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# PERSPECTIVES ON ONLINE AND OFFLINE LEARNING



# learning\_design

#teenagers\_online

#synchronous\_and\_asynchronous\_learning

#digital\_competences

#practical\_advice

## About the authors



(Photo Credit: Olga Zarko)

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is the co-founder of the Ukrainian NGO Insha Osvita, which focuses on non-formal civic education and community development. Natalya has been designing and implementing educational programs for different target groups, including youth in rural areas, professional communities, local authorities, and national NGOs. Natalya helps organizations and communities find mutually beneficial solutions by facilitating strategic meetings and establishing internal communication. She has a background in psychology and applies an integrated approach as well as non-violent communication; she supports facilitators' professional development as supervisors. She develops learning methodologies for in-person and online events and is the co-author of several handbooks for facilitators.



(Photo Credit: Andriy Shishman)

### 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.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, the possibility of organizing events online became a real life-saver in the sphere of civic non-formal education. From organizing support meetings, during which there was an opportunity to talk about how we feel and experience this rapid change, to large international online forums, where activists tried to keep connected and, as much as possible, understand the context of others as well as create new projects relevant to those challenges. Even more importantly, it was the NGOs that developed many new methods for effective online interaction, which were then transferred into formal education and other areas.

The question is, will online events be as widespread once the pandemic ends?

First, it is worth noting that online events are not solely a tool for interaction in conditions of social isolation, but they also help to solve many other challenges: accessibility, access to experts, and they also remove the need to travel, thus positively impacting climate change.

It is also worth noting that the ability to interact online is of critical importance in times of crisis and war. For example, many

Ukrainians who were forced to evacuate can continue working, interacting with their teams remotely. Children have the option to choose to continue their studies in Ukrainian schools remotely. And of course, civic education programs can continue and adapt, responding to new needs and topics while also enabling displaced people to stay connected.

Therefore, we suggest **considering online events as useful more broadly and not just as a tool that is helpful in conditions of self-isolation.**

At the very beginning of the pandemic, as restrictive measures were being implemented, solutions to the problem of implementing offline programs in an online space were developed spontaneously. The core question was how to transfer offline to online and the solutions were not always effective. Therefore, we propose that certain revisions are made to the way things are done and to objectively look at which methods can be used by civic educators and which methods require more experimentation, because there will come a time when online events are no longer our only option, but rather one that has proven effective and irreplaceable in certain contexts.

However, directly transferring offline tools and methods into the online space simply doesn't work in most cases. Therefore, we propose abandoning the question of how to transfer offline methods online, or even how to adapt offline methods to online ones. Instead, we should take a fresh look at what is the value of doing things online and how best to do so. Furthermore, we should investigate how to organize more hybrid events (a combination of

## Choosing a format and working according to its rules

First, we suggest leaving aside the offline/online division for a moment and looking at which processes should take place synchronously and which asynchronously.

- **Synchronous learning** – a form of learning that occurs at the same time, but not in the same place. For example, group discussion, question and answer sessions.
- **Asynchronous learning** – a form of learning that doesn't occur in the same place or at the same time. For example, watching recorded lectures, performing individual tasks.

These terms are commonly applied to various forms of digital and online learning. One of the biggest challenges here is digital fatigue, a state of mental exhaustion brought on by the excessive use of digital devices. Therefore, a general recommendation for educational formats is: Leave for synchronous online work only that which cannot take place otherwise.

So, what should **be reserved for synchronous learning** and can work well in an online setting?

1. **Discussions about basic concepts to create a common understanding:** Even if you provide theoretical materials in advance in the form of text or video, you cannot be sure how much the participants have learned from those materials.

But don't make the content blocks too long. It seems that all these years of organizing online events, we have been bargaining over content input time. No more than half an hour, no more than 15 minutes. How about five minutes? Of course, this doesn't mean that the entire theory must be contained within just five minutes. But it is a good idea to make small iterations, and between these blocks, you can have sections that have to goal of consolidating knowledge, an interactive question-and-answer session, a short practical exercise, an exercise to renew focus and concentration, a question that stimulates the participants to think, and immediately apply the newly received information to their own context.

2. **Link to practice:** It may seem at first that practical training is beyond the scope of online meetings. However, it is often difficult for participants to understand how a tool or theoretical concept will work in practice. To begin doing something in a new way, effort is required, which can be difficult alone even after a training session. So how can we link theoretical knowledge to practice in an online event?
  - Case studies. Separate the participants into groups to work on cases, thus applying their new knowledge.
  - The facilitator provides a real-life example, thereby helping to link theoretical information to concrete practical solutions.
  - Participants apply the knowledge they have acquired to their own context and, for example, develop a specific action plan.

Creating a rhythm in the online event will help keep the participants' attention. To some extent, a successful online event is a show. It doesn't have to be the equivalent of a stand-up comedy show, but the event needs to be dynamic and have a high level of engagement. To achieve this, you can use the breathe-in/breathe-out principle, which combines parts during which participants receive information and parts where they are expected to generate information and content. In the same manner, alternate between elements that require concentration and elements that provide relaxation.

What can be attributed to **asynchronous processes**?

1. **Individual reflection on experience or the learning process:** When participants come with their own preconceived notions of the topic, group discussions tend to be more productive and already involve different opinions. It's also worth thinking about how best the participants will be able to process and assimilate the material presented during the intense online session. One possible tool is a reflective diary for participants with different questions about knowledge, skills, and attitude regarding the learning process.
2. **Additional theoretical information:** Simply providing a large list of literature is unlikely to be useful. It is important to emphasize how this or that material will be useful. Also experiment with different ways of presenting information, for example in a survey.
3. **"Study Buddy":** Encourage participants to form pairs or small groups or even

create ones yourself. Instruct the pairs to prepare something together for the next session. Social isolation makes people eager to socialize, and the learning process can benefit from that yearning. Remember not to make the tasks too difficult or too long to complete. Typical tasks could be: prepare a presentation or an exercise for the next session, reflect on your practice (interview), exchange experiences in a particular field.

4. **Chat:** We're not sure if this tool counts as synchronous or asynchronous. Chat is a fast feedback channel; with the right design, it encourages participants to interact more often with the topic. Ask them specific questions, 1-2 per day between sessions, use their responses for session design and encourage contributions to the discussion as well as experience sharing.

How to ensure the completion of asynchronous tasks?

- It is important to give structure to the asynchronous process. Provide clear, detailed and step-by-step instructions.
- Allow enough time for completion. Warn the participants about how much time the task will take and suggest that they complete it immediately.
- Increase the difficulty of tasks gradually. Start with easier tasks that create interest and motivate participants to complete the next task.
- Provide feedback on completed tasks. Plan for that time in your schedule as well.

Having defined the combination of synchronous and asynchronous engagement, you can start thinking about the combination of online and offline work. To decide which format to choose, it can be useful to consider the following factors:

- Whether the goal, in addition to the individual learning process, is networking and community building. An in-person meeting will certainly be important in such a case.
- To what extent the participants possess the skills of self-directed learning. Quality engagement online requires discipline and good self-management skills.
- To what extent is improving skills and attitudes the goal? While many skills, particularly communication skills, can be practiced online, a change in attitude often requires more time and the opportunity to stay longer in a group process, observing others and reflecting on one's own experience.
- How loaded your target group is overall. Yes, it can be difficult to attract professionals to participate in a long offline event.

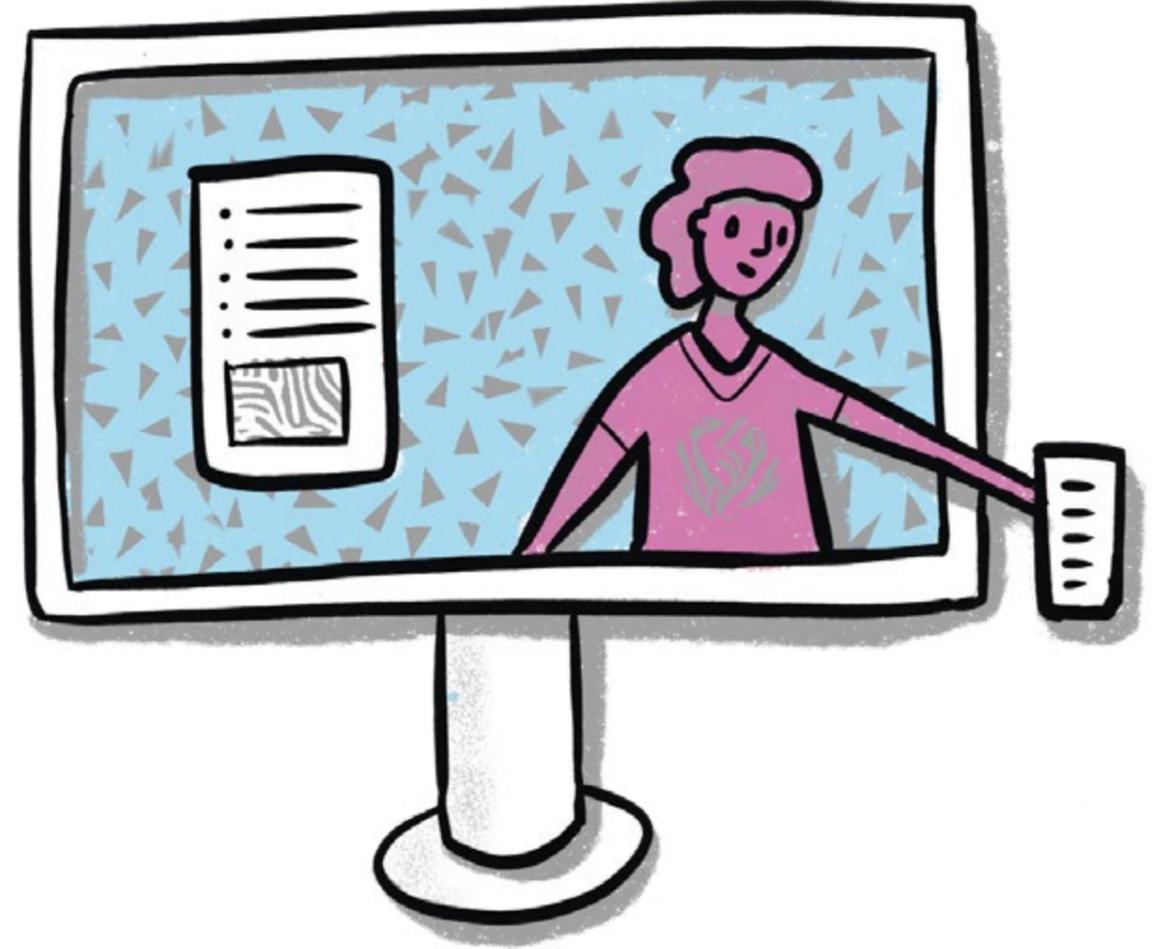
- Is there any added value in the potential venue (for example, getting to know the experience of local organizations) that will really impact the realization of the learning outcomes and further activities of your participants?

When planning a combination of offline/online elements, you can use the same principle: everything we can do online, we do online.

*Can this be done asynchronously? If it can't be done asynchronously, can it be done synchronously online instead of offline?*

The purpose of this handbook is not to describe commonly known approaches. Therefore, we will limit ourselves to a brief mention of Constructive Alignment, Bloom's Taxonomy and the Experiential Learning Cycle by David A. Kolb and Ronald E. Fry, which remain important guidelines for the design of any educational process.<sup>1</sup> Pay more attention to the practical aspects of working with youngsters online.

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see John Biggs, "Constructive Alignment in University Teaching," ed. Peter Kandlbinder, *HERDSA Review of Higher Education 1* (July 1, 2014): 5-22, [https://www.tru.ca/\\_shared/assets/Constructive\\_Alignment36087.pdf](https://www.tru.ca/_shared/assets/Constructive_Alignment36087.pdf); "Kolb's Learning Cycle," Structural Learning, accessed December 7, 2022, <https://www.structural-learning.com/post/kolbs-learning-cycle/>; "Resource for Educators," Bloom's Taxonomy, accessed December 7, 2022, <https://bloomstaxonomy.net/>.



## How to work with teenagers online

The pandemic has led to social isolation and the adaptation of many educational programs to the online format. This change in approaches has a direct impact

on adolescents and children, who are getting used to the new format of interaction. It is not yet clear what kind of impact this transition will have on them.

On the one hand, online work seems to have made more learning opportunities available. But we need to remember that this online format is not simple and accessible for everybody.

## PRACTICAL ADVICE

**Before starting a process, check the group's knowledge regarding the tools/ applications/ platforms/ software** to have a better overview and avoid a potential experience gap.

Adapt your learning process to mobile phones.

**Visualizations are more important than text.** Visualization can also help with focusing attention, documentation, illustrating the idea, and clustering. Rather than using just text in your educational materials, use illustrations, photos and visual metaphors.

**Classroom learning based on structured materials is reduced to a minimum** and interactive education with a strong visual component is gaining in popularity.

**Fast pace: Young participants perform tasks quicker,** but sometimes they lack deep involvement in them. If you can explain to them how the learning materials apply to their lives in the here and now, you will get their attention.

**For learning, use platforms that they already use for communication:** Instagram, Telegram, or TikTok. You can adapt asynchronous tasks into formats that are more appropriate for these platforms.

**Repeat the use of materials in different ways:** Use quizzes, teamwork and challenges, research, competition, or other creative formats that will help students remember information and build an emotional connection to the knowledge.

**Use simple and accessible language for explaining new topics.**

**Build interactive learning with gamification.** You can think about your learning goal as a challenge; you can set time limits for your participants or add a little taste of competition into the educational process. However, remember that each goal should be a little more difficult than the previous one – but not too difficult, because their motivation will disappear if the task is too challenging. This is a balance that is hard to strike correctly.

**Allow space for mistakes.** Compared to formal school education, in the non-formal educational process we may allow our participants to make mistakes without judgment and help them with suggestions for further action based on their mistakes.

**Don't forget to add physical elements during online sessions.** Provide an adequate number of breaks, initiate some body movement or similar short exercises that they can do during the learning process. Physical activity can lower stress levels, build group connection, and support emotional well-being. Such activities can also provide a welcome element of surprise.



## The challenges in working with teenagers online. Case blitz

### CASE 1:

**The Internet connection is weak**

Technical issues can critically influence the learning process. Young participants may mostly use mobile phones. If participants are from rural areas, their Internet connection could be poor or unstable. Sometimes young participants from vulnerable groups have outdated technological equipment.

#### **Solutions:**

- Record short informative videos so participants can watch them when it is convenient for them
- Use other communication channels with those participants who have lost their Internet connection (chats)
- Use a mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning
- Double information in different formats (video, photo, text)
- Check your tasks: Is it possible to complete them with mobile use only?

### CASE 2:

**A lack of motivation or shy participants**

Young participants may be less organized or motivated. They may have been forced to come to the online training by their parents, may disconnect when bored, or be too shy to express their opinion in an unfamiliar group.

#### **Solutions:**

- Emphasize that mistakes are normal
- Ask participants for feedback and let them influence the educational process
- Create a mix of working in small groups and individual tasks

## Why is it important to stay up to date with technology?

When faced with periodic lockdowns and the more recent crisis, digital technologies allow us to continue learning safely in a remote online or mixed format. To stay up to date in these difficult times it is important to be able to find, create, and share knowledge using digital tools. There are many different approaches when it comes to how to develop your digital competencies as an educator. We want to share the DigCompEdu framework, which is focused on the different aspects of educators' professional activities.<sup>1</sup>

### **Area 1: Professional Engagement**

Using digital technologies for communication, collaboration, and professional development. Educators' digital competence is expressed in their ability to use digital technologies not only to enhance teaching, but also for their professional interactions with colleagues, learners, parents, and other interested parties, for their individual professional development, and for the creation of the collaboratively innovating pedagogic practices.

### **Area 2: Digital Resources**

Sourcing, creating, and sharing digital resources. One of the key competencies any educator needs to develop is to come to terms with this variety; to effectively identify resources that best fit their learning objectives, learner group, and teaching style, to structure the wealth of materials, establish connections and to modify, add on to, and develop digital resources to support their teaching. At the same time, they need to be aware of security measures online and respect copyright rules when using, modifying, and sharing resources.

### **Area 3: Teaching and Learning**

Managing and orchestrating the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning. This competence refers to designing, planning, and implementing the use of digital technologies in the different stages of the learning process. The real potential of digital technologies lies in shifting the focus of the teaching process from teacher-led to learner-centered processes. Thus, the role of a digitally-competent educator is to be a mentor and guide for learners to their more autonomous learning path.

### **Area 4: Assessment**

Using digital technologies and strategies to enhance assessment. The use of digital technologies in education, whether for assessment, learning, administrative, or other purposes, results in a wide range of data being available on each individual learner's learning behavior. Analyzing and interpreting this data and using it to help make decisions is becoming increasingly important. Digital technologies can contribute to directly monitoring learner progress, to facilitating feedback, and to allowing educators to assess and adapt their teaching strategies.

### **Area 5: Empowering Learners**

Using digital technologies to enhance inclusion, personalization, and learners' active engagement. One of the key strengths of digital technologies in education is their potential for supporting learner-centered pedagogic strategies and boosting the active involvement of learners in the learning process and their ownership of it.

### **Area 6: Facilitating Learners' Digital Competence**

Enabling learners to use digital technologies creatively and responsibly for information, communication, content creation, wellbeing, and problem-solving. Digital competence is one of the transversal competencies educators need to instill in learners. Digital content creation, media literacy, and information hygiene, responsible use of online tools, and digital problem solving are the main aims of this area. Participants should be able to responsibly use digital technologies for communication, collaboration, and civic participation. "Digital natives" doesn't necessarily mean that they are digitally competent.

<sup>1</sup> Christine Redecker and European Commission, Joint Research Center, *European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators: DigCompEdu*, ed. Yves Punie (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2017), <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/159770>.

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