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WHAT IS HORIZONTAL LEARNING?



#horizontal_learning

#key_competences

#rethink_learning

#rethink_facilitation

#self-development

#adapting_to_changes

About the authors



(Photo Credit: Agata Maziarz)

MARTA GAWINEK-DAGARGULIA is a training designer and facilitator for horizontal school. Marta is an instructional (training) designer, facilitator, and author of books for teachers and facilitators. She has been designing and facilitating group learning processes in non-formal education for 15 years with a focus on civic education and the development of key competencies for the working environments of tomorrow. She also facilitates trainings on intercultural and empathic communication and trainers' qualification courses, including



(Photo Credit: Andriy Shishman)

online facilitation. She is an experienced project manager and team leader who has created spaces for empowering individuals and communities in Georgia, Central Europe, and Germany. She coordinated long-term civic education programs for changemakers, mentors, and professionals from the civil society sector. She is a co-author of the [Competendo.net](#) series of handbooks and digital materials, handbooks for teachers and trainers on holistic non-formal education, and international teams on intercultural communication.

Her passion is designing group learning processes and supporting diverse groups in growing together. Time and again, driven by curiosity about the participants and their development and passion for developing, she reaches a state of "flow," the feeling of being wholly absorbed in designing and conducting trainings, responding to the group's needs, and coming up with formats that will be an unforgettable adventure.

MARIA TYMOSHCHUK is the facilitator of the NGO [Insha Osvita](#) and part of the international [Theodor-Heuss-Kolleg](#) network. Maria is a former journalist who worked in media for seven years. After that, she began to delve into the topics of critical thinking and non-formal education. Maria has experience in working with various audiences – from teenagers to combat veterans. She worked as a media literacy program manager at Impact Hub Odessa.

Education and the process of lifelong learning equip us with knowledge and competencies that allow for an active professional, civic, and private life in our ever-changing world. Crises like wars, epidemics, and natural catastrophes regularly affect our lives. These changes are dynamic and it is the horizontal approach to learning that keeps up with the changes and helps to effectively meet the learning needs of today as well as in the future.

So, what is **horizontal learning**? Here are its five main features:

1. FOCUS ON KEY COMPETENCIES¹

Key competencies are the sum of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values needed for life in contemporary society.

The focus of horizontal learning is the functional development of knowledge, skills, and behaviors that strengthen these key competencies. The world is changing fast and each change brings and requires new skills and knowledge. Oftentimes, a vertical learning system based on gaining knowledge doesn't keep up with current needs, whereas horizontal learning's focus is on competencies needed for dealing with current situations such as communication, active listening, responding effectively

and constructively to conflict, or increasing technical expertise.

Key competencies help people easily transfer what they have learned into their lives as active citizens. The outcome of the learning process is transformed into a practical skill and a new attitude that allows people to act accordingly in complex social situations. Competency-centered learning processes cover the broad set of skills, types of knowledge, and attitudes necessary for successful action in modern society. They help individuals develop key competencies and an open attitude toward lifelong learning. Achievement of goals and the feeling that learning is relevant occurs when learners activate and apply knowledge and skills in concrete

¹ The essence of this piece is based on content from Competendo ([competendo.net](#)), coordinated by Nils-Eyk Zimmermann. Competendo is a free and open toolbox for democracy learning, digitalization, and non-formal education.

situations. This might take place at work, during their free time, as part of a public engagement, or in the private sphere. When competencies are universal, they are called "transversal" or "key competencies." All change begins with an individual's self-perception as a potential change-maker and with an individual's ability to relate to other individuals or groups. Therefore, empowerment focuses primarily on the development of people's personal and social competences. For sustainable

education, competency frameworks need to give these social and personal competences enough importance. To create a holistic learning experience, they need to balance the topical and methodological development of competencies with parallel growth in social and individual competencies.²

The following graph provides an example of how the key competencies model could be applied in a learning environment.³

KEY COMPETENCIES

Abstract competencies

Topical expertise

Identifying adequate solutions for tasks and problems on the basis of knowledge about the specific field, and how it is systematically related within its field and to other fields.

Methodological competence

Acting consciously, adequately and in a goal-oriented way. An ability to choose methodologies and to evaluate outcomes.

(Inter)Personal competencies

Social competence

Living in relation to other people and actively shaping social relations. Reflecting different interests, needs and tensions. Team and conflict management skills.

Personal competence

Acting autonomously, in a self-organized and reflective way: Observing and evaluating challenges, requirements, or options. Assuming responsibility.

Source: German Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training

² Nils-Eyk Zimmermann, "Key Competencies," Competendo - Tools for Facilitators, accessed December 7, 2022, <https://competendo.net/en/images/3/37/Template-key-competencies.pdf>.

³ German Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) et al., "Kompetenzstandards in Der Berufsausbildung," August 27, 2009, https://www.bibb.de/dienst/dapro/daprodocs/pdf/eb_43201.pdf.

2. "LEARNING AS EQUALS"

Horizontal learning is a space where you can learn from each other through participatory methods on equal footing. In this type of learning, the life experiences of each participant are valued and there is no separation between the experts providing knowledge and the rest of the participants in the process. They are aligned around a common goal and learn better together by sharing their experiences.

Additionally, it is also a space for peer learning, a process in which learners (usually of similar age) learn from each other. This can be facilitated through learning activities such as participant-led workshops, study groups, peer-to-peer learning partnerships, and group work. The advantages of peer learning are the development of learners' collaboration and communication skills, enhancement of confidence and the ability to take control of their own learning. Often, they feel more comfortable working with their peers and may interact and engage in reflection and explore ideas more deeply than in a teacher-led environment.

Thanks to skillful facilitation, participants get to know themselves and their backgrounds and they can draw from many sources. Everyone can share theoretical knowledge and life experience. Much of the learning is devoted to group exchange and reflection. With the help of participatory methods such as World Cafe, Open Space or BarCamp, everyone can co-decide on the topic to be discussed. There is no one domina-

ting person speaking as an authority, but participants are co-responsible for the learning process.

3. FOCUS ON WHAT WE KNOW

Horizontal learning focuses on what learners know and builds on that by introducing new themes. It represents the knowledge and skills one acquires while operating at a specific stage of growth and development, one's own level of cognitive, emotional, and relational complexity.

4. CHANGED MINDSET: FROM TEACHER TO FACILITATOR

Horizontal learning can be informal or not organized at all. Alternatively, it can be an organized meeting space held by facilitators.

For those used to a clear-cut hierarchy in formal education and the role of a teacher, a change in attitude is needed when entering horizontal learning. The facilitator's role is about enabling rather than controlling, focusing on potential and strengths rather than emphasizing deficits, and cooperating rather than delivering theoretical inputs. This is what allows for competency-centered learning.

This checklist will help you to make sure your approach allows for horizontal learning:

- Do you pay attention to your relationship with learners? Are the participants aware of your role in the process?
- Do you see them as partners and do they see you?

- Are you empathic? Are you trying to understand the feelings and needs of individuals in the group?
- Do you strengthen learners' independence and believe in their existing abilities and potential?
- Do you support learners' abilities to solve problems and approach solutions?
- Are you open to dealing with different opinions and conflicts constructively?
- Do you take care of your self-development as a facilitator?
- Do you regularly enrich your work with up-to-date tools and methodologies to improve the learning experience?

5. HOLISTICALLY LEARNING BY DOING

Theoretical knowledge and skills are best strengthened by practical implementation and a critical reflection on what one has learned. Addressing the whole person is key in horizontal learning – on the cognitive, emotional, and practical levels.

Cognitive learning is about learning facts, theory, and logical relations. Emotional learning relates to playfulness, feeling connected to others, experiencing pleasant and unpleasant emotions by being challenged, as well as to emotions relating to values and intellectual concepts. Practical learning turns ideas into decisions and actions, practicing skills and experimenting.

Holistic learning emphasizes the active components of learning: discovery, reflective observation, trial and error, and growing with challenges or collaboration. The ability to act as autonomous, responsible individuals requires a safe space for active participation. The circular learning model of David and Alice Kolb illustrates how experience and reflective observation help to acquire new learning outcomes. This activates complex knowledge and establishes key competencies.

This interactive model of learning consists of practical experience, acquiring knowledge, and reflective evaluation. Conceptualization also implies theoretical simulation by experts, mutual sharing of expertise, working with texts, videos and other media, as well as analytical tasks.

Reflective evaluation can be organized in the form of collective or individual feedback, planned time for self-evaluation of the outcome and experience, personal assessment and setting criteria to determine success, discussion and exchange.

Practical experience can be organized in the form of inverted classroom and independent work on tasks, teamwork, role and simulation games, project work, or job shadowing. Even if the theory presented above is completely understandable, some additional questions may arise when the theory is applied in practice. The following are examples of the most frequently asked questions with answers.

Why is it relevant?

The traditional top-down learning system is much simpler to organize: it is more controlled and predictable; it leaves less space for questioning and discussing. It leaves fewer doubts. In such a system, the facilitator has a lot of benefits: the number of participants doesn't matter, you can provide more information in less time, you can prepare everything in advance, and you have total control over the process.

In some cases, facilitators or teachers in vertical learning want to make their training more interactive and add games and different fun tools to increase participants' engagement. But horizontal learning is not just about gamification and interactive methods.

Creating a safe space for real and honest

participation needs more time and effort. When the learning process includes the experience and needs of participants, it has better long-term results and receives more validation.

The learning process should be both full of fun and meaningful. The clearer learning objectives we set, the more relevant experience can be provided for participants to reflect on. Valuing everyone's experience and appreciation of diversity leads to more engagement in the group.

Group work has its own special place in horizontal learning. Education is based on real-world challenges, participants' experiences are valued, their needs are communicated to and heard by the facilitator, and the facilitator is ready to be flexible in trying to meet those needs in the educational process.

Horizontal learning helps to:

- switch from a passive to an active role. Participants feel more engaged, the trainer supports curiosity in the group;
- create the space for diverse experiences, different learning styles and paces – making it possible to use the potential of diversity;

- increase the voice of the individual, increase independence and self-confidence;
- support cross-sectional exchange in which human stories are valued;
- develop communication skills and team work. Participants learn to communicate effectively, to collaborate and negotiate;
- plan your learning path and manage your learning independently.

How does one create an effective horizontal learning environment?

Space. In a horizontal approach, the environment matters a great deal, because it influences the process. If one wants to build connections between people, no physical barriers should be created. That is why a circle chair setting is preferred as it also allows for enough flexibility in changing places among participants.

In some cases, the location of the learning event can support the topic of the training: If you talk about ecology, you can spend some time outdoors; if you are talking about rural development, you could hold the training in a village, and so on. A corresponding atmosphere can be created through good choice of location and materials (posters with quotes, lighting, etc.).

Mindset. To create a safe physical and mental space, one needs to work on the mindset. Facilitators are open to hearing participants' feedback and accepting their feelings and emotions without judgment. Sometimes participants may be critical about something. In such cases, facilitators don't label them as "wrong" or "bad" or "difficult," but are ready to understand the needs behind the behavior and the reason for their dissatisfaction.

It is worth remembering that the facilitator is, first and foremost, a person whose personal qualities influence the educational process. It is important to understand one's own personality, strengths, and weaknesses. If the facilitator can understand herself/himself, it will be easier

to empathize with the participants. By intertwining personal and professional qualities, facilitators will be more interesting to the group and will inspire more trust among participants.

Balance. In horizontal learning, balance should be multidimensional. It is the balance between "breathe in" activities (where people receive new information and experience) and "breathe out" activities (where they can reflect and even build on their own experience using previously acquired information), between closeness and distance in relationships with participants, between the diversity of thoughts in the discussion, and between leading the group or giving them more space for finding their unique path through the process. Sometimes it is not so easy to find the right balance. That's why the other important quality for creating positive surroundings for horizontal learning is the ability to observe the situation in detail and as a whole, that is, to have a full picture.

Power relations. Horizontal learning is based on the participation of all involved in the process. Participation is not about participants being active during the learning event but, at the most basic level, participation means **people being involved in decisions that affect their lives**. Through participation, people can identify opportunities and strategies for action, and build solidarity to effect change.

Power is the capacity to mobilize resources to meet needs. It implies everything participants can use to meet their needs in learning events. Some examples of power can be access to information, money, self-confidence, own networks, language skills, position in the hierarchy, etc. As facilitators of horizontal learning, facilitators try not only to be aware of the

power they have but also of the power of the participants. Being aware of power relations is about being mindful of and moving away from strategies from

strategies that use teachers' or other adults' power over children toward strategies grounded in addressing both sides' needs.

Possible ways of sharing power can be by:

- being transparent about decisions we make and our own role and privileges;
- developing strategies to compensate for power differences – for example inviting participants to say "no" if there are power differences because of the language skills, or introducing more non-verbal activities;

How does one work with people who are not used to horizontal learning?

- Be transparent about your role as a facilitator and explain what it means (people who don't know it may link your role with the one of a teacher and get lost, not feel safe, not have their expectations met).

- moving from imposed to natural consequences;
- shifting from enforcement to collaboration;
- celebrating accomplishments, expressing authentic and specific appreciation (instead of praise and reward);
- involving people in decisions that affect them ;
- expressing discomfort and being authentic.

- Analyze their needs beforehand: research as much as possible to understand the main pains and gains of a given group or audience.
- Show the practical use of sharing life experiences.
- Speak about the aim of each activity and its desirable outcome.
- Attitude is important: People who are not used to horizontal learning may see the role of a facilitator as a weakness. In this case, it is good to be one step ahead and discuss in advance the advantages of horizontal learning and its values.

CASE STUDY I

Marta Gawinek-Dagargulia

Horizontal learning in a formal learning school context – a case study from the AktywnieJWsi program

I facilitate workshops and trainings in a civic education program for rural youth in South Poland called AktywnieJWsi. Teenagers aged between 13 and 18 participating in the program had no previous experience in learning other than formal education at school. After four years of running the program using horizontal learning approaches, I can see clearly the impact it creates on local youth and the neighborhood.

The peer-to-peer approach and partnership relations with adult facilitators strengthen confidence and self-esteem. Young people participate in discussions about improvements in their villages. They present their ideas to the community, initiate partnerships around their ideas, and are listened to. This is of great importance because at school and in other environments, these young people are often not taken seriously and are subject to constant monitoring and evaluation.

The sense of engagement is supported by the holistic learning and learning-by-doing approach. Young people learn from their mistakes in practice, planning and implementing their local projects, which often change along the way due to the process-oriented work. After the experimental phase, where they work in teams, we meet at reflective workshops, where we draw conclusions and analyze the experience the youths have gained. We also provide theoretical inputs, often from invited

experts, where participants gain knowledge on topics that are relevant to them and collectively chosen.

School principals, parents and village inhabitants share with us the stories about the difference they notice in their young people after graduating from this one-year horizontal learning experience. Young people can identify adequate solutions for tasks and problems and relate them to different fields of their life. They act consciously and in a goal-oriented way. They can better relate to other people and actively shape social life in their village – such as in the project of a Ukrainian participant, who organized sports activities at school and nature walks for local teenagers, and started a campaign promoting a more sustainable lifestyle. They can evaluate their actions through regular team meetings where they give feedback to each other and during a closing meeting where they think about lessons learned and plan further civic engagement. They can work in teams and better deal with conflicts due to peer-to-peer exchange and the lack of intervention from adults, who give them freedom and are mainly responsible for safety alone. They can think critically and become more responsible for their environment.

These are exactly the key competencies that horizontal learning focuses on. These competencies can be applied in different contexts and dynamically changing circumstances.

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Galician Foundation of Development and Education*

CASE STUDY II

Maria Tymoshchuk

Working with an audience unfamiliar with horizontal learning – a case study from Insha Osvita

Last year I had a chance to work with teachers from one of the medical universities in Ukraine. They wanted to know more about the participatory approach in the educational process. Some teachers had a lack of understanding when it comes to motivating passive students to participate proactively in the learning process and some of them lacked the skills needed for working with diverse groups and for considering the different needs of students in the curriculum. The roots of this problem go back to established traditions in the old education system, when it was not a priority to focus on the needs of learners or to include their potential and active involvement in forming the educational process.

During the online course, which my team of facilitators provided, we met with a lot of resistance and skepticism among participants. They expressed prejudice towards the horizontal learning approach. Participants had no previous experience with informal education and therefore had a very instrumental approach to their educational process (that is, they wanted to quickly receive the necessary tools without critically questioning their attitude), which contradicted the principles of facilitation. The team of facilitators dedicated a lot of time to explaining how the facilitator's attitude influences facilitation and why one cannot achieve sustainable results using tools alone.

Different work formats were used in the training itself: theoretical inputs for the

whole group, individual and group work, presentations of participants' work, blocks for reflection on homework and discussion of additional issues. After each session, feedback was gathered in both groups to respond in a timely manner and adapt the program to the wishes of the participants where possible.

Reflective diaries once again proved to be a very successful tool for facilitators to track participants' progress and react to the questions or misunderstandings as they arise. Multiple times the facilitators' team could use the participants' notes in the reflective diaries to stimulate further discussions during the online sessions. It was also very helpful to refer to the cases that they created in their diary work when introducing new methods and facilitation techniques.

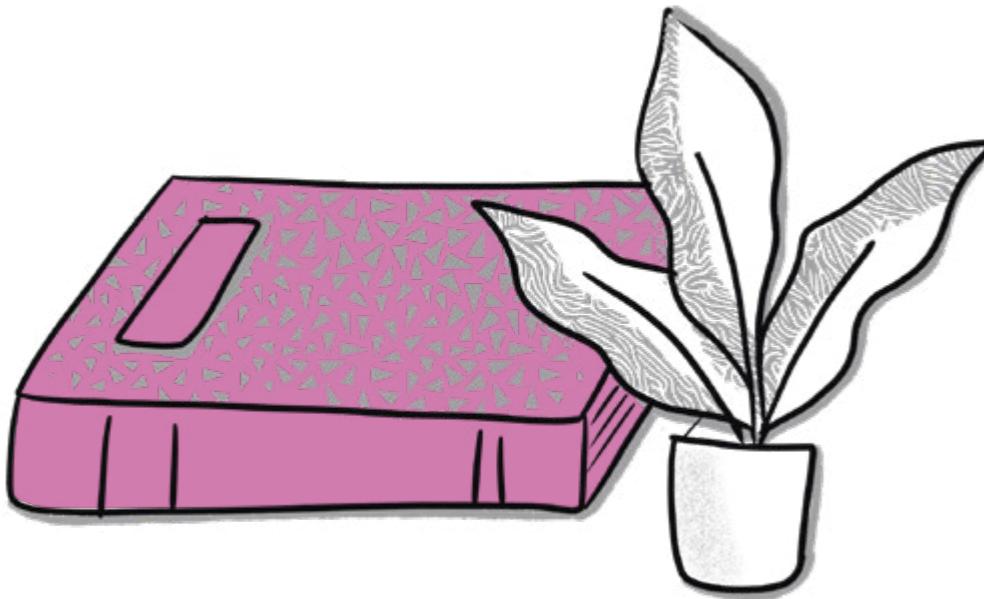
At the end of the course, participants tried to adapt their lessons to students to make them more participatory. We asked them to collect feedback from their students and had one session to reflect on their experience. Not every teacher used this opportunity; but in the end, some of them – even the skeptical ones – admitted using more participatory methods and techniques helped them keep their students more involved in the educational process. Although this experience turned out very challenging for the team, I think that the main success was that we tried to be focused on their real-life experiences, collected their feedback, and tried to implement changes in the program accordingly. In the end, our participants understood that they could influence the whole process and felt more empowered to do so.

Maria Tymoshchuk, facilitator, NGO Insha Osvita

References & Resources

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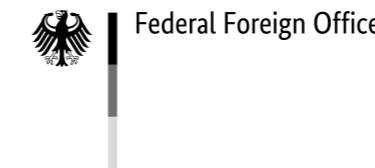


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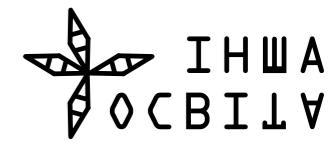
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