



REPORT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERNATIONAL YOUTH ONLINE-SEMINARS

Based on the Online-Seminar “From Corona to
Courage – Exploring the Crisis through a Democratic
Lense”

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Corona Crisis and its Challenges

International Youth Work has been particularly impacted by the restrictions imposed because of the Corona-Virus pandemic. For Haus am Maiberg and a lot of our partners, international projects were cancelled as early as the beginning of February because of the travel restrictions imposed. Due to the nature of International Youth Work (the involvement of at least two national groups as well as long travels) the groups tend to be rather large and the projects include overnight stays. All these factors undermine social distancing and put International Youth Work into an especially difficult position in times of a pandemic. International mobility was one of the first restrictions imposed, and the retreat to national interests and problem solving was swift and almost reflexive. This runs contrary to some of the attitudes that International Youth Work tries to evoke between nations and their members, namely understanding, empathy and unity. *There needs to be a continuous, international dialogue between the specialists and actors in this field, about the impact of this pandemic on the future of International Youth Work as well as the coordinated measures that need to be taken to challenge these issues.*

Shortly after the restrictions were imposed, it became clear that new formats for International Youth Work needed to be considered. The coordinator for International Youth Work in Haus am Maiberg approached their network of European organizations, to discuss the possibility of a web-based youth encounter. Several organizations responded to the call and a team was formed. It consists of the representatives of the following organizations: Gernika Gogoratuz (Spain), Monte Sole (Italy), Carlina (Slovenia), Far (Bulgaria) and Plural (Rumania)

The question underlying this project was: **Can virtual settings be used to reach some of the central aims of International Youth Work and how do they have to be designed to aid this goal?**

It is self-evident that travelling and the pedagogically accompanied experience of new places, is an important part of International Youth Work. This can never be realized by a virtual exchange. Nevertheless, there are a lot of content related aims that involve critical thinking and self-reflection, something that is not necessarily bound to an international setting but can be reached by working with a diverse group of people.

What are some of these aims of International Youth Work?

- Realize and question own prejudices and stereotypes
- Gain diversity consciousness
- Increase political awareness and the power to judge
- Foster dialogue capability
- Contribute to personal development

This report wants to give an account of the Online-Seminar that was executed by the aforementioned network of European organizations. Our goal is to give an insight into the planning and implementation of the project and draw conclusions for the application of virtual learning spaces in International Youth Work at large.

Project aims: Corona- the cause and the topic

We were and are in the midst of a cataclysmic event that has already had a tremendous impact on our ways of life. What makes this event unique is that it has affected (in different ways) all European citizens. From the perspective of political education, it can therefore be understood as a unique subjective learning opportunity. The Corona crisis brings to light and magnifies socioeconomic conflicts and problems, it raises and exemplifies questions about freedom and governmental overreach or the role and scope of the European Union. Political education is needed to provide pedagogically accompanied spaces in which participants engage with these issues in order to foster their understanding of them, to analyze them and to find ways to get actively involved.

Based on this understanding we formulated the following aims:

1. Create a space to exchange on experiences and articulate thoughts on the Corona crisis
2. Transfer knowledge about the crisis and the topics related to it
3. Critically reflect these topics in the context of democratic rights and values
4. Reflect on own behavior during crisis
5. Discuss the consequences of the crisis and how to become active

The goal was to implement the Online-Seminar in a timely manner. At the time, moderate to very strict social distancing measures had been imposed on most of the European citizens. We wanted to offer these people a space “beyond” their homes and take advantage of the free time that a lot of them experienced due to the restriction of their social and professional lives. This exemplified also one of the biggest advantages of web-based youth work: flexibility and efficiency. We were able to start the project just three weeks after Haus am Maiberg had reached out to its partners.

Participant acquisition

We relied on a pool of former participants that had been part of European Youth Weeks, an annual two-week multilateral youth encounter that takes place in Haus am Maiberg. The project is organized together with 10 international partners, almost all of whom were present in the Online-Seminar. That meant that participants were familiar with most of the organizations and individuals implementing the project as well as our methods and process. We had previously restricted our number of participants to 15 and ended up working with a group of 14 participants.

The project was advertised through a flyer, which provided participants with a link to apply for the project through Google forms. All our former EYW participants are organized in Facebook groups, which is where we posted the flyers. In this application we asked, among other things, for participants E-mail addresses and their current country of residence. Furthermore they were asked to pick a topic related to the Corona Crisis that they wanted to engage with more deeply.

Tools

Our aim was to create a space in which participants could share and discuss among each other and we could facilitate a reflection process. We decided to use the format of **videoconference** for this, because it allows participants to see and engage directly with each other. After some research we decided on the videoconference tool **Zoom**, because of the easy access it provided for participants and the possibility of creating groups within an ongoing videoconference.

Furthermore, we made use of **Google Drive**, for the various tools it provides and the easy access it allows for participants. It enabled us to upload documents related to the Online-Seminar as well as conducting our evaluation through a questionnaire **with Google Forms**. **Google Sheets** was used to have participants present themselves prior to the Online_Seminar. With **Google Jamboard**, we were able to accompany discussions and presentations in a written form and allow for participants to discuss a topic beyond an actual meeting.

The Team used **Microsoft Teams** to organize themselves and develop the project. Microsoft Teams is a communication and collaboration platform that allows for more structured Teamwork.

More than an Online-Seminar– How to transfer aspects of youth encounters into a virtual environment

In advance

As mentioned above, we used Zoom Meetings as a videoconference tool. For that, participants received a link from us via E-mail which they needed to open to participate in the meeting. Furthermore we stressed the importance of visibility during the call and encouraged them to sit in a well-lighted place and make sure that camera and microphone were in working order.

Beyond this, we created a Google slide presentation, in which we invited each participant to present themselves to the group. The two questions for this presentation asked, were: What am I good at? What has become very important to me since the Corona Crisis? Participants were also asked to upload a picture of themselves.

Building up trust among the group and having them get to know each other is a vital aspect of every youth encounter. Through this we wanted to aid the get to know process, which would clearly be limited due constraints on time and interaction.

Structure

Web-based meetings are exhaustive. Participants tend to have a shorter attention span when they must focus on a screen. Non-formal education above all relies on active participation of the participants. We therefore decided to do four shorter meetings (which we called “modules”) to ensure enough energy among all our participants as well as the organizing team. Each meeting was 1- 1 1/2 hours long. We did two meetings per week.

Beyond that, we decided on “outsourcing” certain work. We gave participants research and reflection tasks between the different meetings.

During the meeting, we made sure that participants were put into small groups as often as possible. The plenary (or “zoomary” as we called it) can be confusing and anonymous, if a lot of people are present. Zoom allows for the formation of “breakout sessions”, in which the participants of the meeting can be put randomly or deliberately into smaller groups that allow for a more personal and time efficient work.

Furthermore, Zoom allows for the sharing of screens, which enabled participants to give presentations and share the content that they had created.

It became clear to us that 1 ½ hours, translates to even less time in a virtual setting. Communication generally takes longer and there can be technical mishaps that take time.

We divided the topic into the following Modules:

Module I: Introduction and creating a European Perspective

Module II: Topics related to the Corona situation

Module III: The Corona Crisis through a Democratic Lens

Module IV: The Future of Europe and my Role in it

Methods

In order to build trust within the group and foster group cohesion, we **asked participants to present themselves on google slides**. Beyond that, we used **energizers** at the beginning of each session to create a relaxed atmosphere (a collection of energizers for online-seminars: <https://www.sessionlab.com/blog/online-energizers/#three-wishes>).

Throughout our meetings we alternated between the big group as well as small group work.

In the first Module, participants were invited to **exchange personal stories about their life under Corona** (*How has it impacted my personal life? What has changed for me? How do I deal with it? What do you know about the approach your country has taken to the corona virus so far?*).

For this we formed small groups through zoom breakout sessions.

Towards the end, we **sorted participants into different working groups** according to the topic they had picked in their application for the project. As a group, they were asked **to research this topic** and present it in the following module.

The second module mostly dealt with **participants presenting their results**. Zoom allows for the sharing of screens, which makes group presentations easy to achieve. During the presentations, participants were invited to **post questions on Jamboard**. These were then answered by the presentation groups after the module. This was another possibility to “outsource” work and have the topic continue beyond the videoconference itself.

In the third module, we wanted to approach the topic more critically. Our aim was to have participants reflect on their behavior and their opinions regarding the issues surrounding the corona crisis, namely the limitation of democratic rights and freedoms in the name of public safety. For that, **we gave them different scenarios, in which democratic freedoms were limited for different reasons and asked them, if and why they consider these limitations legitimate or not**. We split them into groups, each group receiving the same three scenarios. The discussion regarding the reasons for legitimately limiting democratic freedoms, was then transferred to the current corona crisis and the behavior and opinions of each of the participants. The method proved to be quite successful and was also evaluated very positively by participants.

In the fourth module, we asked participants to **identify the aspects of the crisis that they are most concerned about** and to try to come up with ways on how to tackle them. During this process, participants stayed in the **Zoomary** the whole time. In the end, we did a goodbye round and everybody was asked to say some last words.

Evaluation of the Project

The virtual space: Immensely accessible but essentially flawed

Youth encounters are not just information transfer and networking. We want to facilitate discussions and reflection processes. Creating a trustful and open space is key when facilitating groups. “Space” does not just refer to a physical room that can be manipulated to fit certain aims (light, chair positioning, materials etc.) but also to the atmosphere that is created by the methods and energizers being employed, the (body) language that is used as well as the behavior and the norms and rules that are established for a project in general.

The space in a virtual setting is quite unique. People are logged in from their private homes. They didn’t have to travel for hours; they had to open a link and entered the space. As open the access to the common space is for participants, as limited is the ability of the facilitator to organize the space.

First: the **space is limited to the existence of the Zoom “room”**, you lose contact to the group once the session has ended. In a lot of our methods, we involve participants on a deep reflective level, by asking them to personally engage in methods that deal with exclusion, participation, group dynamics, stereotypes and prejudices, etc. Group dynamics are at the center of this process and participants are asked to reflect on their actions and behavior afterwards. This reflection process is time consuming and can be emotional and conflictual. There needs to be a monitoring of the group afterwards. In the case of a Zoom meeting, participants are “left alone” with the emotions and conflicts that might have arisen in a method.

Connected to this is the fact that, **as a trainer, it is very hard to “read” the group during a session**. Eye contact is impossible and body language is either not displayed or hidden. There is a feeling of distance and of disconnect. Because the microphones are turned off, even any verbal reactions are not detectable.

These circumstances made us **very reluctant to employ methods that used group dynamics as a reflection tool**. When organizing the session, we entertained the idea to create a situation, in which we would tell the group that some people would need to leave the session due to bandwidth problems. This would then put participants in the situation in which they would need to decide on who gets to stay and who doesn’t. We decided against this and instead employed the three scenarios (see Module III), which still engaged participants personal opinions and behaviors, but not so immediate and not towards each other.

Furthermore, **the experiences that participants can make in a virtual room are extremely limited**. They experience the space solely through a two dimensional surface. Their movement is limited to sitting on a chair or their bed. Beyond that, the physical divide cannot be bridged simply by

seeing each other. Even the energizers, in which we animate them to move around, are done in isolation and not in relation to the others in the group. The flow of interaction, in a virtual setting, is much more hesitant and slower than face to face interaction. This makes it harder for participants to engage and to have a group dynamic develop.

All these experiences were made with a group that, at least partly, knew each other and knew the team and our working methods. This circumstance aided us in implementing the project, because we had a certain basis of trust that we could work with. This underlines the fact, that with a “strange” group, it would have been even more difficult to engage them on a personal level.

Impact on the group

The online-seminar was generally very favorably evaluated by participants, though not as good as our usual seminars. Some of them had the feeling that we could not dive deep enough into single topics. It became clear: less is more. We tried to implement our standard process from getting to know, to knowledge transfer, to self-reflection and finally to becoming active. All of this in too short of a time and in an essentially flawed space. Though we gave them tasks in between the sessions, these could never be accomplished in the same depth and intensity. Giving them reflection question to ponder on, in between the sessions, proved to be less fruitful. This reinforces the need for places of non-formal education that allow for a guided pedagogical process, it allows for participants to exit their everyday life and fully immerse themselves in the topic and the group of a project.

Furthermore, though we made the effort, some participant’s criticized the lack of interaction. Throughout the last module, we let the group stay together as a whole. This was negatively remarked upon as not interactive enough.

All in all participants were satisfied with the project. Asked if they would prefer more virtual formats in International Youth Work, all of them agreed but also said that it should only play a supporting role.

After the four modules, participants decided to have another meeting and discuss ways of becoming active. This was a clear sign that participants were very interested in the topic as well as motivated to become active themselves. They agreed on creating a video, which is still in progress at the time this report was written.

Practical advice

- Use the breakout sessions repeatedly to create a dynamic meeting and give participants more space to express themselves.
- Use the various tools that Zoom provides like surveys, screen sharing, virtual hand clapping and thumbs up, in order to create more chances for participation.
- Less is more. Facilitation in an online space is more time consuming and at the same time more exhausting. Really limit your aims.

- Important sessions need to be given time so that participants can open up and group dynamics can unfold.
- Give enough space for participants to get to know each other. You could plan just a get to know session before the actual online-seminar, to familiarize participants without having the pressure to move on to other topics.
- The microphones should be kept on at times. Especially during energizers and get to know games participants should be able to hear each other's reactions.
- 1 ½ hours proved to be a good length. Online-Seminars that extend this time, need breaks in between.
- Outsourcing work can be very effective and interesting, if participants are committed. Tasks like researching and creating a presentation can be easily achieved through group work outside of the digital meetings.

Conclusion and outlook

It was clear from the beginning that web-based formats can never replace actual youth encounters. Beyond that, our experience has shown that a lot of the major aims of international youth work, cannot be accomplished through web-based exchanges. Personal interaction, a common space, chances to interact before and after the session with the group, are all very important aspects that enable us to create a connection with the group, facilitate trust and ensure a personal reflection process. A virtual space is very limited in these regards and can therefore not be used to accomplish the core aims of International Youth Work.

But web-based formats can be a very valuable addition. One great impact of the Corona Crisis is clear: Digitalization has made an astronomical leap forward. Videoconferences and the tools to do them have become part of collective knowledge. This will make it much easier to involve participants in these tools in the future. And we should take advantage of it!

They can play an important role in accompanying a youth encounter: participants could meet in a videoconference beforehand, get to know each other, decide which issues they want to engage with and think of ways they want to be active during the exchange. Trainers can present themselves and the facility, where the exchange will take place. Follow-up meetings can also be arranged. Like this web-based formats can add to the involvement of participants as well as the sustainability of project outcomes.