the quality of youth work applying social media and mobile devices, to network with professionals of other disciplines, and to represent the organisation following the policy of the organisation using the possibilities of social media and mobile devices. The third segment – legal and ethical background – covers the competences related to the legal issues and ethical problems associated with the use of social media and mobile devices in youth work” (Youth Work Mobile 2.0, p.5).



Picture source: Youth Work Mobile 2.0, p.5.

As the framework underlines, not only knowledge about virtual cultures, tools and technologies, social media, netiquette or different forms of cyber violence are needed, but also the attitude of the youth worker is critical. There is a need to understand that technology is a part of youth work and it can be useful and give added value to youth work.

Are those changes being seen by youth workers? Review of handbooks on youth work

The question is if youth work is actually reacting well to the changes that are happening to young people?

There are plenty handbooks and guides published by youth workers, teachers, trainers and other practitioners on group dynamics and leadership in youth groups. The main aim of these manuals is to share with other youth workers ideas about activities that they can implement with groups of young people. They are based on experience and are focused on the practical activities that people working with youth groups can lead. The majority of them provide a complete and well-adjusted description of the activities or detailed workshop guidelines that a reader can use in the classroom, during the workshop, camp or any other setting with young people. They also contain specific guidance and tips on ways of working with young people. However, very often any reflection about group dynamics or the sustainability of these groups is very limited or is missing. They are also lacking the context of online groups and the impact of new technologies on ways of working with young people.

Usually in these manuals one or two theories about group dynamics are briefly presented in the introduction. The most popular theory shown in nearly all of them is Bruce W. Tuckman's about stages of group dynamics (forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning) firstly published in article "*Developmental sequences in small groups*" (Tuckman 1965). Tips and suggestions for youth leaders on keeping a group motivated and maintaining the group's work are presented at each stage. Activities presented in manuals are based on these stages and show youth leaders how they can positively influence this process.

The example of this kind of book might be *Teambuilding with Teens. Activities for Leadership, Decision Making & Group Success* - a manual for youth workers, teachers on developing leadership skills for young people from 12 to 18 years old. The book consists of 36 activities based on learning by doing. In short introduction author underlines the importance of experiential learning and its influence on young people in future lives, however does not reflect on sustainability of this particular group.

T-Kit on Training Essentials published jointly by Council of Europe and European Commission is definitely one of the most popular manuals among trainers and youth leaders working with international groups. Chapter 2, "Training in teams", is unique among all manuals as it is fully devoted to the topic of group dynamics among trainers and people leading activities. The authors try to answer the question: "what makes a team 'team'?" and give a list of tips and topics for self-reflection. In the next chapters the authors raise the issue of group dynamics of participants. However this part is not as comprehensive as it could be. Group dynamics are described only in a short timeframe, which is justified as the manual refers to training courses of international participants. Therefore the sustainability of the group is irrelevant in this context.

Youth participation is another topic widely covered in manuals as an important factor of youth activities. It is present in most of them, however *Have your say!*, published by Council of Europe, fully covers this issue. The most popular theory combining youth participation and young people is

“Ladder of Participation” (Hart 1997) and it is based on rungs, which illustrate different levels of participation and their consequences. The theory states that the more responsibilities and participation in decision making process by youth, the more involvement, motivation and satisfaction from their side. Full participation can happen only if young people are involved in creating activities and have opportunities to show initiative. Although Hart’s theory does not refer directly to group dynamics, entering groups and their sustainability, the conclusion can be drawn, that the higher the level of participation among youth groups, the greater chance that this group will be sustainable.

More and more handbooks refer to the topic of media literacy as an answer to the need of young people to know how to use new media. For example *IThINK Critical Thinking and Literacy Manual*, prepared by young people for young people, focuses on how to “help you engage youth in a fun, exciting, and interactive way while developing their critical thinking skills”. It presents various activities for different age groups, however it does not cover the topic of dynamics of youth groups on social media.

The few examples above show that, although a rich variety of material covering activities for groups of young people and manuals for trainers and youth workers is available, a wider reflection supported by suitable research on youth groups (both offline and online), its dynamics and sustainability is missing.



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