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by Andreas Karsten and colleagues

Nonformal education goes
world wide web…

In May 2008, the Estonian National Agency of the Youth in Action programme hosted a networking seminar for people interested in bringing together nonformal education and the web. Around 20 people joined to explore different web-based initiatives and projects, to discuss their role and po-tential, and to develop strategies for further developing the synergies between nonformal education and the internet - both exciting places and ways to learn. After the seminar, some people met again – online from time to time - to chat about the impact of the online world's connectivity on youth participation, and sometimes they missed each other as you will see. You can contribute to the ongoing long-distance chat, and read more about the seminar itself, at Nonformality, the co-operation partner of the Estonian Agency's initiative: www.nonformality.org/nfewww.

▶ June 2008: Somewhere in a corner of the world wide web …

Andreas K.
Hello everyone to our joint exploration of youth participation in a connected world. Good to see ya here! Here are some questions to start us off with:
- How can youth participation and the internet come together?
- How does social networking influence youth participation?
- How can new media and online participation help shape the world?

Marit K. & Ülly E.
To kick off, one of our ideas – related to the first question about bringing youth participation and the internet together: it's impossible to exclude new media nowadays when thinking of young people and their realities. When trying to support youth participation, we must therefore also consider and understand – or, actually, first understand and then consider – web-based approaches, ideas and solutions.

Pablo C.
This will not be an issue with next generations of youth workers because, as young people today, they will know and use the web in a variety of ways.

Marit K. & Ülly E.
True enough, but in many countries there are no youth work studies yet…

Rui M.
Yes indeed – yet in most countries, there are youth work practices at least! The point is though: if the activities that 'traditional' youth workers offer young people are not attractive to the generation of digital natives – who then will want to become a youth worker?!

Pablo C.
They may want to become youth workers more likely because they consider their current youth workers and their offers as too old-fashioned :-)

Rui M.
I don't see this happening…

Marit K. & Ülly E.
The question then arises if offline is 'old-fashioned'? Or is online just an extra value that we could and should use meaningfully – especially when speaking about developing opportunities for youth participation?

Rui M.
I see possibilities for online participation as well – without extra

• Good practice in Participation

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value to something offline. It's just there, and online only: take blogs, for example.

Pablo C.

It depends whether we consider the internet as a space where non-formal learning experiences can exist by themselves and in their own right – or whether we consider the internet an additional resource supporting all those 'offline' nonformal learning experiences.

Marit K. & Ülly E.

There are quite some good practices in the European youth field about how to bring additional value to youth participation measures, involving web-based actions as complementary tools – like questionnaires about key issues in young people's local communities.

Pablo C.

Certainly some things would simply be harder without the internet. Just think of getting and staying in touch with all our international partners…

Marit K. & Ülly E.

But the very challenging but truly attractive perspective is now to try and develop exclusively online opportunities for young people and youth participation!

Rui M.

And not just limited to the internet as we know it – we need to think, just to give one example, also about mobile phones!

Marit K. & Ülly E.

Which brings us smoothly to the second question about the influence of social networking on youth participation :-)

Pablo C.

In the last Coyote, Mark brought this up by asking how we could use social networking in our educational work as youth trainers and youth workers…

Marit K. & Ülly E.

Youth participation has a lot to do with feelings of belonging, with having the comfortable feeling to say your thoughts aloud and to be heard… And social networking, taking place online, provides such possibilities even easier than before – to meetings you might have to travel to, but the web is just there.

Pablo C.

For many young people, social networking is about friends and fun, though…

Marit K. & Ülly E.

Yes, but they say this about youth exchanges, too! We guess there is

> " **In a nutshell, participation means to be involved, to have tasks, to share and to take over responsibility. It means to have access and to be included.** "
>
> *Peter Lauritzen*

quite some potential for a stronger educational impact in both formats – online in social networking and offline in youth exchanges :-)

Pablo C.

And a ten-day youth exchange is as much 'real life' as the world wide web…

Rui M.

I also spent some time thinking about the third question – how can new media and online participation help shape the world? I find it is interesting that many alternative and opposition movements are connected with the internet. I think it has to do with the fact that using new communication technologies are comparatively cheap, that they can bridge large distances and extend geographical scope easily, and that they can provide anonymity – especially in dictatorial regimes an essential advantage for the opposition.

Andreas K.

I am sorry to be late – some silly offline thing kept me from the online world!

Rui M.

So the moment we all have to leave you finally enter the chat?!

Andreas K.
blush

Rui M.

But you are a good example that the internet does not reach everyone all the time, and that it doesn't reach many people at all. And yet, the digital divide is not only geographic, it is also economic and can be very regional, even local – between rural and urban areas, for example.

Andreas K.

I will just stay here now and wait until someone comes back! (20 min later) Ladila ladilu shalalala. (40 min later) Shubidu sha-bida. (60 min later) Trilala trialalulu. (120 min later) Shuwab-duda. (240 min later) Yeah yeah yeah. (360 min later) World? HELLO?! (480 min later) I give up. For today!

Mohammed D.

Why is it when I left you came in and now you have left I come in…

Andreas K.

Damn good question, but you are gone again now. Will be back!

Pablo C.

I feel so lonely :-)
Am I again the only one entering this chat?

Sakis K.

Late and eventually nobody is here… Have you ever tried to go online in a remote village in the Bulgarian mountains? The digital divide exists, I say.

Sakis K.

Some people claim that social networking is a way out of youth participation, not a way in. I want to challenge that claim tonight! Take Peter Lauritzen's definition of youth participation as an example: "In a nutshell, participation means to be involved, to have tasks, to share and to take over responsibility. It means to have access and to be included."

Sakis K.

About involvement. More and more people, especially young people, are involved in social networking. See the numbers! Check. About tasks. Even digital immigrants can upload photos or buy a digital beer for their friends. Check. About sharing. That's what social networking is all about. Check. About responsibility. People take over responsibility on their platforms, they develop ownership, promote it, improve it, shape it – and all this without the fear of making mistakes, being pointed or laughed at. Check. About access. Accessibility to the internet is increasing rapidly, digital divides are shrinking. Check. Looks like 5 points of 5, doesn't it?

Mohammed D.

Sorry I missed the chat! I would like to follow up on a number of issues.

Youth work is changing in nature – it is certainly not the same as 15 years ago… Back then, youth work was detached work, you would go out on the streets and talk, engage, discuss with young people. Trust developed, and everyone was part of a two-way process. Nowadays the focus is on things like employability, output counts much more than outcome – as long as the numbers fit, things must be alright. But young people may not be interested in this factory-type, conveyor-belt, one-way youth work approach.

There is, of course, still great youth work – but more and more youth workers are leaving because their profession is not any longer about nonformal education. Others are staying and put up a fight – and to those, new technologies can be an added value in their efforts to foster youth participation. But youth workers need to be, just like in real life and offline youth work, creative and innovative.

Young people use so many things we didn't know or have earlier: mobiles, ipods, wiis, notebooks… How do we use these technologies to engage with young people – without losing every contact in the offline world? How can interpersonal skills be developed through such channels, if at all?

Pablo C.

New technologies are a great tool for self-directed learning, and while some youth workers might be afraid of the web's chaotic nature, this chaos is in the end all that nonformal education is about! With creativity and innovation, we could create brand new non-

formal learning environments online, or use existing resources such as Second Life to allow young people to develop skills and competences through their engagement and participation in such online endeavours. And there is a real contact point between on-line and offline worlds – the skills developed in one world are almost always useful in the other…

Andreas K.

Sometimes I wonder whether we are too late already? How can we develop a relationship of trust with young people, when we begin to utilise their social networks – and let's face it, they were there long before us – for our own purposes with them? Doesn't this feel like invasion?

Maybe we should first try and use such social networks for ourselves – for our co-operation and communication, between youth workers and trainers. Maybe we should first leave them kids alone, and learn about the potentials and obstacles through the experience with our professional networks. All else then will come, I believe.

Mark T.

Seems like there was one good interesting chat when there were people with interesting reactions and viewpoints coming in at different times; plus a few incidents of irritation, loneliness and frustration at just having missed someone or just hanging around waiting for anyone to show up! A nice microcosm of online working and co-operation!

Pablo C.

You are making an interesting point about contributions that are not simultaneous – indeed, the internet is a universe where time and communication are really relative and communication happens not only in brand-new ways, but also challenging and astonishing ways. But in the end, when it comes to action and creating change, offline seems the place to be.

Mohammed D.

And it brings up another point of relevance again – the question of access. Consideration needs to be given to access to internet, which could be limited for a range of reasons including poverty, infrastructure, geography…

Andreas K.

Or soccer! Who will come here now, once that the European Football Championship has started? Another aspect of realities on the web: some offline things simply are more attractive for participation than the web …

And indeed, no one else came. ◼

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