

# Ethics in Digital Youth Work

## An exploration of professional boundaries and ethics in digital youth work – introduction for facilitators

The biggest takeaway from this workshop should be that trained youth workers already have the skills, knowledge, values and principles needed to make decisions about ethical issues and professional boundaries in digital youth work and in online spaces. **Delivering youth work online or in a 'blended' (online and offline) setting is about transferring our offline practice to an online setting.**

Some key ideas to discuss that may help youth workers to understand and gain confidence in digital youth work are:

- Young people live their lives seamlessly online/offline<sup>1</sup>
- The internet is a place - where young people (and adults) go<sup>2</sup>
- You don't need to be a technical expert to help a young person navigate the online aspects of their lives
- Digital issues are just issues, like sexual health, drug and alcohol use. Although there are some specific behaviours that can only happen online, the youth work approach can help young people to build resilience, manage relationships, consider risk, make reasoned decisions and take control in all aspects of their lives.<sup>3</sup>
- Young people as 'digital natives' is a myth<sup>4</sup> – young people aren't born with high level digital and information literacy skills. Being able to interact on social media doesn't mean someone is able to use email or critically analyse 'news'.
- If youth work doesn't engage with the digitalised context of life for young people, we risk becoming irrelevant to them
- Professional boundaries are important both offline and online – they are a key part of our ethical codes
- Ethical challenges are a continuous feature of youth work practice whether it's in a digital context or not
- Organisations should both trust and support youth workers to deliver digital youth work<sup>5</sup>

In summary, digital youth work focuses on the same goals and outcomes as youth work in general, is underpinned by the same values and principles and is delivered by the same skilled and professional staff and volunteers.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [Young Scot 5 Rights Youth Commission Report, 2017](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Digital Youth Work, Defining, understanding and justifying its purpose](#), Dana Cohlmeier Jupp, 2017

<sup>3</sup> [Youth Work Outcomes](#) YouthLink Scotland, 2016

<sup>4</sup> [#NotWithoutMe: A Digital World for All?\\_Carnegie UK Trust 2017](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Digitally Agile National Principles](#), YouthLink Scotland, Learning Link Scotland, SCDC, 2014

<sup>6</sup> [Developing Digital Youth Work](#), EU expert group on digitalisation and youth, 2018



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## Workshop plan

### Aims:

- Youth workers consider the ethical dilemmas and grey areas that emerge within digital youth work
- Youth workers consider the importance of transferring their existing practice basis: values, principles, ethics, approaches and skills, into a different context
- Youth workers begin a dialogue about the challenges and ethical issues they face surrounding digitalisation, online youth work, addressing digital life-worlds in youth work

This workshop plan can be used in conjunction with the Social Media Guide developed as part of the Digital Youth Work project.

For exploring approaches to ethical challenges and case studies you should refer to youth work codes of practice: In Scotland we have the [Code of Ethics](#) for Community Learning and Development (CLD)<sup>7</sup> and the Values and Principles statement within the [National Occupational Standards for Youth Work](#)<sup>8</sup>.

### Activities:

#### 1. Ethical issues

- Set out an agreement of openness and confidentiality within the group. It's important for people to feel that they can discuss challenges they have encountered and the way they dealt with situations without them or their organisation being judged.

*Depending on the group, you may want to include or omit sections of the session which include reflecting on difficult situations participants have encountered.*

- Ask participants to shout out some of the ethical issues that might come about through digital youth work – record them on a flip chart to refer back to later on. If someone reveals an experience they have had, take time to explore it if they want to.

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<sup>7</sup> CLD Standards Council, 2014

<sup>8</sup> LSIS, 2012 (under revision at time of writing)



## 2. Agree/Disagree line

- Stick 'agree' and 'disagree' posters up on opposite ends of a room or corridor.
- Explain that you will read out a series of statements and ask the youth workers to stand in a place along the 'agree/disagree' continuum that most closely matches their views.
- For each statement, once people have taken their places, ask representatives from along the continuum to explain why they have stood there. Participants are free to move if they are convinced by someone else's point.

*During facilitation of this discussion, remember that there are a number of grey areas and dilemmas, and the questions are intentionally ambiguous. The discussion is intended to draw out the rationale behind the different approaches and the complexities that arise through our role as youth workers, striving to be good role models, acknowledgement of power dynamics within relationships and what is in the best interests of the young person.*

### Statements: Agree or Disagree?

- It's ok to be Facebook friends with a young person you work with.
- It's good to share your political views on social media e.g. twitter.
- It's ok to challenge a young person about behaviour you have seen on their social media account.
- It's ok for youth workers to breach the terms of conduct for different platforms in order to uphold personal/professional boundaries.
- You see a worrying post by a young person at midnight on Friday night. You should immediately contact that young person via private messaging to make sure they are ok.
- It's ok to continue being connected with a young person after you no longer work with them.

## 3. What's our guide?

Discussion questions:

- What strategies do you use in managing offline boundaries between yourself and the young people you work with?
- What strategies do you use in managing offline boundaries between yourself and your employer?
- What strategies do you employ in addressing ethical challenges when they arise in face to face practice?
- ... and in digital contexts?

If it doesn't come up in conversation, introduce the Code of Ethics or relevant local codes of conduct. How do these apply to the digital context?

#### 4. Case studies peer support

Ask participants to form small groups and choose one ethical challenge from the practice experience of a group member to discuss in detail. The group should try to analyse the situation and discuss potential perspectives/ framing/ approaches to support the colleague.

If the youth workers do not have a challenge from their practice, or are not comfortable sharing, the trainer should provide a case study example.

*Have some prepared in advance – resource available alongside this session plan*

You could use the Code of Ethics for CLD to help guide discussion.

#### Further exploration

- Have a listen to Verke's Digital Youth Work Sessions podcast with Dr Jane Melvin from the University of Brighton. She talks about the impact of digitalisation on youth work and some of the challenges for youth workers. <https://media.zencast.fm/digital-youth-work-sessions/episodes/5>
- Check out this presentation by Professor Sarah Banks: "Ethics, Professionalism and Youth Work". Consider what this looks like in a digital context. <https://www.slideshare.net/POYWE/key-note-speech-1-sarah-banks>

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