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EDUCATION

# **DIGITAL WELLBEING IN THE HYBRID CLASSROOM**



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## Digital Wellbeing in the Hybrid Classroom

In Europe, the realities of schooling and learning have changed since the advent of COVID-19, with distance learning and lock downs in many parts of the world. Overnight, schools had to switch from classroom to online teaching - which also accelerated the development of digital learning and meeting platforms, making them more user-friendly even for audiences with lower digital capital. As the pandemic subsided, society realised that people had become accustomed to the digital format and working remotely, and therefore faced some resistance to returning to the physical workplace or school. Many institutions started to explore hybrid solutions, where students participate in learning both online and on-site at the same time. The aim of BEYZO is to contribute to digital transformation through the development of digital readiness, resilience and capacity by enhancing the competencies and capacities of VET educators to deliver quality, inclusive training opportunities in online and hybrid (online, offline and combination of both) teaching and learning environments.

It is a well-known fact that it is more difficult to feel a sense of community and belonging in the digital space - informal communication is easily lost and it is often the glue for building relationships. In the digital space, one can also experience a higher degree of insecurity as it is not always clear how the digital material will be disseminated, and it is often easier to express mean things when sitting protected behind a screen. For participants in a hybrid classroom, it can be even more difficult to sort out the impressions and experience community both with the people online and with those who are physically present, but also to maintain a good balance between the digital world and the physical one.

To achieve digital wellbeing in the hybrid classroom, we believe that educators must actively

§1 create arenas to strengthen informal communication and thus create a greater sense of community and coherence

§2 create safe spaces both online and offline.



## Digital well-being

Digital wellbeing is about maintaining a healthy balance and positive relationship with technology and digital tools. It means using technology in a way that promotes physical and mental health, productivity and social relationships. This includes how people interact with technology, the amount of time spent on screens, and how digital use affects their quality of life. Finding a balance in screen time is essential to maintain digital wellbeing, as an overdose of digital content can lead to sleep disturbances, increased isolation and feelings of loneliness, which in turn can lead to mental health problems - an increasingly common condition in modern society. Being constantly connected and available is also considered to increase stress levels and thus reduce wellbeing at all levels.

## Informal communication

Previous research has shown that as little as 2.5 days of teleworking per week has a negative effect on workplace relationships and the sense of belonging with colleagues (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). In many workplaces where people used to work together in the physical space, work was changed to be conducted remotely behind a computer screen. For the sociologist Erving Goffman (like many other sociologists), the social encounter is the most elementary encounter for sociological analysis and a place where unreflected social norms and unwritten rules flowed freely (Glavind Bo 2014, pp. 96-97). These contacts took place on a daily basis in a shared physical space, but moved largely overnight to take place at a distance. Even in symbolic interaction, it is considered that meaning and consensus do not exist in advance but are created through a formative process in the interaction between people (Engdahl & Larsson 2011, pp. 104-105).

The sociologist Karl Marx believed that work was the place where people could express their own selves and that individuals can become alienated by not being given the opportunity to control or understand their own input into production work (Lindgren 2015, pp. 53-54). Work that is not linked to either the end product or the organisation can thus have negative effects on the individual. When working and studying from home, the use of technology increases and there are fewer spontaneous opportunities for everyday, informal interaction, according to Martha Fay, who in her study analysed the informal, digital interaction between employees when working from home (Fay 2011). Social encounters and interaction do not disappear when work is relocated to teleworking, but their content and opportunities change. Implicit communication, i.e. informal communication, is likely to look different and change when people's education is moved from the physical space to the digital space.

In her study on informal conversations between colleagues, Martha Fay (2011) found that when working from home, technology use increases and fewer spontaneous opportunities for everyday, informal interaction arise. Social encounters and interaction do not disappear when work is relocated to teleworking, but their content and opportunities change. Furthermore, Fay (2011) writes that informal communication is what helps to preserve and nurture relationships in the workplace, and that informal communication can even strengthen weaknesses that may exist in the organisation's formal communication.

Larsson (2014, p. 86) emphasises the importance of the informal channels for employees - especially when formal communication is lacking. The more formal communication is lacking, the richer the informal communication tends to be. Information will find its way, the only question is which way it chooses. As a leader, or in this case, trainer, it is important not to underestimate the value of the 'grape wine' - it may be better to be aware of the informal communication and build relationships with the informal leaders.

## SAFE SPACE

### What is a safe space?

The term safe space is older than the Internet. It was used for the first time in 1983 by the YMCA – a worldwide youth organization that aims to put Christian values into practice by developing a healthy mind, body, and spirit. From its beginning, the term safe space refers to the same values and indicates a place that intends to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations. Nowadays, a safe space is not only a place but also a virtual environment where each person can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm (Oxford Dictionary). In the Internet era, with social media and the possibility of all-to-all communication, the creation of safe spaces has become even more necessary than before.

We may think about safe space when we feel safe and this is, of course, the subjective experience of each individual. At the same time, it is possible to identify the elements that are necessary for the creation and functioning of the safe space. What is important in the case of a hybrid space is to take into account both elements of the real world and the virtual environment. Accordingly, these will include:

*Physical dimension* - activities take place in a space designed in such a way that participants feel comfortable in it. Note that it is not always possible to provide such a space. An extreme example of this situation is that of Ukrainian students. Due to the war, they are unable to attend classes in a stationary manner, as it is impossible to provide them with a safe learning space.

*Psychological dimension* - a given learning environment is safe if the participants are not afraid to actively participate in classes, ask questions, participate in discussions, disagree with the instructor, and receive but also provide constructive feedback. They feel partners in the process and know that their voice matters.

*Emotional dimension* - participants feel valued and respected in their diversity and expression. Working with extroverts and introverts may be a good example here as it is a common challenge. Teamwork, group presentations, and numerous interactions are sometimes challenging for introverts. When designing activities, it is worth paying attention to the specific needs of this group.

## Create arenas to strengthen informal communication

To successfully maintain digital wellbeing in the hybrid classroom, we believe that active efforts must be made to strengthen informal communication.

*Safety* - People thrive in environments that are familiar and safe, in environments where relationships can be created and maintained. Informal communication is important for achieving safety and strengthening relationships - therefore we argue that educators must actively work on this.

*Community* - Being part of a group is something that has been important for human survival throughout the ages, and it is an instinct that still lives on today. Therefore, we believe that increased community leads to increased digital well-being - and these two are strengthened by informal communication.

## Create safe spaces both online and offline

We believe that digital wellbeing is strengthened by a sense of community and security - something we believe can be achieved by creating safe spaces both online and offline.

*Safety* - For informal communication to occur, there needs to be a sense of safety. Therefore, we believe that educators need to create safe spaces where informal communication can exist and take place.





## Pedagogical suggestions

### *How to foster informal communication*

**Create chat rooms** - by creating chat rooms that are meant for informal communication we can help the students to get to know each other better. This can also be done by creating meetings on the preferred digital platform naming it “coffee break” or similar. Make sure to choose a platform that is easily accessible via a mobile device to make the people onsite join the ones online.

**Start meetings before lecture starts** - by starting the meeting early students can interact with each other in a more informal way. Chit chat and small talk. Encourage your students to take this opportunity.

### *How to create a safe space*

**Policy and procedures** - the most important principle here is 'do not harm', whereby this also means protecting participants from unwanted contact and content, and not allowing participants to hurt each other. As a facilitator, you can simply announce the rules, but it will be more effective to develop the rules together in mixed (online-in-person) groups. The starting point should be to jointly agree on the rules for the event and to consistently follow the agreed rules in the future.

**Equality and inquisitiveness** - we are all equal and everyone has the same right to share their opinions and be heard - both online participants and now at the event venue (note that adequate technical support is needed to enforce this right). Everyone has a role to play and they are not more or less important. If there is no presenter - there will be no event, if there are no participants - there will be no event either.

**Be flexible and adaptable to change** - group events are highly dynamic. Be prepared for changes and challenges, and be prepared to renegotiate your contract. Remember that creating a safe space is crucial in the process of building trust and rapport, factors essential to team building.

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