

Oana Laslău

REENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH IN OFFLINE EVENTS



#youth_work

#online_learning

#offline_learning

#based_on_experience

#tips

#tricks

#meaningful_events

About the author



(Photo Credit: Agata Maziarz)

OANA LASLĂU

is an experienced project manager and youth mentor with the Gutenberg Youth Organization, Romania. Active for over 10 years in Romania's youth work and youth empowerment field, together with her

colleagues, she has co-shaped a community of more than 350 young volunteers and active citizens: the [Gutenberg Network of German-speaking young people from Romania](#). In her capacities as an active part of the executive and/or consulting board of the Gutenberg organization for the past 10 years, she has overseen the coordination and implementation of more than 110 educational and youth projects with more than 40,000 children and young people as beneficiaries. Oana has also mentored and co-founded educational SMEs and social enterprises in Romania, supporting language learning and personal development for children and young people.

Context and relevance: effects of online events

The recent years of mainly online communication and collaboration (although it for sure has its perks) has influenced the attitude and behavior of the young people we work with, making them less collaborative and sociable, more individualistic and sometimes even apathetic. In the context of an ongoing pandemic and after so much time spent with mostly online events, we get the impression that young people's engagement is diminished. Moreover, the methods, tools, and formats used before the pandemic don't seem to work anymore.

The previously validated approaches are not getting the same level of engagement from the young participants as they once did.

This is how things look like from our perspective – the Gutenberg Youth Organization from Romania – a NGO active in the field of youth work and youth empowerment for 14 years, mostly with the young target group of 13 to 23 years old, on a local, national, and international level.

Furthermore, the needs and wishes of young people have changed and we need to adapt to them. This is an insight increasingly encountered among youth workers and facilitators that work with our young target group and it seems to be a natural result of the times and challenges we face.

How did we get here and is there something that can be done about this?

First step: Rethink it all!

Big life changes and challenges such as the pandemic, war, insecurity, and instability have led to changes in the way the young people behave and communicate as well. The needs and wishes of young people are constantly evolving so we need to reiterate and readapt what we think of as being valuable and meaningful to them. This is important not just in terms of reassessing the topics and areas of interest addressed by the youth projects we organize, but also in terms of learning more about their (updated) learning styles. Therefore, the methods and instruments that we will use

in our youth work need to adapt to these changes to provide quality and meaningful interactions for the young participants.

As the interests of young people have changed, the formats and topics of interest need to be relevant to them in terms of novelty and in terms of providing practical approaches from the educators' side. Novelty in this context means avoiding providing information in trainings or workshops that they can easily find with just one web search or on their TikTok feed. We also need to contextualize and personalize the information provided as much as possible and to focus on the practical use of the learnings.

So how do we better understand and ensure that our events are still relevant and meaningful to young people?

- One answer for our challenge on how to get to the core of young people's needs and wishes might be pretty obvious: just ask! Ask the youth about their needs, wishes, and topics of interest. Use questionnaires, quizzes, focus groups, etc. to gather as much information as you can to get to know them better.
- Make use of recent studies and re-search available specifically for the

target group you will attend to; also learn from other youth workers' and facilitators' experiences.

- Organize consultative pre-events in the preparation phase of each project to create the space and time to engage with the future participants, to get to know them closer, to adapt even better to their needs and communication styles.

Are young people prepared to express their opinions?

Are young people comfortable enough and are they ready to express their wishes and needs and to make use of the opportunities they encounter? Can they articulate what they want or do they sometimes have difficulties expressing themselves?

Although young people can, of course, be very vocal about expressing their opinions, some of them might not be used to processes of self-reflection and analysis of their own needs.

It's hard for all people to know what they want; it's not necessarily a question of age. How do you know what you need if the future is constantly changing? It's more difficult to make decisions for one's future

if plans are influenced a great deal by constant changes such as industrial and technological developments, or by challenges such as a totally unexpected pandemic or a war.

In terms of how to properly support young people in better navigating current and future times of change and in encouraging self-reflection as a habit, some core competencies might be good for every young person to develop for the process of constant adaptation to the new realities. Examples of such competencies are:

- Learning to learn
- Critical thinking
- Self-reflection and self-assessment
- Goal-setting
- Correlating all of the above (accuracy and alignment of self-reflection, self-assessment and goals)

Young people's future

How do we support them on their future learning pathways?

- Keep in mind the topic of career orientation (for youth) or career reorientation and conversion (for adult learners).
- Topics should be **relevant for their plans and needed skills**, so don't just assume what they'd like to or need to learn, but support them in the learning process needed for the goals and dreams they want to achieve.

- Be informed about **new realities and what the future will bring**, to stay relevant to the young participants in terms of topics and learning objectives covered in the educational programs we provide.

When designing youth projects, we should keep in mind that new areas of interest constantly pop up among the young generations and we, as youth organizers and facilitators, need to keep up at least on an informational level with the latest technologies, platforms, and passions.

Tips & tricks: The proper setting for offline events

How can we create an enabling environment for young people so that they can

make the most of the learning experiences they are provided?

The following paragraphs contain some suggestions that were implemented and validated for the young target group of 13 to 23 years old during the first months of 2022 (at a time when the big pandemic restrictions had partially relaxed and offline events slowly became viable again).

From the content point of view:

1. From our experience, we feel **a deeper, more meaningful connection is needed**. Creating frames and conditions for authenticity and honesty should be encouraged during offline interactions.
2. Create space in the program for both **individual and collective activities**. Help them regain **trust in teamwork**. Always include interactive and playful activities for energizing, team building, or just having fun.
3. More focus on **peer-to-peer learning** can provide great added value if used as

“mandatory” practice in youth projects. For young participants, peer-to-peer learning can lead to a more engaging and collaborative learning experience and could support them in the process of regaining trust in teamwork and building meaningful connections.

4. In times of change and challenges, the behavior of young people is influenced by situational and external factors, as well as being active in an environment conditioned by discomfort. Therefore, **exploring one's (dis)comfort zone** should be encouraged during offline interactions, but the ways and methods used should be very mindful of the participants' needs and reactions.

From the organizational point of view:

1. Create a **safe space for participants** that is welcoming and very comfortable. Go the extra mile in creating a good atmosphere on all levels:
 - Setting: cool space, plenty of room for all participants, good food and snacks, etc.
 - Enough breaks in the daily program and short sessions only.
2. **Short sessions** in the framework of **multi-day events and projects** is a format supported by many youth

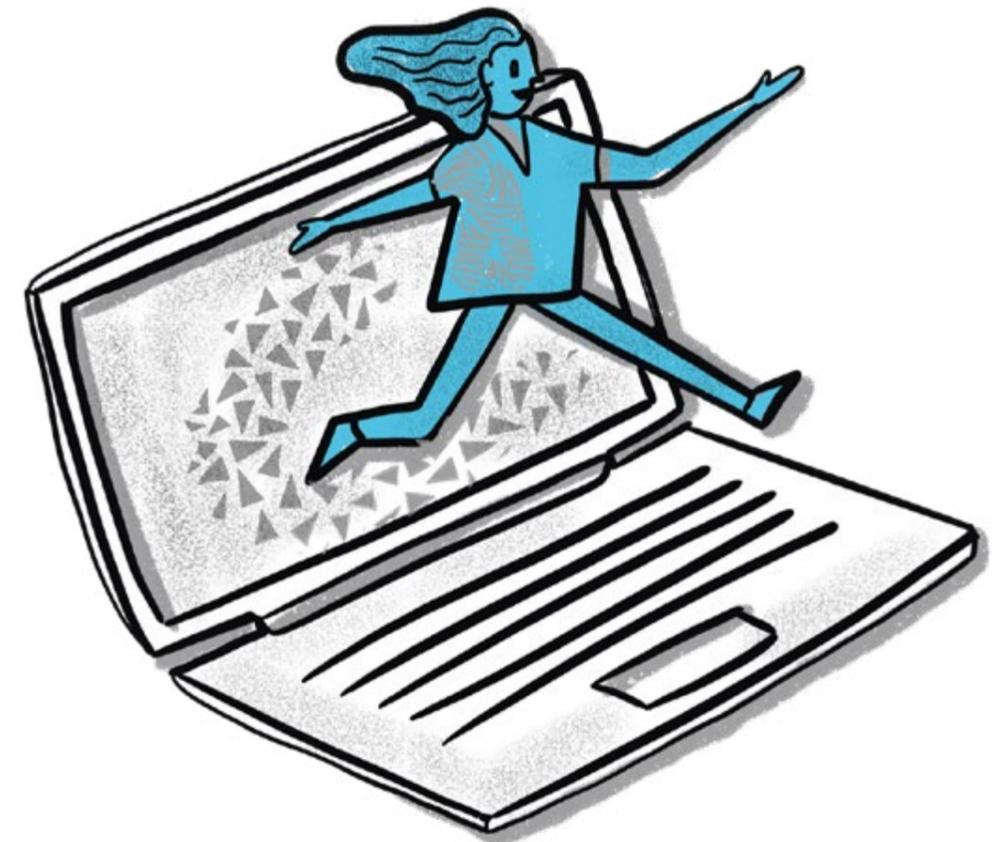
workers and facilitators, being mindful of the following behaviors of youth people:

- **Limited attention span and limited capacity to focus** on the same topic for a longer time, therefore short sessions work better – up to 1 hour to a maximum of 1½ hours. For longer sessions, longer breaks of 20-30 minutes are necessary.
- **More time is needed to feel comfortable in a group setting**. One intro session or check-in session or one introductory day doesn't seem to be enough anymore for youth to connect to the group and overcome their social awkwardness and get actively involved in the learning

process, so there is a need for multi-day events: 4-5 or more days per youth project.

3. **Preparation and follow-up in youth projects** are equally important phases of a project, having in mind the fostering of meaningful engagement with young people and their learning processes.

In the preparation phase, you could organize consultative pre-events to better understand and get to know your target group of participants. And in the follow-up phase, creating networking opportunities and spaces for further connection and collaboration might contribute to a more profound and sustainable learning experience for the participants.



CHECKLIST FOR MEANINGFUL YOUTH EVENTS

Here is a list of suggestions in the form of questions that you might want to ask yourselves when designing and implementing projects for young people: ¹

In the preparation phase:

- ✓ Are the topics addressed in the youth project relevant to the needs and wishes of the young people involved?
- ✓ Have the young participants been informed in advance that their participation is confirmed and have they been provided with all organizational and logistical information so that they have enough time to properly prepare?
- ✓ Are young people treated as equal partners in this engagement?
- ✓ Have we provided sufficient and accessible information to ensure meaningful participation of young people (for example, providing them with a concept note of the project using youth-friendly language)?

In the implementation phase:

- ✓ Have we created an adequate space and framework so that young people feel able and comfortable to freely express their opinions and experiences?
- ✓ Have we created an adequate space that fosters trust-building between young participants and treats them as equal partners?

In the follow-up phase:

- ✓ Have we provided young participants with the opportunity to connect and engage after the event?
- ✓ Have we provided the means and ways for the young people to give feedback to the overall project and to offer inputs and improvements on what we can do in the future to further improve their engagement?

¹ "Checklist for Meaningful Youth Engagement," United Network of Young Peacebuilders, accessed September 23, 2022, <https://unoy.org/downloads/mye-checklist/>.

References & Resources

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