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Types of learning mobility – Blended, hybrid and online

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Blended learning mobility

Blended learning mobility is perhaps the most familiar concept or the one closest to the “conventional” understanding of a learning mobility. It was practised quite frequently before the COVID-19 pandemic through some informal connection elements via social media, chat applications, asynchronous tasks and preparation/follow-up activities, or even including live online meetings (though perhaps less often). The idea of blended mobility is to complement in-person (residential) parts, to extend the process of group connection and building and to strengthen the impact on the local community. In short, **to support the impact of learning mobility on those involved and the environments around them.**

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In practical terms, “blended mobility activities [are] where participants are together online or together in person at different times”.¹ It is important to highlight that both in-person and online elements of the learning mobility are interconnected and linked and that they represent one coherent and clear flow.

What are the key benefits of blended learning mobility?

- A combination of the extended learning process, as well as an intense period of being together residentially, enables more opportunities for stronger group bonding. This, in turn, contributes to deeper connections and more profound sharing and exchange. In addition, this combination provides for more opportunities to work on participants’ attitudes, values and behaviour, which often need more time and space.
- All participants go through the same flow/structure of the learning process.
- It enables an impact on communities of all involved participants. Given that there are online activities upon participants’ return to their “home” environments, they can support their follow-up and increase their motivation and engagement.
- Online activities, which support the residential ones, offer a stronger chance for a more structured and “connected” preparation (both in local groups and in the whole, international group), and ensure a stronger personal follow-up with participants
- A blended approach can support participants to meet in their local groups, in order to increase their confidence for an international process and then come together to meet others online.
- It supports participants in the process of reintegration in the “home” community, which can sometimes be quite harsh and abrupt. Knowing that the process is not over and that they have an international network to fall back on can make the reintegration smoother and less sudden, allowing them to adjust changes into everyday life.

What are the key challenges to “blended learning mobility”?

- It is a long process to prepare and see through and it requires a lot of commitment and resources from both leaders/facilitators and participants themselves. The enthusiasm and dedication can vary and there has to be quite a lot of investment to maintain a stable engagement and exchange.
- The time that needs to be dedicated to the online part of the activity can sometimes be perceived as an overload. It is arguably easier to be fully committed to an activity when participants are together in person, while commitment might be more difficult to maintain online, when participants’ everyday reality kicks in.

1. Safe. Confident. Connected. Inspired. Learning experiences of hybrid, blended and online mobility activities, available at www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-4221/Safe,+Confident,+Connected+and+Inspired+-+Learning+Experiences+of+Hybrid,+Blended,+and+Online+Mobility+Activities.pdf, accessed 28 November 2021.

- Knowing that they would meet in person, participants might be tempted to skip pre-residential online preparation with the intention of catching up when they all meet together.
- On the other hand, it is not always easy to keep the group together, especially in the follow-up phase. While the international exchange and the network might be a great support for some participants in their reintegration efforts, some participants will be drawn into their everyday reality and the extensive process might be seen as a burden – or, at least, not a “decent replacement” for an in-person reality.
- Having one logical flow of all the blended activities is often easier said than done. Having a clear plan which works towards one set of objectives and, at the same time, being constantly open to the needs and contributions of the participants can be quite a tiresome ordeal.
- Not being the only learning environment, investment into setting up the online part of the process is sometimes overlooked. At the same time, the need for equal access to the internet and digital devices, as well as adequate digital competences, is very important to ensure an inclusive and quality process.

Recommendations

- Consider it as a truly blended and interlinked process and build one whole learning flow – otherwise the process will be unsynchronised.
- Communicate it clearly and early on as a blended process, so participants will commit as much as possible.
- Make sure that support from facilitators of the mobility is available in all phases (including, for example, the online parts or meeting of local/national groups) and participants are not left to their own devices.
- Build the programme together with the participants, so they can share what kind of tools/platforms they would prefer and what kind of support would be needed in the online parts.
- Online activities can be really helpful for extracting the most out of “learning by leaving”, i.e. the experiences that come from immersion into another culture. While in-person mobility is great for challenging and questioning one’s own thoughts, perceptions or even sense of belonging, online parts can help in reflecting and perhaps even supporting shifts in values, attitudes and behaviours.
- It can happen that upon their return, young people are pulled back into their familiar reality and effects on in-person challenges and even seeds of change are forgotten or buried under their everyday tasks and challenges. When these possible changes relate to a participant’s identity or something that they discovered about themselves, there should be at least an attempt to make it last. Online follow-up enables facilitators to sustain the process and the group meeting online to act as a safety net.

- Make sure to consider participants' inclusion needs during the whole process (both online and in-person).
- Adhere to the use of platforms and apps that are fully in line with European data and privacy standards.

Hybrid learning mobility

Hybrid learning (mobility) is a fairly new concept which emerged strongly after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In hybrid learning mobility, some people physically move from their own place in order to meet with the others. However, this mobility does not apply to everyone, as part of the group connects and joins the learning process online. Hence the word “hybrid”, or a learning exchange made by **combining an in-presence (residential) and an online learning process**.

“Safe. Confident. Connected. Inspired. Learning experiences of hybrid, blended and online mobility activities” defines hybrid mobility activities as “where participants are meeting partly online and partly in-person at the same time – be the latter at local/regional or cross-border level, depending on the project”.² This definition could be extended to include learning mobility that involves local groups of young people meeting together in one physical space and, at the same time, meeting other local groups online.

Arguably, hybrid learning mobility is based on synchronous learning, which means that both in-person and hybrid elements are happening **at the same time**.

What are the key benefits of hybrid learning mobility?

- An opportunity to participate in learning mobility for young people who are not able to join physically due to certain challenges and/or limitations (health issues, administrative challenges, family reasons, personal responsibilities, etc.). If there is a willingness to set up a hybrid process, even if someone is not able to travel at the last moment, there is a place for them.
- If significant time and effort is invested in preparing and supporting the mobility process, inclusion could be a very strong component of the experience. It takes quite some dedication to join the two processes together and keep everyone involved and engaged and yet it might end up a genuinely inclusive learning experience.

2. Safe. Confident. Connected. Inspired. Learning experiences of hybrid, blended and online mobility activities, available at www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-4221/Safe,+Confident,+Connected+and+Inspired+-+Learning+Experiences+of+Hybrid,+Blended,+and+Online+Mobility+Activities.pdf, accessed 28 November 2021.

- A chance to have input from a wide variety of geographical and professional backgrounds – the online part of the process could also encompass expert inputs or contributions. In this way, mobility is mostly about the exchange in the group, but this can guarantee quality inputs from those who could otherwise not be present.
- An intermediate step before a “full-on” learning mobility. Local/national/regional groups can gather together physically, while they could meet in an international group online. This could serve to expand the comfort zone and give a taste of an international learning mobility.
- Once all the technical setup is in place, hybrid learning mobility could encompass a much wider audience, bringing in a diversity of voices and a stronger impact, while maintaining a focused group process in presence.
- A hybrid environment caters for different learning styles and needs by joining two very different learning environments, a variety of different tools, different dynamics and opportunities for learning and exchanging.
- There is a wider opportunity to bring in different communities in the process, as part of the group are still in their “home” environment. While there is one focal point as a host community of the hybrid learning mobility, there is still a space to involve communities of those participants that are joining online.

What are the key challenges to “hybrid learning mobility”?

- There is a need for synchronisation and constant attention to the two (if not more) learning and exchange channels. As much as this is a great opportunity for inclusion, it still takes extra effort from everyone’s side.
- Part of the group that is participating online will not be able to join the socialisation, informal moments and field visits to the same extent. To a certain degree, there will almost always be some that are missing out, not only in terms of socialisation, but also in terms of informal learning experiences and development of intercultural competences.
- It might be challenging to work on the dynamics of the whole group when it either never meets together online or the meetings are segmented (between the local and international groups). Hence, it is quite an endeavour to make a genuine hybrid experience and not just two processes under one mobility experience.
- It is quite an investment to set up a hybrid process in terms of time, technical equipment, humanpower and competences needed to facilitate this process.

Recommendations

- People who connect online can easily be at a disadvantage. Depending on the number of participants online and in person, the “fun” might be happening in person, while those connecting online could be forgotten. Hence, make sure that you have dedicated facilitators for the online part as well, so no one is idle.

- The two processes could not just mirror each other or, in other words, in-person activities could not just be adapted for the online environment. There needs to be a flow that is logical in both environments and the activities that suit them, even if that means that, at times, two parts of the group are taking part in different activities – as long as the processes are synchronised, i.e. objectives are the same and the outcomes can be joined together.
- At the same time, you should avoid, as much as possible, having “online” vs “in-person” groups and two processes running in parallel. Try to think of ways and use common tools to pair up or put groups together that would have both in-presence and online participants, whenever that is possible and meaningful.
- To avoid screen fatigue, think of activities that can take participants away from their screens, as well as working rooms. This could include individual, reflective tasks, or, for example, a walk-and-talk reflection, where participants are having a phone conversation.
- In order to ensure that everyone can participate on an equal basis (as long as technology enables that), it would be good to have technical coaches and not just facilitators of learning. They could support participants to confidently and competently deal with the digital tools, so they could focus on the content and the exchange.
- Adhere to the use of platforms and apps that are fully in line with European data and privacy standards.

Online learning mobility/exchange

“Online learning mobility”, though used quite often in the past couple of years, is quite a divisive concept among those active in the field of international learning mobility. There is a fairly common understanding of what online learning means, which is, in very simple terms, **learning that takes place in an online environment from start to finish**.

However, the “mobility” aspect of learning is quite debatable. Therefore, in order to move forward we need to understand **whether online learning mobility is mobility at all**.

The Handbook on quality in learning mobility³ defines “Learning mobility in the field of youth” as the “mobility of young people across countries, inside and outside Europe, and in formal and non-formal learning settings”. Judging by this definition, learning mobility requires (physical) movement of young people and even foresees that they cross the boundaries of one country (at least the majority of them). What boundaries are people crossing when they join online from their own home?

3. Handbook on quality in learning mobility, available at <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261953/Handbook+LM/3a5c103c-0367-4eba-1aca-ee544826f557>, accessed 28 November 2021.

The Handbook definition continues by stating that “Learning mobility takes place within a framework of exchange programmes with the aim of promoting and developing personal and professional competences, communication, interpersonal and intercultural skills, and active citizenship, among others”. Nothing in this part of the definition disqualifies the online environment, as arguably all the mentioned elements can find their place in an online learning “mobility”.

At the same time, EPLM (European Platform on Learning Mobility)⁴ defines learning mobility as a “mobility of young people (transnationally, regionally or online)”, hence explicitly acknowledging possibilities of online mobility. Yet, there is no further explanation into how “mobility” unfolds online.

Furthermore, in the field of international learning mobility, “virtual learning mobility” has been used interchangeably with the online one. Looking at different definitions of virtual learning mobility, their two core elements are that they offer **cross-border collaborative experiences** and **enhancement of intercultural learning and understanding**. **Interaction and exchange** are the key here and, in its definition, ERASMUS+ Virtual Exchange⁵ refers to these processes as “**technology-enabled people-to-people dialogues** sustained over a period of time”.

Nonetheless, there is no mention of actual movement or mobility and, according to another definition, virtual mobility enables participants to “obtain the same benefits as one would have with physical mobility but **without the need to travel**”.⁶

Looking at the above definitions of processes that might be the closest to youth mobility which take place in presence or in residential settings, **exchange** is certainly present. It is even enhanced by the possibility for its participants to bring in their own environments (rooms, pets, favourite objects – to name just a few) into the exchange. However, the concept of “**learning by leaving**” is missing. Being in a new environment, having a fair distance from one’s home, friends and family (as much as possible nowadays with the digital technology that enables constant connection), seeing, tasting, smelling, feeling, sensing new things. Being immersed in another culture, without being able to escape, simply by clicking the “Leave meeting” or disconnect button. Having the possibility to be someone different, to reinvent oneself, to allow space for different affiliations and layers of identity to come to the surface. Arguably, virtual mobility enables its participants to explore other cultures through virtual travel to other places and even seeing/feeling/sensing them to a certain extent. Nonetheless, participants always remain rooted in their home environments, which makes the mobility just that – rooted.

4. European Platform on Learning Mobility, available at <https://pip-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/european-platform-on-learning-mobility>, accessed 28 November 2021.

5. ERASMUS+ Virtual Exchange, available at https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/about-virtual-exchange_en, accessed 28 November 2021.

6. European co-operation in education through Virtual Mobility: a best practice manual, available at www.eurashe.eu/library/modernising-phe/mobility/virtual/WG4%20R%20Virtual%20Mobility%20Best%20Practice%20Manual.pdf, accessed 28 November 2021.

For the purpose of this document, the exploration stops here and the rest of the document will refer to this format as an **online learning exchange**. This does not imply that the discussion above is a final say in the matter, but just proposes an intermediate operational conclusion in order to move forward.

What are the key benefits of an “online learning exchange”?

- An opportunity to engage in a cross-cultural exchange for young people who wouldn't be able to participate in residential mobility due to certain limitations (geographical, economical, challenges with personal mobility, personal responsibilities at home etc.).
- A chance to connect transcontinentally. Having participants from different continents in a residential activity is often very expensive and sometimes quite challenging due to different visa and other administrative procedures and recently COVID-19 restrictions. With online learning exchange, besides the time zone, there are no obstacles for participants joining from different continents.
- Online learning is a good entry point to “warm up” to international co-operation and exchange. For many young people, it is less of a challenge to participate in an online activity than to gather courage for a trip abroad. It might be easier to do an online learning exchange as the first step.
- They can popularise learning exchange by reaching larger numbers and more diverse target groups. In other words, “They can prepare, deepen, and extend physical exchanges, and, by reaching new populations and larger numbers, fuel new demand for physical exchange.”⁷
- A wonderful opportunity to bring one's home, to the extent to which a learner feels comfortable about it, into the learning and exchange process. Their living/working environment, their family members, the sounds of their home, the objects that surround them, etc.
- Connect the learning to daily life/routine/habits/behaviours – make the learning immediately transferred and integrated into everyday behaviours.
- Flexibility of formats and timeframes. The online learning exchange process can combine synchronous and asynchronous activities, condensing or spreading them over time. In fact, online environments enable learning exchange to take place with the same group of participants over a period of several months.
- It is arguably more environmentally friendly, as there is no impact from travelling.

What are the key challenges to “online learning exchange”?

7. ERASMUS+ Virtual Exchange, available at https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/about-virtual-exchange_en, accessed 28 November 2021.

- No “learning by leaving” and reduced opportunities to be fully immersed in other culture(s). In addition, by not distancing oneself from the home environment, arguably a lesser chance to try to discover new aspects and identity layers of oneself.
- Possibly the biggest challenge to online learning exchange is the **digital gap** – unequal access to the internet and devices needed to participate in the online exchange, as well as different levels of competences needed for participation. In addition, there is a need for at least one more person to manage the technical part of the online learning.
- Digital competences for support, leading, facilitating online learning exchange are still not as developed as some other competence areas and there is still quite some resistance among youth workers and others working with young people.
- Lack of common moments for informal learning, socialising, networking. By not sharing learning and living space, participants are rarely connected beyond “official learning hours”.
- Reduced (though not impossible) experience of sensing others.

Recommendations (or how to bring online exchange as close to online mobility as possible)

- Bring in the “home” environments as much as possible. There won’t be one focal environment (besides the online platform) for everyone, but participants should capitalise on the possibilities of getting immersed into each other’s environments.
- Invest in group bonding and building. Though it might be tempting to skip it, in order to save time and/or focus on the “important topics”, getting to know each other is still one of the key pillars of learning exchange. Informal moments could be supported by dedicated channels used by young people and socialising by organising get-togethers on different engaging platforms (e.g. Gather Town, Mibo, Topia, Spatial Chat).
- Use the flexibility of the formats to keep the group together for longer and extend the learning process, so they could connect and evolve as a group. This could be done by designing a learning exchange process that stretches over weeks or months by combining synchronous and asynchronous elements. In addition, one day online is not the same as one day in person. Screens take a lot of energy. Complement the screens with asynchronous activities.
- Continuously pay attention to the learning environment. Principles of non-formal learning are still in place, which includes a safe and comfortable environment (e.g. invest in preparing some appropriate music or tasks/activities that break the ice).

- “Explore your tools – less is better. Do not overload people with tools. Check what your target group is the most keen on using – the chances are, they would be more likely to come.”⁸ Do not forget: a facilitator of learning exchange, who is leading the process, is still the best tool.
- Do not just transfer the activities online. Online is a different environment that requires its own approach. This is not to say that common activities will, by default, not work online. It is just an invitation to approach it as a different environment and perhaps let young people take the lead (which is the way it should be after all), if this is the environment they are more used to than the activity organisers.
- Send “starter kits” by post to all participants. Tools, cards, gadgets ... things to play with. Having the same kit physically with them will enhance the sense of belonging.
- Invest more time in planning – online learning usually needs more detailed preparation and planning is often down to the minute.
- Adhere to the use of platforms and apps that are fully in line with European data and privacy standards.

8. Safe. Confident. Connected. Inspired. Learning experiences of hybrid, blended and online mobility activities, available at www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-4221/Safe,+Confident,+Connected+and+Inspired+-+Learning+Experiences+of+Hybrid,+Blended,+and+Online+Mobility+Activities.pdf, accessed 28 November 2021.