

# Taking youth work to the digital world



This article is an outcome of the international seminar “**Developing digital youth work**”. The seminar was hosted 13 to 17 September 2016 in Oulu, Finland by the Centre of International Mobility (CIMO).

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## Playing catch-up with the digital (r)evolution

In Europe digital youth work methods have seen a significant growth in interest over the last few years. This is a direct result of the increasing prevalence of technology and increased pervasiveness of digital tools and networks in young people's lives. The use of digital tools is now more commonly than ever accepted as a part of youth work.

“Despite the growing interest in digital youth work, European policies around digitalization of youth work are behind what is going on in the field”, says **Graeme Robertson**, business manager of the European youth portal. “We are unfortunately playing catch-up in terms of policy and are in fact running an expert group on this very topic.”

The European Commission appointed the expert group in the summer of 2016. All EU member states have been called upon to name a representative for the group. The group is tasked - among other things - to draft recommendations on how youth workers should be trained in regards to digital tools in youth work. The group has already started working on defining the key competencies around digital youth work, and the first recommendations are scheduled to be completed by the autumn of 2017.

There have also lately been - in addition to the expert group - other strong efforts to rectify the policy situation and fill the need for data on European practices. One of those efforts is the **Screenagers research project**<sup>1</sup>, a collaborative study focussing on the use of ICT, digital and social media within youth work. The Erasmus+ funded partnership included agencies from Ireland, Northern Ireland, Finland, Austria and Denmark. The research report showed that where ICT is used in creative and innovative ways it offers a highly versatile and powerful tool to support youth work. When planning our seminar it was only natural to base lots of our framework on the findings of this report; the findings even recommend that particularly EU-level strategic actions should be concentrated on practice development and training of youth workers.

“Digital youth work is defined very differently in european countries.” says **Suvi Tuominen**, project manager of Verke, the finnish national development centre for digital youth work in Finland and a member of the aforementioned expert group. Verke was also heavily involved in the Screenagers research project. “Some countries see social media as a big risk factor for young people and the role of youth work has predominantly been enhancing youngsters’

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<sup>1</sup> Screenagers international research project: using ICT, digital and social media in youth work. International research report, 2016. <http://www.youth.ie/sites/youth.ie/files/International%20report%20final.pdf>

skills to safely use the web. While some countries can be somewhat lagging behind for example Finland in terms of using social media in youth work, they are often much more advanced in adopting different digital tools, e.g. GPS tracking apps for adventure activities, hacklabs or makerspaces.” There is definitely much to be gained in the mutual exchange of experience and practices on a European level.

## City of Oulu and digital youth work

The City of Oulu has long been a major hub for technological development in Finland. Against that background it is logical that the city of Oulu - and especially the department of education and culture, which is also in charge of youth work - took the initiative of starting up this seminar process with CIMO. Later on they invited Verke to join into defining the main themes and target groups of the seminar. The facilitators of the seminar were then tasked to outline the program and the methods for implementing the defined goals.

“I think it’s very important for everyone to see the wider picture every once in awhile”, **Jarmo Laitinen**, one of the original exponents of the seminar wrote via e-mail. “That’s why it is crucial to continuously build up new networks and get to know what other people are doing in the field, be it on a national or European level. Luckily I’m in such a position in the city of Oulu that that the idea to host this kind of seminar in our city was easily pitched.”

Jarmo told us that the city of Oulu has drafted a digital agenda for the whole department of education and culture, which includes a more detailed framework for each service area, e.g. youth work. This seems like a strategy many organizations could adopt to strengthen the development and planning of digital methods and approaches, which can sometimes be a little sporadic. Strategic investment in infrastructure, hardware, professional development and practice development is also outlined as one of the main recommendations of the Screenagers research report.

## Defining the concept of “Digital youth work”

Although we naturally sent out lots of material to our participants from 16 countries beforehand, we also had some unexpected help to “set the stage” for our seminar. The in-flight magazine on the flight from Helsinki to Oulu featured an article eight pages long about

the changing curriculum and teaching approaches in schools across Finland. The tie-in to the topics of our seminar was twofold: firstly, in the future there will be a much higher focus on using and integrating digital technologies. Secondly, there will also be a much more higher focus on non-formal learning, such as the learning we see all the time in youth work activities.

"One major thing is learning by doing and the associated learning of broader phenomena. The other one is bringing digitalisation more prominently into schools," says Minna Huotilainen, a brain researcher and research fellow at Uppsala University in the article. A very nice helping hand from the airline and the Finnish school system!



The seminar program was built around many digital tools. Here participants are starting with an app called ActionBound.

After the first warm-up activities - which naturally used digital tools by way of “learning-by-doing” - and going over practicalities we went to work. To develop a common starting point and get the exchange of ideas going, the participants were first tasked to collaborate on some definitions. How do practitioners from different local and national realities see digital youth work? What would they define “new media” to be? How do people see e-participation? What would an optimal European project to develop digital youth work consist of?

Participants were very quickly effortlessly discussing themes like providing education services through digital media, old school journalism vs. the changing media production landscape, self-expression and e-participation through digital tools and whether digital youth work should even be seen as a separate approach. It was evident from here on in that attendees could easily find common ground in their respective fields of expertise.

“The thing about these international and European conferences is that although you have been doing something for a long time, by talking to people with different backgrounds and different contexts you get lots of new insights.” says **Heleen Mesellem** from Belgium - FL. “So even if you think “ok, I’ve got this, I’ve mastered this”, by talking about it you get new points of view.”

Heleen was a first-time seminar attendee but doesn’t think being a “rookie” in these seminars should deter anyone from signing up. “Surely anyone has something to

contribute, because we have all had our own hurdles to overcome. And even if you haven't mastered many kinds of digital youth work methods, that's fine because the main thing is you get to learn from other people and people can definitely benefit from your experience even if you haven't mastered all the latest technologies."

This definitely seemed to be the case when listening in on the discussions. Participants were keen to expand on each others ideas and everyone contributed to the common discussion from their own viewpoints. The shared interest in digital youth work really showed.

The participants defined Digital youth work to include - among other things - new competencies, new possibilities for participation, deeper cooperation with youth & youth workers, non-formal education through digital media, peer journalism and fostering chances for

**"It's not something extra, but instead you just replace your old methodology with new digital approaches."**

young people to connect with new groups of peers. All in all, these definitions don't look that different from youth work goals in general. That is also what many participants brought forward in their presentations: Digital youth work is not a separate form of youth work, but rather a new way realizing the core competencies of youth work. The expert groups first draft on the definition of digital youth work also agrees with this statement.

Heleen put it this way: "I think the beauty of digital youth work is that you get to try out a new way of doing the thing you're best at. You get to pour this layer of sauce on top of your traditional dish, which makes it more spicy. It's not something extra – which I think many people struggle with – but instead you just replace your old methodology with new digital approaches."

Seminar programs should always include time for reflection, whether in groups or by yourself.

Pictured are Andrew Keogh (left), Craig Burns and Kico Navas reflecting on the first days agenda in an organically formed working group.



## Online youth participation

The rapid advance of Internet technologies and online environments gave promise to lower the barrier for young people to engage in civic affairs. Survey data concluded in the EU Youth report 2015<sup>2</sup> shows that virtual spaces frequented by young people can be compared to the physical ones and thus be “a great resource for political and social engagement, which young people have been the quickest to recognise and use.”

Such transformation requires new skills and tools to participate. **Jaakko Jokipii**, our first keynote speaker from Oulu, shared similar observations - using memes as his form of presentation.

“Young people have - through digital tools - more chances than ever to participate. Those chances are everywhere and in everything. We need to rethink our whole approach toward participation.” says Jaakko. This sparked further questions from the youth workers in the room: “How do you get into online communities and build relationships with the youngsters already there? Youth work is a lot about relations? Isn’t it?”

**”It’s all about identifying the needs of the participating individual.”**

According Jaakko, the starting point can be to explore what people want to have, what sense of belonging they seek to develop and what actions to carry on as a result of their involvement in a broader activities in society. Youth participation processes - like all youth work! - should

ask the right questions; not about what young people want, but rather what they need, what they already have and how resources should be prioritised. In online participation - as in offline participation processes - it's all about identifying the needs of the participating individual: Jaakko divided these into categories of “having”, “acting” and “belonging”.

A previously held Erasmus+ funded seminar focused on youth e-participation called #BePart<sup>3</sup> - one that was also included in our background materials - collaborated to create their own working definition of e-participation. By their take e-participation was defined as “a transparent process, using the using the benefit of online tools to facilitate participation in decision making, sharing of opinions and contributing ideas & providing feedback.”

<sup>2</sup> EU Youth Report 2015, [http://ec.europa.eu/youth/library/reports/youth-report-2015\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/youth/library/reports/youth-report-2015_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> #BePart summit, 19 to 22 November 2015 in Brussels. <http://www.bepartevent.com/>

These approaches to participation are a bit different in that the former is based in the needs of the individual and the latter is based more on the relationship between the young person and the civic society around him. While these viewpoints complement each other nicely, they also further illustrate the complexity inherent in almost all forms of digital youth work.

Our next keynote speaker **Evaldas Rupkus** shared his practical experience of EUth; a project aimed at developing e-participation. “If you are not sure *how* or even *if* the results of the participation process will be implemented, then it’s often better not to start the participation process at all.” says Evaldas. Their project develops innovative digital and mobile tools to enable and support youth participation. Evaldas encourages to view the digital aspect of youth work as a horizontal part of our work and not separate, and therefore suggests avoiding establishing the term “digital youth work”. He rather suggests to use the term “digital approach” in regards to youth work.

**Damjan Tkalec**, a participant from Croatia just recently started working in the P.O.I.N.T. Association where they want to make young people be more active in shaping local youth policy. They are currently developing the KA2 strategic partnership that aims to promote e-volunteering and active participation of young people in digital environments.

“I am excited about e-participation. I think it could be a fun way to get young people involved, for example through mobile apps. I think that digital youth work can create ways for young people to take their first steps into participating.”, says Damjan.

## Youth social media realities

One of the most important principles of youth work is to be where the young people are. When Facebook was growing in popularity among young people, youth workers were still stuck on discussing pros and cons of interacting and engaging with young people on Facebook. Now, when finally youth workers are there, online and ready to engage using Facebook, a number of articles point out that teens are leaving Facebook and favor other social media channels.

**Jukka Weissenfelt**, a keynote speaker working at eBrand pointed out that “youth trends of using social media change every year.” Therefore it is

**Youth work policies and practices should be flexible enough to adapt to changing trends.**

important to have enough flexibility and ability to quickly adapt youth work policies and services to be up-to-date. This may be a challenge, considering that youth work planning and implementation processes often stretch out to span 2 to 4 year cycles. According to eBrands study of how young people use social media in Finland, individual young people are unlikely to drastically change their usage habits of social media in a year, but 2 to 4 years is an entirely other story.

Youth work organisations can (and should) implement social media practices and services based on current youth media trends and realities. However they need to be aware that their policies and practices should be flexible enough to adapt to changing trends. Rapid - that is, rapid to adults - change has always been a constant in young people's lives, but the rate that change occurs at has significantly accelerated with the prevalence of technology. Another trend that youth work practitioners should be aware of is that even when young people and adults / professionals use the same services, their usage patterns and ways differ wildly. That's why many youth workers in the seminar talked about using youth participation processes to identify and specify to organizations what kind of approaches work and which don't.

**Dirk Madderken** joined this seminar with an interest to learn more about youth and media. He works with young people at Horizont organisation in Germany. "We need to be more open minded and interested in all of that. The development of social networking tools is rapid and you can't have a strict plan for the several next years. It may be that the use of some of tools will increase during the next year, but then it may drop completely. It is important to be always on track. You have to be interested.", says Dirk.



Damjan Tkalec & Heleen Mesellem presenting their groups portrait of "Josh", who uses among other apps Snapchat for "intense following"

The participants were tasked to prepare a visual portrait of a young person using current technology and reflect in smaller working groups on how those persons could benefit from digital youth work methods. The discussions were very lively and approaches very different. It was, however, very interesting to see common themes in many of the portraits prepared; many groups thought that through digital approaches young people could learn social skills, media awareness and have a community to belong to. This reflects the participants' understanding of the meaning



of digital media for young people: the chosen tools and platforms are for young people a natural extension of their daily lives and social relations, not an added layer of technology.

## Sharing is caring

During the second full day of the seminar we invited participants to host sharing sessions for attendees. The selected inputs included a range of viewpoints from practical tools for practitioners to methods for developing digital youth work on an organizational scale. In between there were also sessions where participants presented their own areas of expertise and even managed to practically try out selected methods in the very limited timeframe we had available.



Kristiina Kauranen and Andrew Keogh listen on as Suvi Tuominen presents guidelines for developing digital youth work in the sharing sessions.



Participants in the makerspace - workshop hosted by Nadine Schirtz (left).

“I really loved how you could choose in the sharing sessions the things you found most interesting for your own work and tag along.”, says Heleen. “There was also something for each and every one of us; and even if a program was not specifically tailored to your own line of work, you could definitely take away something from it. It was a great mix of new theories, new stuff to think about and practical exchange.”

## Different realities, different approaches

The seminar program was structured in a way to try to illustrate the point that digital youth work has many different available approaches. Like previously stated, digital youth work methods have been developed very differently in different countries. This goes to show how youth work, whether online or offline, is always grounded in the society and reality it is implemented in. While some countries have embraced social media as their chosen method of youth work, some countries have taken a different path. It is always refreshing to take in the new - for yourself, at least - realities and ways of implementing digital approaches.

One of those approaches is digital gaming, a method that has solidified its legitimacy in the canon of youth work over the last few years. As a method of youth work it isn't necessarily widely known yet, but it is nevertheless gaining more and more traction all the time.

**Marko Tiusanen** from Oulu defined in his keynote presentation digital gaming to be “a natural and modern continuum for traditional games”, which youth workers have applied as a method (or at least a leisure activity) for ages. According to Marko digital gaming includes - but is not limited to - computer and console games, browser based games and for instance mobile games. For a long time digital gaming has been seen only through the negative effects; Marko says, however, that the benefits of gaming can include development of social skills and for example positive experiences of success. These goals and benefits probably sound familiar to anyone who has ever explained youth work to a non-practitioner.

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Youth work has also always been about identifying and understanding youth culture. “We need to see gaming much wider than just seeing young people playing games.”, says Marko. “There is a culture around the games and the gaming community. And this is important for youth work.”

**Martin Fischer**, a seminar attendee from Germany and the project “Gameoverhate” would probably agree; he spoke at length about how it is vital to combat the negative effects of gaming culture by influencing the gaming community from within. Martin also hosted a popular workshop in the sharing sessions about his projects method for digital game based learning.

**Hannes Pasanen**, the project manager from Helsinki's gaming house "Pelitalo" outlined another approach in his keynote. Their project "Good game squad" uses an eSports team as a form of youth work group activity. The youth workers bring in their own professional skills working with groups while former professional players from the eSports community bring their eSports and gaming expertise to the table. In this joint venture young people playing in the projects four teams gain the best of both worlds. "Why do we do this?" asks Hannes from the attendees and answers: "One of the biggest reasons is that there is a lot of negative attitude towards gaming and gaming culture. However, for a young person gaming can be and often is a big part of their life." Like Martin, Hannes says that they are "also aware of and work with the negative behavioural phenomenon, such as sexism, hate speech, etc."



Hannes Pasanen held a keynote on eSports as a form of youth work.

While gaming has gained significant traction over the years, many other forms of digital youth work still have to constantly fight for their legitimacy to non-practitioners. It would be great if we could confidently state in this article what the "next big thing" will be in digital youth work, but future trends are unfortunately very unpredictable; for digital platforms and apps the rise and fall of popularity can be extremely rapid. Our bet for digital youth work would probably still be in any digital approach that can implement the values of youth work in a fresh and relevant way. Things like makerspaces - an approach that seminar participant **Nadine Schirtz** from Luxembourg presented in her workshop to an excited group of "tinkerers" - are a good example; after all, youth work has a long tradition of employing crafts and arts.

## Recommendations for developing digital youth work

“Screenagers” research project, which we used extensively as a reference in our seminar, has in their research report identified some guidelines for youth work organisations on how to develop digital youth work:

1. **Strategic financial investment** in infrastructure, hardware, professional development, and practice development.
2. **Meeting the identified training needs** of youth workers at all levels, from introductory basic skills training to professional development and bespoke courses, and with a focus on the practical application of skills.
3. **Challenging resistant mind-sets** and support a fuller and more creative use of ICT in youth work.
4. Ensuring **policy commitment** within youth work sectors.
5. Providing youth workers with **written guidance** laying out principles of best practices and demonstrating impact, which could be supported through national Centres of Excellence and/or through national champions for ICT in youth work.

The Screenagers report clearly states the need for further European cooperation: “Probably the most striking conclusion across all the partners is that despite different political and youth work contexts, there was much similarity about what needs to be achieved to realise the amazing potential of ICT use in youth work.” Evaldas Rupkus agrees and recommends improving the expert discussions on a European level by involving all youth work stakeholders. “For example youth information and counselling actors have already several years of experience in the digital youth information service provision and hence have many good practices to share. Youth information and counselling has been the main actor providing media and information literacy.”, says Evaldas.

**Despite different political and youth work contexts, there is much similarity on what needs to be done to realize the potential of ICT in youth work.**

Another avenue of development will surely rise from the work of the newly appointed expert group. “The discussions within the expert group have been very interesting.”, says Suvi

Tuominen. “I am confident that the recommendations drafted up by this group will have a positive effect on digital youth work policies and training in many European countries; hopefully they might even have an effect in youth policy in general.”

European Union’s programme Erasmus+ can provide opportunities for youth work organisations and their strategic partners to develop further digital policies and practices in youth work. “There is a lot of money - 14,6 billion euros - that can be invested through the Erasmus+ programme. As much as 10% of this amount is aimed at youth.”, Jutta Kivimäki from CIMO, National Agency of Erasmus+ programme in Finland says while introducing available funding opportunities.

In the last leg of the seminar we also had the chance to have a look at ongoing Erasmus+ projects; for example the Key-action 1 project “Digital Superpowers”<sup>4</sup> aims to bring digital tools to youth work practices. This project creates opportunities for youth workers and young people to develop their digital competences by participating in European mobility: training course, youth exchange and evaluation seminar. This project involves youth work organisations from Estonia, Germany, Italy, Lithuania and Portugal. Another example could have been the Erasmus+ funded #BePart summit in Berlin in the November of 2016 that aims - for a long-stretch goal - to build up a European cooperation network of e-participation practitioners.

Judging from the discussions and the feedback received from participants of this seminar the chance of mutual cooperation and sharing is very well received among digital youth work practitioners. There is lots going on within the field of digital youth work and at least Italy, Ireland and Luxembourg are already in the process of drafting up their own trainings on the topic. Embracing digital methods is crucial for the youth work sector; as the Screenagers report states: “If youth work fails to embrace the use of technology and social media there is a risk of becoming outdated and irrelevant to young people who use youth work services.”

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<sup>4</sup> <https://digitalsuperpowersblog.wordpress.com>