

Always well interconnected? Potentials and limits of the digital transformation in European youth work

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Abstract

The restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic also led to a digitalisation push in youth work, which will shape its further development. The article poses the question of how the digital transformation of youth work can succeed using existing potentials. The considerations are based on the development of a digital platform for youth work in the Erasmus+ project ViSAS. The results show that not all success factors of classic youth work can be transferred 1:1 and point out what needs to be adapted to the special conditions in the digital space.

Keywords

Youth work, digital transformation, equal opportunities, social media

Introduction

Under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, people around the world experienced considerable restrictions regarding their spaces of movement and contact. Especially hard hit by lockdowns and quarantines were young people, for whom identity-forming social exchange is particularly relevant in the development process of their own personality. On the one hand, this group had to accept a loss of contact with social reference groups due to longer school and university closures; on the other hand, most leisure activities were also lost and there were restrictions on personal exchange with friends and acquaintances, and it was also much more difficult to establish new social contacts. Disadvantaged young people experienced the restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic as particularly stressful (Calmbach et al. 2020, cited in Sturzenhecker et al. 2021, p. 2003), as they worried that they would no longer be able to maintain friendships adequately, had only limited or exclusively digital contact with their peers and feared social isolation (Neumann 2020, cited in Sturzenhecker et al. 2021, p. 2003). Those young people who find it rather difficult to form and maintain supportive and reparative social relationships are targeted by social youth work services. However, these also lay fallow (ibid.). Although residential services such as assisted living groups for young people remained open during the lockdowns, classic lifeworld meeting places such as (cultural) youth facilities, the local sports club as well as boys' and girls' clubs were lost as places of encounter (ibid.). Instead, the teaching and learning formats of schools and universities were digitalised and eventually even individual offers of school social work were shifted into the digital space (Kommunalverband für Jugend und Soziales

Baden-Württemberg 2021). In the post-pandemic period, the digitalisation of teaching offers has been largely reversed again, but the digitalisation of everyday life and leisure offers has prevailed in parts. Using the potentials of digitalisation that became apparent during the pandemic should be the goal of efforts in all areas of society and thus also in the area of youth work.

This article therefore explores the question of how a digital transformation of youth work can succeed. The aim is to show under which conditions this is possible, which aspects of classical youth work can be transferred, which potentials digitalisation offers in this area, and which limits this transformation process can come up against.

The reflections are based on the work done in the two-year Erasmus+ project "ViSAS - Virtual Social Art Stage", whose aim was to develop a digital platform for European artistic youth work. The idea for the project was born during the second major lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, at the end of 2020, when all seven European partners involved in the project were significantly constrained in their work with young people, looking for solutions and finally found them in the digital space. As the work of the project partners is based on the educational principle of "social art" (cf. Best and Guhlemann 2021; eaed. 2020), the digital solution was also developed based on the principles of social art: The solution was to be holistic, low-threshold and networking, as well as offering space for one's own (artistic) development. Finally, from April 2021, a digital platform, which is geared towards use in youth work, was developed and tested participatively with the target group over a period of two years.

Youth work on the way to digital transformation

In order to discuss the digitilisation of youth work, it is important to remember the basic principles and goals of youth work. Since its inception, the central function has been to create a space for encounters to promote personal development through mutual exchange, joint leisure activities and projects. The idea of compensating for inequalities in opportunities and deficits in family and institutional provision is indirectly pursued in youth work. In contrast to the explicitly problem-solving approach of youth welfare, which has an intervention function in crisis situations, youth work is a fundamentally open service oriented towards self-empowerment and empowerment with a leisure, social and educational function (Rose 2006, p. 174, 176). Following Cohen, March and Olsen (1976), Sturzenhecker (2006, p. 182) describes youth work as "pädagogisch organisierte Anarchie [pedagogically organised anarchy]". This construct combines the characteristics of a) unclear preferences, b) unclear technology and c) fluctuating participation (ibid., p. 182f.), all of which place specific demands on the youth work actors, who have to create an appealing, sustainable offer within this framework, but also on the participants,

from whom this setting demands, among other things, a certain flexibility, self-integration, constant orientation as well as tolerance of difference and uncertainty (ibid., p. 184). The potential barriers to access that this creates must be removed through professional action so that the requirements become effective as educational potential.

Characteristic here are the openness and voluntary nature of the offer – there are initially no limits regarding both the target groups and the offers. However, the goal of reaching the target group, in combination with the voluntary nature of participation, leads to an increased need for sensitivity regarding the accuracy of fit, as offers that are unattractive for the target group do not find resonance. Successful offers thus arise from the "Fehlen formaler Machtmittel [absence of formal means of power]" (ibid., p. 181) in the intersection of pedagogical goals and target group preferences and thus enable self-development processes. According to Scherr et al. (2004, cited in Sturzenhecker 2006, p. 191), these development and learning potentials of open youth work arise from encounters between socio-demographically and culturally heterogeneous young people, conflicts that arise, joint engagement in projects and assumption of responsibility. An essential component is open youth work, which has been realised in youth centres and other places of encounter with the aim of providing young people with their own meeting place, but at the same time supporting these encounters through specialised pedagogical staff. In this context, the cultural codes, rituals and the range of values and norms of the young people are paramount, and the youth workers are called upon to integrate and adapt, to allow themselves to be excluded if necessary, and to carry out sensitive relationship and regulation work (Rose 2006, p. 169).

Central to this is the demanded flexibility and willingness of youth work to adapt to the changing lifeworld of young people (Sturzenhecker 2006, p. 188). Since a large part of young people's social life takes place digitally, the digitalisation of youth work has not only been discussed since the COVID-19 pandemic. Already in 2017, an expert group of the European Commission made recommendations for the further development and improvement of digital youth work. Digital youth work was defined as "proaktive Nutzung oder aber die Thematisierung von digitalen Medien innerhalb der Jugendarbeit [the proactive use or thematisation of digital media within youth work]" (European Commission 2017). With the focus on the promotion of social and personal competences, the goals of digital youth work formulated in the recommendations do not differ from those of traditional youth work. Their basic principles of openness, voluntariness, low-threshold accessibility, orientation towards needs and lifeworlds as well as participation are also congruent with those of general youth work (ibid.). However, digital youth work does not necessarily have to take place in an online environment but is also

characterised by hybrid offers. It can therefore also take place in face-to-face settings where digital media and technologies are used as content, activity, or tool.

Even though research and work on the further development of various concepts of digital youth work had been going on for several years before the COVID-19 pandemic (Diebäcker and Wild 2020), it was not until the first pandemic-related lockdown in March 2020 that this became significantly more important. Within a very short time, central offers, which were all based on a presence setting, could no longer take place (Zinkel-Camp 2020). By using already existing and established online structures and further expanding them, it was possible at the time to prevent service interruptions and maintain access to counselling and support.

The digitalisation of youth work during the COVID-19 pandemic not only compensated for deficits, but also emphasised the advantages and diverse possibilities of digital youth work. Digital youth work is barrier-free as it is not bound to a specific location and participants can take advantage of the offers from their private setting. This can be a new way of building relationships with young people, as the communication channels are increased and diversified, and contact can be maintained even when no real meetings take place. Ideally, new target groups can be reached that might not have been reached through face-to-face services, more participation can be made possible, and services can be made more accessible and more needs-oriented (Stainer 2020).

Digitality can also have disadvantages, as some aspects of online communication, e.g. the reduced possibility of non-verbal communication make it more difficult to build up a relationship, and contact via digital means seems less binding (Sturzenhecker et al. 2021). What appears to be an advantage for the accessibility of some young people can be a disadvantage for other young people, as they may not react at all or only after a long delay. Digital youth work poses further challenges for the providers, since with the reduction of access barriers comes a reduction of exit barriers as well, i.e., the offer must be designed in a more stimulating and attention-grabbing way than face-to-face offers. Furthermore, artificially created youth spaces are more difficult to establish in the digital world, as young people are already strongly integrated digitally and the range of social media is large. An advantage or solution in terms of outreaching youth work would be the use of existing social networks. However, the use of commercial social networks within youth work is not to be recommended without restrictions. Social media networks like Facebook or Instagram promote themselves as community-building and connection-maintaining, but they are unsuitable for promoting reparative, supportive relationships between users for several reasons. For example, the psychologically risky attention economy of these platforms invites users to measure their own value in visibility. If users do not post

anything for a longer period of time and are thus disadvantaged by the algorithms when resuming activity, there is a high risk of taking a response that falls short of expectations as supposed proof of one's own unworthiness, due to the quick response- and like-functions of such platforms. Burghartz et al. (2021) also diagnose that "die Besonderheit der digitalen Plattformen weniger im Etablieren von sozialen Beziehungen als solchen als vielmehr in ihrer Performativität für andere und vor anderen [liegt] [the special feature of digital platforms lies less in the establishment of social relationships as such than in their performativity for others and in front of others]" (ibid., p. 161), which can additionally intensify the problems of excessive and inappropriate comparison with the supposed success of others and aggravate fear of missing out (FOMO). At the same time, youth work in terms of its target group orientation cannot ignore existing social networks either, as young people show an increased tendency to use social media. For youth work, a type of offer is therefore required that precisely does not bear the risk of a self-deprecation spiral and yet is not too far removed from the reality of use of the target group. Another problem in the area of existing social media lies in the opacity of the algorithms with simultaneous mass data collection. These are thus "letztlich nicht auf Kommunikation, sondern auf Datenakkumulation ausgerichtet [ultimately not geared towards communication, but towards data accumulation]" (Burghartz et al. 2021, p. 162). These considerations give rise to the question of suitable venues for digital youth work that fulfil the above-mentioned criteria of target group engagement and at the same time keep the problems and risks of commercialised platforms low.

This argumentation should have made clear that a simple transfer, especially from open youth work to digital, cannot work, as the mere provision of digital spaces for free usage is not sufficient, but a content-related tailoring is required, e.g. via joint activities or setting of topics. This raises the question of how digital offers can be designed on the content level so that they appeal to the target group. For this purpose, the MGML model, which is located in pedagogy and has also proven itself in educational contexts during the pandemic (Rachbauer et al. 2021), appears instructive. It defines quality criteria for tasks in the classroom, which should be small, feasible, meaningful and enjoyable in order to motivate the target group to carry them out (Girg et al. 2012).

On this basis, the empirical part will delve into the question of how digital youth work can succeed, in terms of content, form and locus, and what limits and potentials a digital transformation in this area entails in practical work.

Methodical approach

The research is based on the scientific monitoring of the Erasmus+ project ViSAS. Therein, the development and use of a digital platform for artistic European youth work was tested in an experimental design-approach. The project brought together seven actors from the field of youth cultural work from four countries (Spain, France, Italy and Germany), whose fields of work can be partly attributed to open youth work. The work with the young people in the project consisted of digital as well as face-to-face offers and, as figure 1 shows, followed a sequence of first alternating and finally interlocking face-to-face and online offers in national and transnational/mixed groups of young people from the partner countries. The face-to-face work took place with a performative-artistic focus at two times for a fortnight each, first in Spain and then in Italy. The online work took place first on Zoom, then on the platform developed in the project – an online town by WorkAdventure in the form of a map of Europe¹ – and in parallel on the messenger Signal. Due to the focus of the project partners, the content was tailored to performative cultural youth work. This focus was pursued in presence and online, with the transnational presence offers being project-oriented on the development of a play and the online work in the mixed groups being largely oriented towards the preparation and follow-up of the transnational encounters.

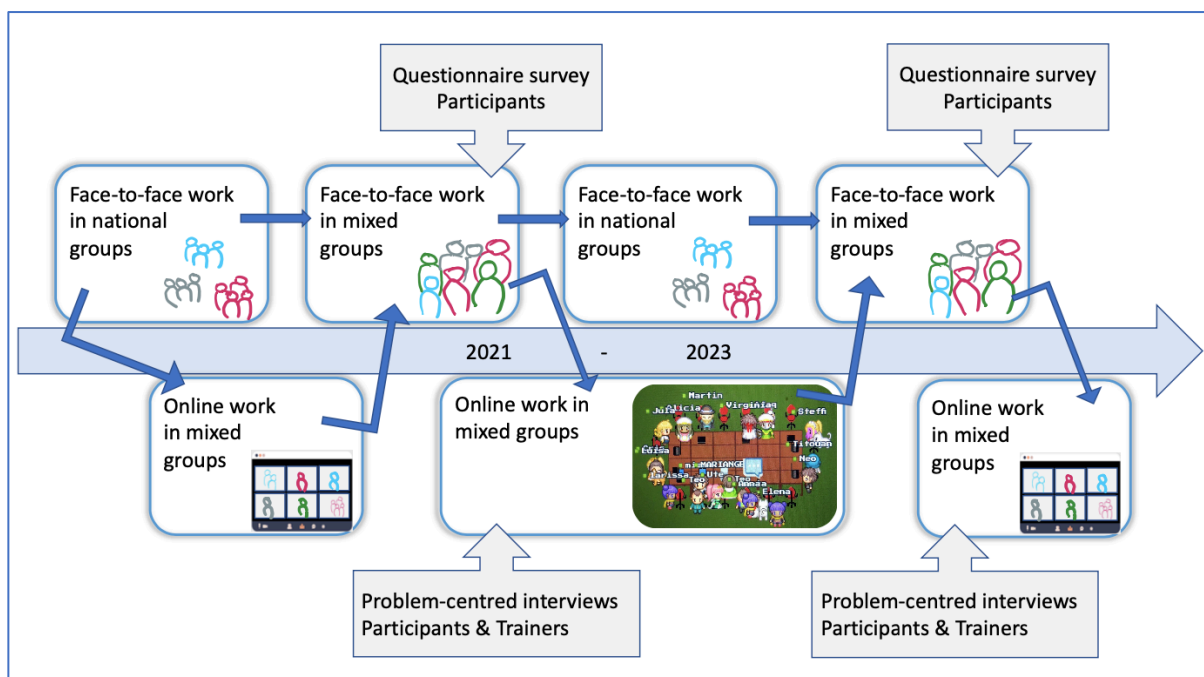


Fig. 1. Course of youth work and surveys in the ViSAS project

At the end of the transnational face-to-face work, the questionnaire survey was carried out in each case, and the problem-centred interviews took place in the subsequent online work. With minimal

¹ Visit <https://visit.virtualsocialartstage.eu> or www.visas.projektfabrik.org

overlaps, different young people were represented in the questionnaire surveys and problem-centred interviews. Since the sample is relatively small (n=19) due to the special survey situation, the evaluation was descriptive. In the following, selected results are presented and contrasted with the established characteristics of youth work. As an indicator for the success of the chosen approach, the criterion of participation over time is also included.

Results

Assuming that digital youth work should have the same goals and functions as presence work, it is now to be examined on the basis of the project results how these can be transferred to the digital. For this purpose, the goals, functions, structural elements, demands on the actors and potentials of youth work are to be considered.

Goals

The goal of promoting equal opportunities and social integration is easier to realise in practice via digital offerings due to the lowered access requirements. This aspect unfolds its potential especially in the context of transnational networking by overcoming mobility restrictions. Thus, in the ViSAS project, economically disadvantaged young people from structurally weak regions in particular emphasised the opportunities for networking with new people and getting to know foreign cultures in the qualitative interviews, while young people with greater opportunities to travel ascribed less importance to this aspect. Also, for the integration of young people with physical or cognitive disabilities, assistance functions of digital platforms offer integration potentials, which, however, have to be considered when programming or selecting the platform and the activities. The project experiences of participatory platform design show in this regard that aesthetic aspects, programming efforts or aspects of usability can collide with accessibility requirements, which is why an integration of persons with special needs in the development is recommended from the beginning in order to fulfil the goals of improving opportunities for this target group as well. Even seemingly basic prerequisites of digital youth work – access to mobile devices and a stable and powerful internet connection as well as a certain level of digital skills – cannot be assumed on a large scale, despite digital penetration of the target group, if the goal of equal opportunities is to be promoted. Here, questions of the data volume required for the planned online activities and the technical requirements for certain end devices must also be considered in order not to create additional barriers to access.

Functions

Theoretically, leisure, social and educational functions can easily be transferred to the digital world, since these are all areas that are covered by online activities anyway. At the same time, as the qualitative interviews with the target group show, this is also the crux, since every additional offer must prove itself to the target group through an added value compared to existing offers. Figure 2 shows that all three functions can be found in the answers of the young interviewees in slightly different forms. The social function is most clearly reflected in the desire for group meetings; the educational function, here in the form of language and career skills, also seems to be transportable via the online offer. The leisure function shows slightly higher approval ratings for artistic activities, which were the focus of the underlying ViSAS project, than for games. The qualitative interviews suggest that for this function, competing digital offerings are preferred.

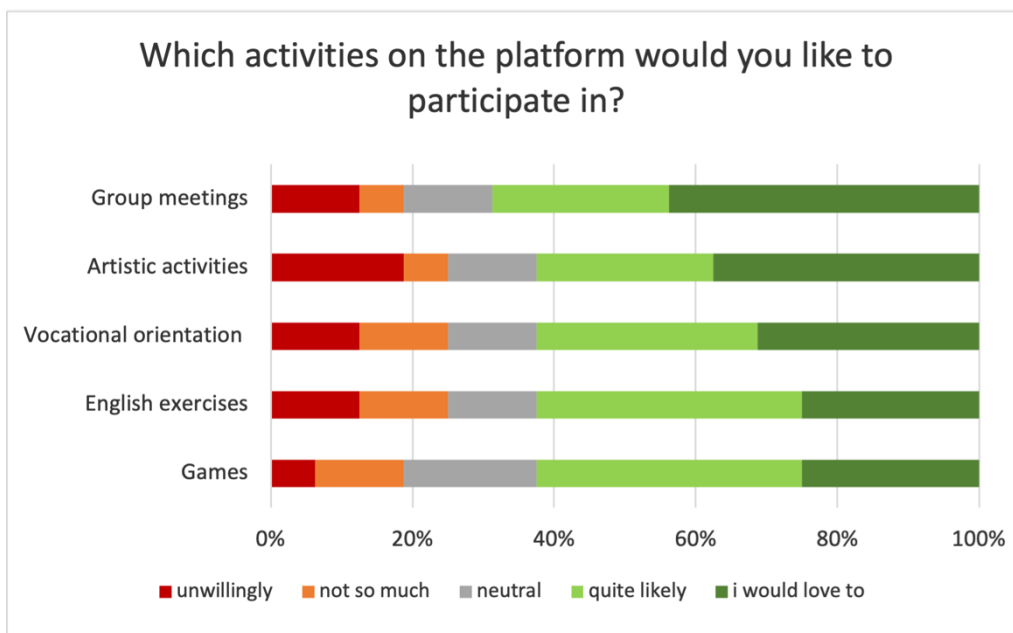


Figure 2: Activities on the platform desired by the young people (n=19)

In general, it could be determined that the participants need a concrete reason to use the platform. In the open answers of the online surveys, it becomes clear that after three years of pandemic, a digital fatigue has also set in among the younger people, which imposes additional usage barriers on new digital offers and makes the target group prefer the presence offers in the absence of added value of digital solutions.

Structure / characteristics and associated effectiveness

The characteristics of youth work, openness and voluntariness, which condition the identified "pedagogically organised anarchy", can also be transferred to digital youth work. As in face-to-face work, there are various ambiguities associated with the situation that cannot be completely eliminated. At the same time, digital work demands a stronger conceptual design from the educators in their work with the target group. From the interviews with the trainers, it becomes clear that the planning and preparation effort for digital work is much higher and that there is much less room for improvisation. This is due on the one hand to the different expectations of the target group depending on the form of the offer, and on the other hand to the reduced possibility of sensing moods and developments among the participants via non-verbal signals and being able to react to them on the same level. The lower exit barriers online increase the need for the offers to be highly captivating by themselves compared to face-to-face offers; at the same time, the possibilities of open youth work in the digital space are limited, as the presence of youth workers in digital spaces is perceived as inhibiting or disturbing by the young generation.

Requirements for participants and actors in youth work

The demands on the participants for self-integration, flexibility and tolerance of differences and uncertainties are additionally increased for the participants due to the lack of transparency of online groups, low exit barriers and greater competition for offers in the digital space. Similarly, the requirements for youth workers to find a balance between their goals and the preferences of the participants and to create the joyful and meaningful character while simultaneously effacing themselves are increased. Against this background, a digital transformation of open youth work seems to be challenging, since digital offers, as explained, require more structuring and preparation. In addition, it became clear in the interviews and workshops with the trainers that it is pivotal for them to get involved in the online situation, and to understand it as an independent situation with its own potentials, instead of seeing it with a deficit-oriented view as a substitute for presence offers and to design it.

Learning potential

By reducing mobility restrictions and expenses, digital youth work enables encounters between heterogeneous groups even more than face-to-face work. In the interviews, gratitude and joy about meeting "people you would never have met otherwise" were expressed by a large part of the interviewees. One aspect that tends to play a lesser role in the online offerings is that of conflict resolution. Due to the possibility of simply withdrawing from conflicts that arose, conflict potentials

that had to be addressed and resolved in the face-to-face offerings tended to be ignored in the online offerings, which at the same time also reduced the exchange. In the example used here, this was also related to the fact that the platforms used for online work only enabled an exchange between all participants and were not designed for private conversations in small groups. The acceptance of responsibility and the development of commitment were able to be promoted to a certain extent but would have required a setting with greater freedom to fully unfold. Here, it seems crucial to establish a strong connection to the target group's lifeworld in order to encourage their own engagement through the stimulation of joint activities.

Success factors for online activities using the example of messenger challenges

In the project context, the requirements in different facets became particularly clear in the example of the work in a messenger group. Weekly low-threshold artistic challenges were used to engage the target group in regular exchange. At the same time, tasks such as "post a picture of graffiti you like in your neighbourhood" were intended to playfully strengthen attention for one's own surroundings in everyday life. In theory, the activity thus fulfilled the MGML criteria – the tasks were small, manageable, joyful and meaningful. In practice, however, participation fell short of expectations. The search for reasons revealed the following causes, which at the same time can be read as success factors in the process of balancing the offer between the demands of the providers and the target group.

1. Observe usage preferences

Digital work with vulnerable target groups is subject to the requirement to use a secure and data protection-compliant environment. These considerations led to the shift of the offer to the messenger Signal instead of WhatsApp. The latter is more widely used by the target group but unsuitable with regard to the criteria mentioned. In the qualitative interviews, it became clear that this created an additional barrier to access for the participants, as many did not otherwise use Signal in everyday life and therefore participation would have required actively seeking out the messenger. The activities therefore did not take place in the usual spheres of digital everyday life and were often simply forgotten, which prevented lively exchange or communication-promoting reactions to the activities of others. The fact that many of the participants were already connected to each other in a WhatsApp group made the required change of communication platform even more difficult. The choice of platform for online activities in the field of digital youth work thus requires strong compromises between the usage preferences of the target group and the media-didactic demands of youth work.

2. Grant communication spaces

At the beginning of the measure, the choice of Messenger as a medium led to the chat that was designed for artistic tasks being increasingly used to share private pictures such as group photos and to comment on them or to exchange everyday experiences, following the established usage habits of the target group. A thematic steering attempt in the sense of focusing on the weekly tasks to stimulate artistic exchange through a moderating intervention in informal communication immediately led to a communicative standstill and a strongly decreasing participation in the activities. In the interviews it became clear that this caused uncertainty and, in the sense of the MGML model, the joyful part of the situation was lost.

3. Create clarity about those present

The lack of the possibility to visually assess the affiliation of those present in the messenger group to one's own peer group was another aspect that, according to the interview statements, discouraged the participants' communicative exchange and participation in the challenges. The awareness of the intermingling of one's own group and the group of trainers with simultaneous uncertainty about the identity behind the nicknames gathered in the messenger brought further uncertainty and caution into the commenting on the posted contributions and the accompanying exchange.

4. Avoid lurking

In the attempt to create conditions for open youth work by withdrawing the trainers from communication and participation in the exchange and to minimise interventions in the social situation, a climate arose in which one part of the group that was exchanging was confronted with another part of the group that remained silent. This situation was also perceived as unpleasant by the participants, as they now had the feeling that they were being observed in the social situation, which limited their openness and willingness to communicate.

5. Avoid task character

The artistic challenges were intended to create a joyful, meaningful atmosphere. However, since these were posted weekly by the trainers and the openness and joy were limited by the effects described above, according to the interviews, some participants had the impression that they had to complete a task, which in turn proved detrimental for the criterion of voluntariness. When the tasks were created and posted by people from the target group for a while, an increase in participation could be observed, which, however, also diminished again as the motivation of the task creators decreased. This shows

that activating the target group in such an online environment requires tact and should be designed from the beginning with the greatest possible participation of the target group in order to avoid top-down effects.

The ViSAS platform

The platform developed in the project takes up the developed aspects and tries to address the needs of digital youth work by combining playful elements, places for spontaneous and planned encounters, opportunities for exploration and the possibility to share content with each other. Using WorkAdventure technology, a walkable map of Europe was created with spaces to explore, co-designed by the young people². In addition to pure meeting possibilities, the platform offers the opportunity to meet in groups of two or more, to explore the area with avatars and to discover the deposited media content. Thus, the possibilities of use in the context of youth work are already significantly increased compared to the use of online meeting platforms³. In the interviews, it became clear that the young people prefer the platform to other meeting platforms, but also that they need a clear reason to visit it. Despite the possibility of independent discovery, the offer is not a substitute for open youth work but must be specifically linked with invitations and guided or moderated activities.

Conclusion

The first results clearly show that digital youth work is not a self-runner despite the online presence of young people, but works best in combination with analogue phases, so that recognition of the other people present in the digital space is possible. The desire to maintain or deepen contact with the people involved should not be underestimated as a driver for young people's participation in online activities. The orientation of classical youth work to offer young people a protected, yet easily accessible place for their own encounters and to accompany them with a self-effacing presence is not readily reproducible in the digital space, because for one thing the presence of youth workers is perceived more strongly online, and for another thing the offer of professional social media is effective as both competition and benchmark. Offering an adequate alternative here requires a careful focus on added value and can hardly work without a range of captivating activities. When developing activities, the choice of digital space must be carefully weighed in relation to the offer. Especially the balancing of presence, free space and autonomy requires a high degree of conceptual effort and sensitivity.

² See <https://visit.virtualsocialart.eu> or information on the project page www.visas.projektfabrik.org

³ The practical potentials and possible applications in the context of digital youth work are compiled in a playbook, which is available for download at www.visas.projektfabrik.org.

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