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# Social Connections

TRAINERS FOR E-SOCIAL WORK

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CURRICULUM TO TEACH  
E-SOCIAL WORK



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## Preface

This manual intends to be a useful tool for professionals from the social field to introduce them into the practice of digital social work.

As clearly shown during the COVID-19 pandemic, online technologies can be exploited to provide social support and a sense of belonging to vulnerable and housebound groups. However, many social workers are not confident with their digital abilities and claim for a specific training that allows them to provide high quality attention to their clients in any circumstances.

As a response to these difficulties, the Erasmus+ project, Social Connections (Reference number: 2021-1-ES01-KA226-VET-095080), emerged. The aim of this innovative action, implemented from 2021 to 2023, is to develop digital pedagogical competences of continuing vocational education and training (C-VET) educators in the social sector, enabling them to develop and use high quality digital content for social inclusion of clients which are housebound because of disability, illness or COVID-19 related restrictions.

There are six European organizations behind the Social Connections project: INTRAS (Spain), is the project coordinator and has been involved in several previous European projects related to VET, ANS (Italy) being one of the first Italian organizations introducing ICT-based training methodologies in the social sector, SOSU (Denmark), educating and training social and health care professionals, Aproximar (Portugal), responsible for the creation of learning programs and training resources, Virtual Campus (Portugal), with extended experience in vocational training for SMEs and adult education and EaSI (Romania), an association and a network of the third sector from more than 15 countries.

The tangible results of this project are a handbook and a toolbox, both conceived to support trainers in applying e-social work for the social inclusion of vulnerable groups. More concretely, this handbook provides knowledge to social professionals related to the use of digital tools in their usual work with clients who are housebound due to the above mentioned circumstances. In this sense, the contents are structured in eight short chapters, including a complete list of references, so the learners can check more information about concrete parts of the training.

We hope that you find the next pages useful to the existing difficulties and challenges related to the technological field, answering to your needs to work online with your clients or learners.

We are sure that your efforts to enter the professional digital world are going to be a success!

For more information about the Social Connections project, please visit

[www.socialconnectionsproject.org](http://www.socialconnectionsproject.org).

# Social Connections

TRAINERS FOR E-SOCIAL WORK

1. PROFESSIONAL ENGAGEMENT



# 1. PROFESSIONAL ENGAGEMENT

## 1.1. Reflective practice

### **Development of social work educators' own digital pedagogical practice.**

Parker and Bradley (2003) state that social work practice is driven by theory, but the educators also construct a body of informal knowledge or experiential wisdom from working with people in practice. Reflection and reflective practice help to integrate theoretical learning, whether formal or informal into the social workers' practice<sup>1</sup>.

With the global pandemic, many tools have been developed in order to maintain a social bound even through the distance. The crisis has revealed that we are capable of great adaptation: it is possible to play online, to communicate, to share skills and pieces of information and to teach almost anything efficiently.

The educators have been made aware of some challenges while working online, this is how they built a reflective practice in digital pedagogy. Some important elements of the reflective practice are listed here<sup>2</sup>:

- Cameras that don't work or people who do not wish to be visible.
- Social room issues such as Skype or Zoom.
- Some persons may have unique learning needs and styles that make distance and online education difficult.
- Dealing with people who monopolize the discussion and with those who do not wish to participate.
- The impossibility to read correctly body language information and the risk of misinterpreting other's intentions.
- The risk of providing a linear teaching that is perceived as boring.
- The discomfort of sitting all the time.
- Internet connection issues.
- Some clients have a limited physical environment to work.
- Confidentiality challenges.

It has also been pointed out by some studies that peer learning activities are less effective online than in a face-to-face course<sup>3</sup>. Some tools such as *Mentimeter* (online quizzes and personalized surveys) or *Miro* (collaborative whiteboard) facilitate to engage all the

participants into a funny and yet simple activity and thus promote sense of belonging and group cohesion to enhance peer learning activities.

Additionally, the social worker should focus on making a clear plan of his/her digital pedagogical practice. As the Angelo State University points out, the online teacher must use technology to enhance the course content. By utilizing the positive aspects of technology, the online teacher can provide a quality educational learning experience<sup>4</sup>. Also, Ko and Rossen point out that “Techies don’t necessarily make the best online instructors. An interest in pedagogy should come first, technology second”<sup>5</sup>.

The social worker should be able to define the goals to achieve with his clients using the following criteria. The objectives must be<sup>6</sup>:

- Clear.
- Learner-centered and worthy.
- Use action verbs so that the learning is explicit to the learners and communicate to them the kind of intellectual effort that is expected.
- Measurable and precise.

It is quite possible to readapt something that the social worker has done in the past (in a face-to-face course) so that it can be done online. This is more than a simple copy/paste action because many things must be thought anew such as:

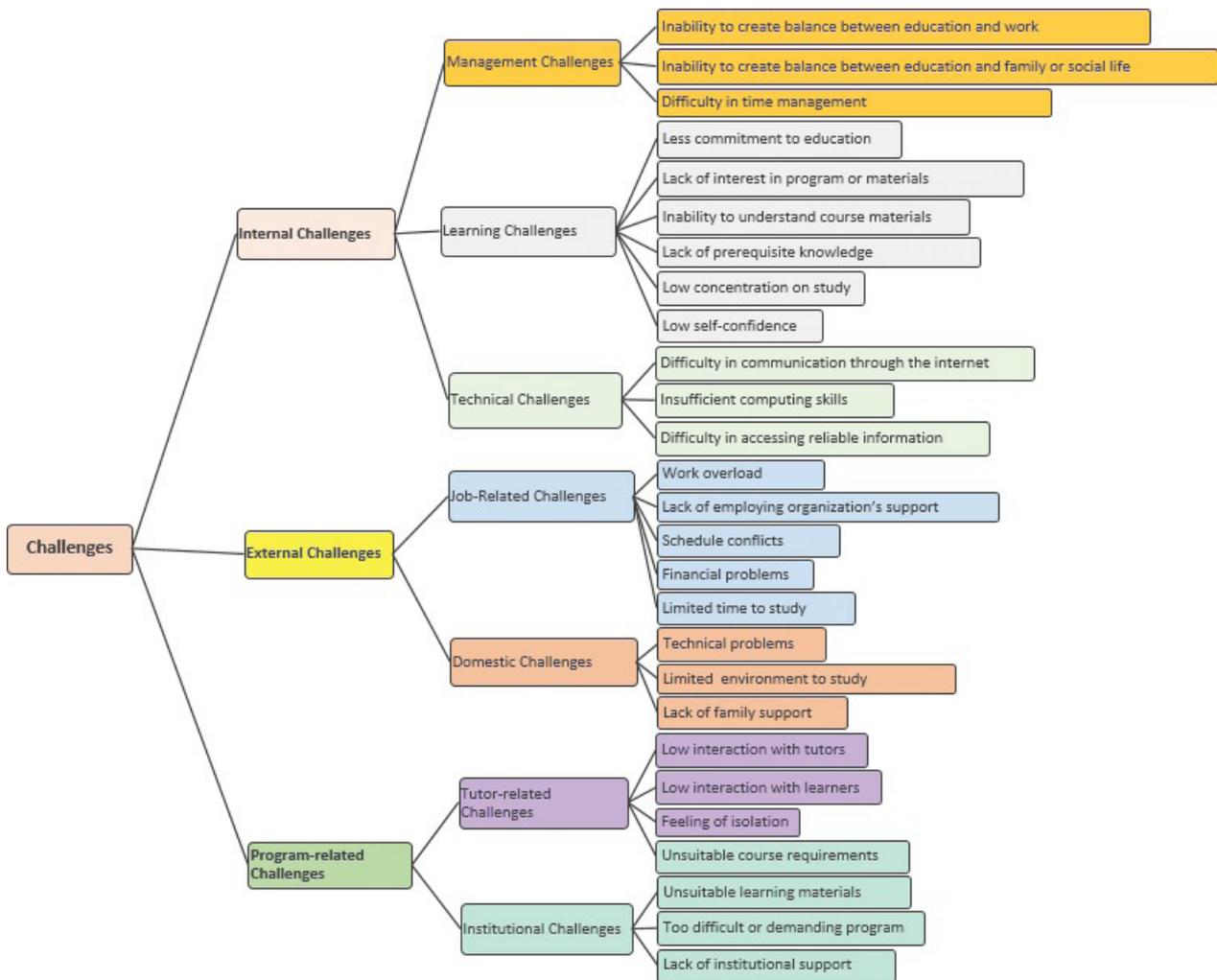
- The time dedicated to each activity.
- How and where to include ice-breakers and energizers.
- How to think again the activities that are naturally done in face-to-face.
- How to leave room for the students to participate.
- How to define the rules of communication between the clients themselves and with the social worker.

The social worker should keep in mind that many learners might encounter difficulties with digital technologies.

Since some studies show that some learners, especially older adults have a challenge in using technology, it appears that these learners need technological support from their distance education institutions<sup>7</sup>.

The next image shows some of the main difficulties of online teaching:

Note: Especially the section *Internal Challenges* address many of the difficulties that inexperienced learners face using digital technologies.



Picture 1: Main difficulties found when teaching online <sup>7</sup>

## 1.2. Professional collaboration – collaboratively sharing and innovating pedagogic practices

### To use digital technologies to engage in collaboration with other educators.

E-learning resources and communication tools are playing a key role in this COVID-19 pandemic, and it is not yet clear how long all of this might last<sup>6</sup>. Prior to the pandemic, the use of synchronous virtual care was minimal for many health and social service settings<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, we should take this as an opportunity to strengthen distance-learning capabilities<sup>6</sup>. Technology can empower educators to become co-learners with their students by building new experiences for deeper exploration of content, thus enhancing learning experience<sup>8</sup>.

Practice learning is a core element of the education of social work professionals<sup>9</sup>. Using digital technologies follows a similar scheme: it starts with a learning by doing stage, followed by a digital phase. However, the difference this time is the rapid transition to virtual care, which leads to great concerns with regards to the relational nature of social work practice<sup>10</sup>.

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Using virtual care in practice is new for many social workers, so platforms where they could meet, collaborate, exchange experiences and ask for advices seem to be crucial for their confidence at work. Here we have some example of platforms where professionals can collaborate with other educators:

- [\*Classroom 2.0\*](#): Here the emphasis is made on exchanging knowledge about digital practices. Teachers and professionals share their opinion and experience about some specific topics, and it is possible to easily interact with them.
- [\*Social Workers Forum\*](#): This forum offers the possibility to look for existing topics or create new ones, and of course to enter in collaboration with other users of this website.
- [\*Social networks\*](#): Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Reddit, etc. offer the possibility to create groups of professionals working on the same field. These tools are fast, easy to use and most of the people are already used to them.

### To use digital technologies to share and exchange knowledge and experience.

[\*Epale resource centre\*](#): The EPALÉ Resource Centre is a bank of materials related to adults' education best practices and reference documents, including case studies, reports, policy documents as well as magazine and newspaper articles.

[\*Erasmus+ project results platform\*](#): This platform allows educators to discover each other's work and to exchange information. The searching tool allows anyone to look for documents that treat about a specific topic. Several links are available in these resources

along with other helpful documents. Anyone can contact the source organization in order to exchange information.

[International federation of social workers](#): Here you can find information related to social work in the whole world: news, policies, reports, events, publications, etc.

It is of highly importance to facilitate the above mentioned resources internally in the organization if we expect the social workers to use those tools. Receiving this information from other colleagues or from the organization they are working to, increase a feeling of confidence of being using the right resources. The organization can exchange this information through its intranet or using the social media they normally use, as for instance its Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter page.

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# Social Connections

TRAINERS FOR E-SOCIAL WORK

## 2. SOCIAL WORK AND TECHNOLOGIES



## 2. SOCIAL WORK AND TECHNOLOGIES

### 2.1. The challenge of being useful in a digital society

The ability to access, adapt and create new knowledge and new social intervention methods using ICT.

Digitalization can be defined as the whole relations, structures and elements involved in the assumption of ICTs in any aspect of life. Digitalization processes transform interactions with users, the organizations were social workers engage in professional practice and produces a digital environment that creates its own context in which processes of exclusion are redefined, and where it is necessary to develop new strategies for diagnosis, intervention and assessment. (López Peláez et al., 2018)

Indeed, there are different social dimensions that can be impacted by the use of ICT:

- Social connectedness: social connectedness has been defined as the subjective awareness of being in close relationship with the social world. Human beings have a powerful need for connectedness that if not satisfied, can have a negative impact on their health, adjustment, and well-being. (AbuJarour et al. 2018) ICTs can help social connectedness through keeping in contact or maintaining relationships with others and developing new relationships and connections. (Barlott et al., 2020)
- Social inclusion: social inclusion means having the opportunities and resources to participate fully in economic, social, and cultural life (AbuJarour et al., 2018). Digital technology has been described as a facilitator for social inclusion, because it allows for the delivery of real-time services that can enable individuals to learn, work, socialize, shop, and interact with the community without being subject to physical barriers. (Manzoor et al., 2018)
- Social participation is described as the persons involvement in activities that provide interactions with others in society (Pinto-Bruno et al., 2017). Technology can support people in remaining socially active even in the wake of physical, cognitive, and mobility challenges.

*As Bryant et al. point out: "The evolution and permutations of ICT have thus transformed, and continue to transform, the geographical, temporal, and spatial nature of communication and access to information, as well as the possibilities for the ways in which users can connect and communicate using verbal, textual, and visual mediums. Taken collectively, ICT, therefore, provides a diverse range of potential applications for social work services to bridge geographical and resource divides between urban and rural places and communities." (Bryant et al., 2018)*

So, for example, webcams can be used to facilitate one-on-one or group discussion simulating face-to-face interpersonal interaction. Videoconferencing software enhance this by including other features such as online 'white' boards, break-out rooms, and online documents that can be viewed by all (Bryant et al., 2018). Mobile devices, and especially smartphones, made it easier to non-savvy users to easily access all information and communication offered through the Internet but also a means for easily creating and sharing videos and photos.

According to López Peláez et al., ICTs can therefore reshape the professional relationships occurring in social work in three ways: through new methods of communication, rethinking social work roles and collaborative problem solving (López Peláez et al., 2018, ii).

## 2.2. E-Social work as a new frontier

Training of social workers in the reorganization of social services incorporating ICT

E-social work can be understood:

- as a specific sphere for professional intervention
- as a cross-cutting sphere that affects the lives of people, groups and institutions
- as the professional activity of social workers (interventions using new technologies to address traditional social problems that are being redefined in the technological setting, etc.).

In its individual, group or community dimension, social work is undergoing a continuous process of change due to the constant evolution of society and institutional responses to civil society's reaction to the demands and needs of its citizens. These changes require that social work as a scientific discipline constantly adapt all its areas of intervention (López Peláez et al., 2018). A number of activities can be considered within the label of "E-social work", such as online research, therapy (individual, group and community dynamics), the teaching and training of social workers and the monitoring of social service programmes. In this regard, e-social work has become the new social work frontier. (López Peláez et al., 2018).

The COVID-19 outbreak had a big impact on social work practices, which had to change rapidly and significantly. As identified by Berg-Weger and Morley in relation to professionals working with older clients: "social workers (...) have become creative and resourceful in staying connected to our older adult clients, patients, friends, and families and supporting their efforts to stay connected with others to allay loneliness, social isolation, and anxiety. In-person activities and contacts began to be facilitated virtually through individual devices and videoconferencing. Social distancing, personal protective equipment and virtual reality devices were introduced. Daily telephone reassurance calls,

home delivery services, virtual and phone health care visits, and prevention education and news updates became a part of social work practice.” (Berg-Weger & Morley, 2020).

Undoubtedly, while there are pros and successful examples, the use of ICT in social work also raises some challenges and concern. Indeed, besides ethical issues which we will address in the next paragraph, according to Mishna et al. the use of technology has also been considered by the social work profession to negatively impact core practice principles through the dehumanization of the therapeutic relationship (Mishna et al., 2012).

According to Bryant et al., to overcome these risks, what should be considered is “how to ensure that social work practice drives the utilization of ICT rather than practice being technologically driven”, meaning that the values and commitments of the social work profession need to direct the nature of engagement through ICT (Bryant et al., 2018) Also, to ensure a technology-rich social service delivery system it seems that there is a distinct need for interdisciplinary collaboration, requiring partnerships between social workers and technologists, computer scientists, software engineers, and business management. (Berzyn et al., 2015) Finally, it is recommended that social workers adopt a practice-led approach to the use of ICTs, so as to ensure that they might be used in ways that benefit, rather than detract from, the enduring values of the profession (Baker et al., 2014).

To conclude, according to Bryant et al., it is only through experiment and experience of trialing ICT and problem solving the ethical and practical problems posed to practice that social work will advance its engagement with ICT and develop an evidence base for the benefits it encompasses. This knowledge can then be used to shape social work education and drive culture change, develop competencies, and engage ICT champions to work with local communities to develop and implement ICT-based services (Bryant et al., 2018).

## 2.3. New technology standards for social work: The ethical dimensions

Ethical standards and norms vary among diverse cultural groups served by social workers.

The use of ICTs and social media gives rise to potential ethical challenges for social workers.

One of the most widely cited limitations is professional boundaries (Mishna et al. 2012; Reamer, 2017). Indeed, it is true that social media can undermine the efforts of practitioners to give clear messages about their availability, office hours, roles and responsibilities as they might appear to clients as always available. Also, in the study conducted by Mishna et al. it turns out that according to participants, there are certain circumstances, behaviours, and requests related to cyber communications seem to infringe on professional boundaries, in the sense that ICT seems to encourage a less

formal and friendlier communication and this changes or it introduces a new kind of dimension in terms of how professionals relate with clients (Mishna et al. 2012).

Another issue, is that of personal discretion when interacting with clients or representing agencies on social media networks. For example, in a study from Ryan & Garret it is mentioned that social workers spoke about the need to 'self-censor' the information they make available through Facebook in an attempt to control what the wider public observe. (Ryan & Garret, 2018) Also, clients can gather information about social workers using social media, such as Facebook and often social workers chose to not 'post' anything and simply used the site to view other people's posts and maintain connections (Greysen et al. 2010).

Privacy and confidentiality was another commonly mentioned concern, such as protecting client data in a computer, especially information shared over the Internet, preventing computer' hackers from spying on therapists' computer information, forgetting hidden files (text residue) left behind when they are seemingly deleted (Menon & Miller-Cribbs, 2002).

Another important ethical issue is that of ICT as a source of information. In fact, on one hand social workers must be prepared for handling situations where clients bring up information they have found (López Peláez et al., 2018). On the other hand, they also have the ethical obligation to seek material from reputable sources, such as empirical peer-reviewed studies, which are readily available through the Internet (Giffords, 2009).

In this regard, in the study conducted by Mishna et al., participants expressed the need for organizational policies and social work code of ethics regulating professional behavior in order to help them sort through the dilemmas encountered related to cyber communication (Mishna et al. 2012).

Finally, discussing ethical dimensions dealing with technology in social work, we shall mention the concept of the 'digital divide' which is connected within all the issues we highlight.

Indeed, as mentioned by Steyaert & Gould, technology may become another index of 'social exclusion'. While social interventions aimed at reducing the digital divide have expanded from their original focus of providing access to include enhancing digital skills and inviting citizens to become information producers (the so-called Web 2.0), they have yet to address the challenge posed by the expanding entertainment nature of the internet and the differences in content preferences across socio-economic groups. As part of its overall concern with reducing social exclusion, social work needs to ensure that the wide availability of the information opportunities of the internet does not only benefit the already information-rich. (Steyaert & Gould, 2009).

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# Social Connections

TRAINERS FOR E-SOCIAL WORK

## 3. TEACHING TRAINING AND LEARNING



## 3. TEACHING, TRAINING AND LEARNING

### 3.1. Teaching and training

The use of digital technologies in the teaching and learning process is a theme that is discussed for several years in the literature on Educational Technology, first with the introduction of the personal computer, then the Internet in 1990s, and finally with the access to mobile devices and social media platforms in the 2000s (Pedro, de Oliveira Barbosa, & das Neves Santos, 2018). In inclusive training and teaching actions, there are student with different abilities and needs and many teachers are increasingly using an approach in line with the Universal Design for learning framework. The challenge is to utilize technology to enhance and transform learning in order to meet the needs of diverse student populations (Hitchcock, 2018).

Besides this trend, an additional challenge arises: how to keep appropriate the use of both “physical and virtual worlds”, in terms of how to make it meaningful, empowering, efficient and safe, even more after all the experience from the Covid-19 pandemic. The safety side on the use of technologies includes a series of factors, such as adapting the type of devices to the profile of learners, the way they are used and its purpose (creativity, data analysis, etc.), or the protection of personal data. Moreover, trainers shall bear in mind the developmental stages and the way these may affect the choice either of the devices or the digital technologies (Virginia Department of Education, 2021).

Social work practice, and its teaching and training to new professionals, faces the same issues as many other fields, in how to adapt to the new context of digital environments. Examples from the United States provides us with insights on how to setup standards for a common practice in terms of the use of technology in social work - NASW and Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice. One of these standards concerns precisely ‘social work education’ (Knight, 2017).

In social work education, the focus is that learners are aware of a new possibility and approach to a classical field of work, its potentialities and opportunities, how they can effectively use them, but also all the other ‘downsides’ of it: ethics, digital illiteracy, limitations on mobilization and engagement of communities, among others (Hitchcock, 2018). For instance, social media may be a “dangerous minefield”, as it is often a free editing space and relies too much on the knowledge of each person; for learners in social work, it is mandatory that they acknowledge the importance of limits and boundaries, as this may jeopardize the trustful relationship they seek for with their end-users (Knight, 2017).

Besides this mind-set, a particular attention shall be made into how digital training strategies can be applied to learners of social work, meaning a critical reflection from educators to which tools work best for the topic they are teaching. For some practical skills required for the profession, like an in-person interview or the creation of empathy

with a client, face-to-face learning appears to be more adapted, whereas for some topics concerned theory, policies or advocacy, online learning can be right suited. The principle shall always be to keep the idea of social workers as 'guardians of social connections' (Knight, 2017).

With the mind-set of a “hybrid approach” on social work training, some specific methods appear to be relevant nowadays: mobile-learning; simulation-based learning; experiential learning; and gamification.

The introduction of digital technologies led the appearance of mobile learning (m-learning), which can be defined as the use of interactive technologies on mobile devices in learning (some authors referring it as an 'natural evolution of eLearning'). This method has been highly researched, though not in specific fields or learning environments, neither relating to its use by teachers and educators, but more in relation to the perceptions and motivations of learners and students (showing generally positive outcomes). One relevant finding is that m-learning is seldom used in formal contexts of learning, being more common in informal settings: the results from studies are not consistent in determining a linear good outcome, though the studies have mainly focused on the use of mobile devices in class activities. Nevertheless, it also revealed that “being always connected with their mobile devices allowed students to access course information and also gave them the opportunity to interact with the content, potentially contributing to tear apart the existing barrier between learning and real life” (Pedro, de Oliveira Barbosa, & das Neves Santos, 2018).

The use of simulation-based learning provides an opportunity for learners to practice their skills in a protective environment and has been recognized as an important tool prior to place learners/ newly-professionals in real-life settings (Craig et al, 2017). This method combines knowledge-passing, observation, a feedback loop between doing and improving, and coaching (in some settings, peer mentoring by older learners might take place). The rapid development of technology provides the opportunity to introduce “technology-based simulations” and “virtual clients”, for “immersive learning experience” (Smith et al, 2021). This latter is a learning experience that allows for “complex interactions” and “a feeling of presence”, while facilitates empowerment of learners and increased interactivity. In this method, the evaluation framework needs to be adjusted and adapted (De Freitas et al, 2009).

Experiential learning has been proving that is a useful ICT resource, which is translated into activities and practical experiences that allow people to reflect on their practices. This type of resource also benefits social work students/adult learners when it is not possible to integrate ICTs in the social work curriculum, since it is seen as an opportunity to understand the relationship between theoretical content and professional practice. Experiential learning is a great resource to promote the development of knowledge and key skills between students/adult learners, although, it is important to take into consideration that is crucial to be applied in a proper way, which means that it is

fundamental to link the theory with the learning experience that is being delivered (McInroy, 2021).

Similar to the tools previously described, we believe that it is important to mention another resource: gamification. Gamification is a method in which the use of games promotes critical thinking, motivation, and the learning process. When used in groups (e.g. groups of 3-5 elements), it also increases the development of soft skills (e.g. mediation, time management, etc.). When we think about including gamification in the learning process, we can assume to use it in content and/or organizational measurements. In this first case, the educator benefits from the game to introduce a topic or give theoretical clarification; in the second case, games are used to be more accessible to students/adult learners, performance of tasks or development of reports. Studies focused on the impact of gamification on the learning experience have been showing that students/adult learners can increase their assimilation of information in 40%, compared with more traditional methods (Pokulyta & Kolotylo, 2021).

The challenge is now focused on the way to tailor and customize these general teaching and training methods to social work education.

### 3.2. Guidance

Education, in general, needs to adapt the learning experience of students/adult educators to the real-life context, and this is not exception for ICTs, since it is getting more usual to accept technologies to implement online teaching and training activities. With this kind of adaptations, several benefits emerged in the relationship between learners and also between learners and educators, through a better connection and understanding between them, but also with learners learning from each other and getting direct and fast support or feedback from teachers and trainers. Consequently, and as studies on this topic show, the level of achievement in learning has a positive impact due to the use of ICTs (Kumi-Yeboah, Kim, Sallar, & Kiramba, 2020).

In the case of social work learners, there is still some work to do in relation to ICTs. That's why the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare (AASWSW) reinforced the importance of including technologies in social work education and performance, putting its efforts to raise awareness and influence the intention of students and professionals to use technologies in professional practice (McInroy, 2021). In relation to the need of this awareness on ICTs and social work education and practice, it is found that several students are not aware about the benefits of using technologies and online resources. In this way, it is crucial to change the way ICTs are presented by future social workers. A study made by Goldingay and Boddy (2017) revealed that when students are guided in their online interactions, they increase their ability to be engaged and to interact in online environments. As so, social work educators need to perceive how guidance within ICT may affect their way of teaching and training.

### 3.3. Collaborative Learning

The development of an education system that includes technologies allowed to improve the way the content is delivered and the relationship between all the parts involved in the educational process, since it can be displayed through different methods (e.g., synchronous sessions, webinars, online platforms for educational systems, like Moodle). In VET systems, online classes allow to combine different and effective bottom-up approaches and to involve teachers, trainers and learners (Pokulyta, & Kolotylo, 2021; European Commission, 2020).

It is important to pay particular attention to the increase of these methods, since devices and online platforms are an ever-changing and updating target. In this way, learning and teaching activities should include the awareness about technologies – the ones that already exist and the ones that are emerging – that may impact the performance of learners (in this case, social workers) in the future. This means that it is critical to promote the engagement of social work learners with ICTs to keep organizations from the social sector updated in terms of technologies that may contribute for an effective social work practice (McInroy, 2021).

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These findings are in concordance with the Joint Research Centre, who considers that it is imperative to be continually updated in terms of ICTs in order to “*rethinking learning, for innovating education and training and for addressing new skills requirements (e.g., digital competence) to generate growth, employment, and social inclusion*” (EU Science Hub, n. d.). Also, a study made by Kumi-Yeboah, Kim, Sallar, and Kiramba (2020) concluded that ICTs have a positive impact in the feedback provided between learners and, consequently, their social interaction regarding the learning experience.

ICTs also have a positive impact in the learning experience and, particularly, in social workers’ performance, since technologies are a key resource for people with special needs, who can be excluded from educational and/or social opportunities and take advantage from ICT devices and online resources to facilitate their integration in the community. This is also applied for those individuals who could benefit from educational and social services if they would be delivered through online formats, since their geographic, financial or physical condition would make it difficult to move from one place to another. For example, in the case of people with disabilities, they could benefit from telecare support services in the comfort of their houses, without the need to travel to an office/organization – and all the logistic implications of the travel (Hamburg & Bucksch, 2017; Reamer, 2020).

It is important to reinforce that the findings from the study of Reamer (2020) show that social workers are more aware of the benefits of ICTs and agree in the implementation of online services to be provided to their clients. Regarding tools that usually are used by social workers in their professional role, Hung, Lee and Cheung (2021) found that

professionals give preference to social media channels and video-conferences through online platforms.

Despite the fact that technologies have positive aspects in all people involved (students, educators, professionals, clients), it is important to be aware that online resources can miss some key attributes, as body language and nonverbal communication. To overcome possible adversities that may arise, facilitators (in this case, adult educators, or even social workers) should establish group rules that promote the participation and communication of all elements in an effective way. For example, participants from a group session (learning experience or with clients) may keep their webcams turned on during all the session, which allow them to see the other group elements and facilitate useful discussions and interactions. Also, Zoom, Google Meets and other online platform are key tools when delivering online sessions, since they allow a bigger interaction between participants (e.g. it is possible to create rooms to split participants in many groups as necessary; participants can edit, draw or write in documents; etc.) ((Hung, Lee, & Cheung, 2021).

### 3.4. Self-regulated learning

Teaching and learning experiences in the social area is a challenging matter since there are always updates, both in technology and pedagogy, so it is important to keep updated with new and innovative approaches related with the use of technology (Hitchcock et al, 2018).

The introduction of ICT devices and platforms in educational fields has been changing the way the involved parts (students, professionals, educators) see how the learning processes are delivered and the need to develop and raise ICT skills. As OECD mention: “it is difficult to imagine innovation strategies in education without a strong focus on developing digital skills among students and learners” (Syauqi, Munadi, & Triyono, 2020).

ICT resources turned into a greater opportunity to deliver training and supervision for social workers, and it became usual to have online courses and training as part of social work education. As previously mentioned, online platforms, like Zoom, allow facilitators to plan group activities during synchronous sessions, and allowed professionals to improve their ICT and soft skills, since they need to be prepared to promote the engagement of all participants. Also, educators should take into consideration that they must include all learners and insure diversity in the technological aspects of the learning experience (NASW, 2017; Hitchcock et al, 2018).

Regarding the use of technological resources in social work professional practice, it is important that professionals are aware about expectations, clear communication with the person/group, to be continually updated about innovative methodologies – active learning -, and to be aware about the relationship between the objectives of the session and the activities that will be delivered, which may have an effective link with the goal of the intervention (Hitchcock et al, 2018).

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# Social Connections

TRAINERS FOR E-SOCIAL WORK

## 4. DIGITAL RESOURCES



## 4. DIGITAL RESOURCES

### 4.1. Selecting digital resources

#### **To identify, assess and select appropriate digital resources to be used in the context of teaching social work**

In the aftermath of the Covid-19, multiple questions arose in order to derive knowledge for future use of technological advancements for social connections. Especially vulnerable groups of people have been exposed, felt excluded, social disconnected and have experienced a decline in the quality of life during the pandemic. It is important to pass on the positive experiences for the above-mentioned groups.

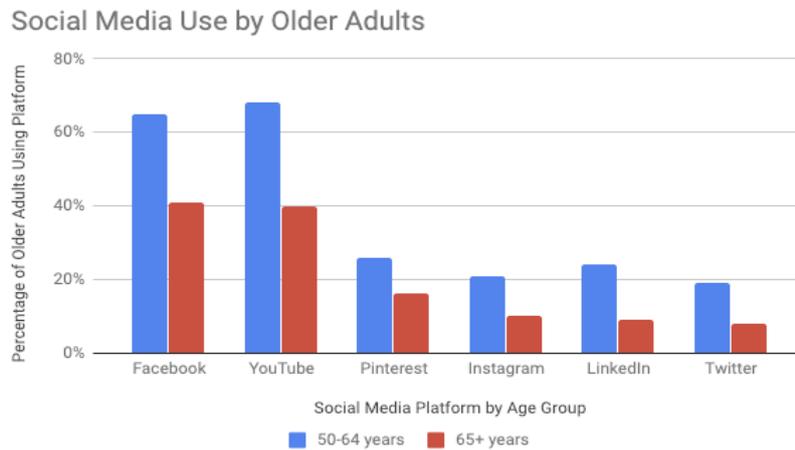
For the last decade, we've been looking into how social networking sites can enhance the social life of older adults and disabled persons and reduce their feeling of social isolation. This is important, especially for older adults and disabled persons living alone and who suffer mobility constraints, limiting their ability to socialize. For elderly and disabled persons who may be less mobile, Facebook and similar social media could play a critical role in breaking isolation making them feel like they are part of a large community or to maintain an important role in their family life, keeping contact to close ties<sup>1</sup>.

A study from 2016 finds that social technology use among older adults is linked to better self-rated health and fewer chronic illnesses and depression. Social technology included email; social networks such as Facebook and Twitter; online video or phone calls, such as Skype; online chatting or instant messaging; and smartphones. Over 70% of the sample reported that they were open to learning new technologies. Furthermore, 95.6% of older adults reported that they were at least *somewhat satisfied* with the technologies they used for communication. These findings show that older adults are largely keen to learn and develop new technological skills.

The study also found that social technology use predicted lower levels of loneliness, which in turn predicted better mental and physical health and they were generally more satisfied with life<sup>2,3</sup>.

In 2018 another study found that Facebook and YouTube are the top platforms used by older adults by a wide margin. The other four platforms of note are nearly equal in

popularity. This was also the result of a Pew research in 2017, that found Facebook as the most popular social network among older adults<sup>4</sup>.



When you think of the benefits of social media, one can immediately picture the positive element of staying engaged with life and maintaining relationships with other people. Successful aging is clearly associated with high levels of physical and cognitive health and social engagement. But how can we reach out and include those who suffer hearing-, movement-, sight- and cognitive impairments? And how can we teach the social workers to select the most suitable platform among a range of plenty, considering the possible individual limitations of the end user?

To point out the possibilities in the use of the different platforms and tools, it's necessary to examine and assess which platforms accommodate the different limitations and to closely study the best tips for helping elderly or disabled individuals to go digital.

A literature review conclude that elderly might embrace technology if they had a better understanding of how it could impact their daily life and if they were aware of the benefits of senior-friendly technology. Step number one is therefore: Uncover and reveal the, new unfolded opportunities and explain the value of connecting digitally with close ties on a Zoom- or Teams-call or show them photos of their grandchildren on Facebook. Beyond social connections, today's technology has many practical applications, e.g.; online doctor appointments or order groceries for home delivery.

### Consider specific learning objectives, context, pedagogical approach and learner group

New technologies can sometimes be overwhelming and it is important to remember that some elderly or disabled persons have never used personal computers during their worktime. A Pew study finds that the best way to approach technology to this group

is with patience and guided repetition. The study found that 77% older adults needed assistance in learning how to use new technology<sup>5</sup>.

So, the best way to approach the benefits of technology is to show them. Walk them through the simple steps in viewing photos of their grandchildren on smartphones or tablets, time and patience are essential. Demonstrate how easy it is to talk to a friend or relative they haven't seen in years through Facetime or Teams. Or help them send a text message or an email and watch their faces light up when a reply returns in seconds or minutes.

The social workers are frontline employees to perform this task. First step is to locate the status of the digital equipment, if accessible. Do the end user have a PC, a tablet, a smartphone or do they need help to buy one? Can they be taught in small local groups or do their physical limitations or social distance restrictions hinder physical participation and requires individual lessons at home?

## 4.2. Managing, protecting and sharing digital resources

### To organize digital material and make it available to learners

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Being aware of possible physical limitations of the elderly or disabled person, the social workers should be able to teach end users struggling with e.g. impaired hearing and show them the usability of videos and visual effects instead of written materials and vice versa with end-users with visual impairment. One way to make the end user understand the new digital world could be producing a dictionary with explanations of the different "new words" (digital slang). The dictionary could as well be spoken and should include several websites such as Skype, Teams, WhatsApp etc.

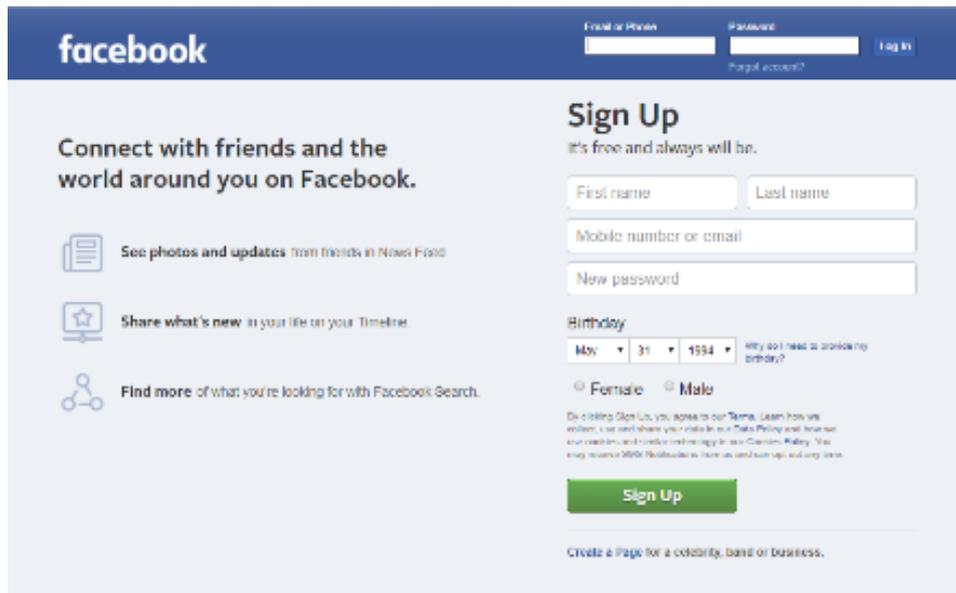
E.g.:

**What is Kindle:** *Created in 2007, Amazon Kindle is a series of e-readers designed and marketed by Amazon. Amazon Kindle devices enable users to browse, buy, download and read e-books, newspapers, magazines and other digital media via wireless networking to the Kindle store.*

**What is Facebook?** *Invented in 2004, Facebook is a popular free social networking website that allows registered users to create profiles, upload photos, videos, send messages and keep in touch with friends, family and colleagues. The site is in 2020 available in 111 different languages.*

Before even getting started using digital technology and accessing social media, the potential obstacle of a user account must be solved. A number of the most popular

communication platforms today are only accessible with a user account, which often also requires an e-mail account, making it essential to help the end user signing up / create the account(s). There are various online senior-friendly websites explaining the signing up process step by step. Making social media available to the elderly and disabled person, the social worker should pay special attention in this process, as obstacles in signing up and accessing social media can be a significant learning barrier, if not solved.



[How to use Teams and create an account](#)

### To protect sensitive digital content

The use of the internet is changing and an increasing number of older or disabled people want to be connected to keep up with friends and family. While this is great for relieving social isolation, it also means they need to be educated in terms of safe use of the internet and social media.

Internet safety for unexperienced users is much the same as internet safety for anyone else more experienced. Users need to be taught how to handle threats as phishing and malware/ransomware and how to safely use the internet and social media by keeping their software up to date with anti-virus software.

Online safety starts with education. Seniors, disabled people and inexperienced users face the same malware and phishing attacks as everyone else, but they may be more vulnerable simply because they have less experience navigating different platforms on the internet and therefore less familiar with avoiding or rejecting suspicious pop-up windows and e-mail links.

It is highly important for social workers to explain that not everything online can be trusted and that end users should never give away personal information like credit card numbers to strangers online, nor should they open suspicious links or download suspicious files or programs <sup>7</sup>.

### To understand the use of open educational resources (OER)

OER has been shown to increase learning while breaking down barriers of affordability and accessibility<sup>8</sup>. This meets the needs for both social workers and the end-users in order to teach and be taught the online benefits in order to minimize social isolation.

Hewlewt.org defines OER as:

*“Open Educational Resources are teaching, learning and research materials in any medium – digital or otherwise – that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions.”<sup>9</sup>*

One of the main benefits of using OER is the ability for the social worker to customize course material or create the most suitable course packet instead of being bound to one-fits-all course models. Customization targets the course material directly to the needs and requirements of the end user and the user experience therefore becomes far more relevant<sup>10</sup>.

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# Social Connections

TRAINERS FOR E-SOCIAL WORK

## 5. COMMUNICATION IN DIGITAL SPACES



## 5. COMMUNICATION IN DIGITAL SPACES

### 5.1. Digital social connections

#### **Digital forms of communication in the absence of embodied social connections**

The COVID-19 pandemic played a major role in redefining social interactions, determining us to pursue whether new forms of communication or to further explore the already existing ones in order to minimize the physical distance. In this context, social professionals have been among those who must take an extra mile to reach the beneficiaries, to maintain trusted relationships in the absence of physical presence. Research has shown that digital technology and social networks have helped maintain social connections during the pandemic between caregivers and beneficiaries, helping create affiliations and a sense of belongingness (Pandey et al., 2021).

Technology, namely, social networks have played a major role during the pandemic, especially in the first months, acting both as a tool for resilience and connectedness and a means to spread news inducing panic or anxiety (Pandey et al., 2021). Uncertainty can be highlighted through the circulation of excessive and contradictory information about COVID-19. Therefore, one must distinguish between useful and harmful information. In regard to social work, technology facilitates the continuation of client-beneficiary relationships, acting as a communication liaison.

Video chat and conferencing platforms can alleviate the physical distance in a larger proportion compared to text messaging and email. Being able to have a synchronous communication, having a face-to-face interaction, although virtual, contributes to creating a stronger connection between social workers and clients, simulating the typical intervention context. Nevertheless, more attention should be placed on the non-verbal cues which can be blurred during an online interaction.

Social networks, such as Facebook, Instagram, or WhatsApp keep facilitating communication, both synchronous and asynchronous, as not only the direct conversations, but the sharing of visual and/or written content can help reduce the sense of isolation and loneliness (Neves, 2017). Moreover, a qualitative analysis has shown that “the perceived support provided by technological advancement worked as a mental component in recovery of patients” (who have contracted COVID-19) (Pandey et al., 2021).

## 5.2. Available communication platforms and social media, pros, and cons

### Mapping the available communication platforms and social media

This section will provide information on the most suitable communication platforms for e-social work, from video conferencing applications, collaborative platforms to social media. By understanding both the pros and cons of each platform, as social professionals, you can properly decide on the best tool to use within your work.

#### Video conferencing

All video conferencing platforms listed below are similar in features and pricing plan's structure, therefore, this section includes the most relevant aspects for every platform, whether a pro or a con. A detailed list of features for the platforms was not considered necessary, as it can be accessed via the provided references.

#### Zoom<sup>1</sup>

Zoom is among the most user-friendly platforms, offering a lot of useful features even in the Free Plan. For more advanced options, it is advisable to upgrade to a paid subscription (Pro/Business/Enterprise). Zoom requires the creation of an account to use the platform, yet the steps are easy to follow and there are not many details required. A minor drawback would be the necessity to download the application, irrespective of the device – desktop, tablet, or smartphone. Below you can find some of the features included Free version which, besides the limited duration of a group meeting up to 40 minutes, the offered features are suitable enough for e-social work.

PROS	CONS
User friendly interface	Requires downloading the application on any device (cannot be used in browser)
Easy sign-up process	Requires creating an account
Host up to 100 participants	Limited duration of a group meeting for the Free plan
Unlimited group meetings for up to 40 minutes	
Unlimited one-on-one meetings with no time limit	
Private & Group Chat	
Screen sharing from desktops, tablets, or mobile devices	
White boarding	
HD video and voice	
Meeting record option	
Ability to join a meeting by telephone	
Instant or scheduled meetings	
Online support	
Unlimited number of meetings per month	

### Microsoft Teams

Microsoft Teams integrates Office applications (e.g., Word, PowerPoint), making it easier for the users to share various documents. The free version includes plenty of features, for example launching video conferences directly from the chats. Therefore, after the caregiver and the beneficiary have downloaded the application, they can easily make contact through Teams. Other interesting features can be found below, as well as the cons of the platform.

PROS	CONS
<p>Web version of Word, Excel, and PowerPoint</p> <p>File storage and sharing</p> <p>Up to 300 users</p> <p>24/7 phone and web support</p>	<p>Video and audio quality</p> <p>Slow and/or unstable connection during the entire meeting, as mentioned by some reviewers</p> <p>Requires considerable storage on Desktop and mobile device</p>

### Google Meet<sup>2</sup>

As part of the Google Workspace, Google Meet is an easy alternative to a video conferencing platform, consisting in all the basic characteristics needed for a successful meeting. Simply by logging into your Google Account with your Gmail address, you can access the platform. No additional application needs to be downloaded, the video meeting can be accessed from the web browser and what is more, you can schedule instant meeting and share the link with the participants. Below you can find the pros for the free version, along some drawbacks to be taken into consideration when using Google Meet.

PROS	CONS
<p>Easy to use</p> <p>One-on-one meeting duration: 24h</p> <p>Unlimited number of meetings</p> <p>Up to 100 participants</p> <p>External participants can be invited</p> <p>Live subtitles</p> <p>Allows share screening</p> <p>Adjustable aspects</p> <p>Native mobile apps</p>	<p>Group meeting duration: 1 hour (for the free version)</p> <p>The free version doesn't have a record option</p> <p>Requires having a Gmail account to create a meeting</p> <p>Difficulty in sending multimedia files through the platform</p>

### Cisco Webex<sup>3</sup>

Cisco Webex allows meetings up to 50 minutes and up to 100 participants within the free plan. The platform can be supported on iPhone, iPad, Android, and wearable devices. It is one of the most secure video conferencing platforms, including Transport Layer Security (TLS), third-party accreditations, encryption, firewall compatibility, single sign-on and secure scheduling options. An interesting and differentiating feature included, however, in one paid plan is the recording transcriptions which other platforms do not provide.

PROS	CONS
Meeting length up to 50 min in the free version	Complicated to navigate compared to other video conferencing platforms
Participants limit: up to 100 in the free version	Requires an account and app download
Full screen video with 4 layout option	Not user friendly enough Dial In/Call Me options available for limited country code phone numbers
Screen sharing	Audio problems
Schedule meetings from your Google calendar, Microsoft Outlook Calendar, or Microsoft Office Suite 365	Trouble in accessing the app from the browser
Save recordings to your computer	

### Skype (Personal)<sup>4</sup>

Skype is among the pioneers of video conferencing with a user-friendly interface and easy to access features. It is a suitable tool for an average ICT user, especially given its notoriety and well-known features. It requires downloading the application; however, you can also make a call via web browser. Skype allows you to connect using your phone number, facilitating the users access through the platform.

PROS	CONS
<p>Easy to use</p> <p>Optimized for mobile device, desktop, tablet, web browser</p> <p>Accessible via application and web browser</p> <p>Allows to make a call across several devices (e.g., phones, tablets, and desktop)</p> <p>Available for Windows, Mac OS X, Linux, iOS, Android</p>	<p>Technical issues with the video quality</p> <p>Recording meetings option is not intuitive</p> <p>Lack of sync option with other calendars</p>

### GoToMeeting

GoToMeeting is a user-friendly video conferencing platform, although not as popular as its competitors, it is a good and reliable alternative. The free version provides a 40-minute meeting including the basic features, such as screen sharing and live chat and the option to access the meeting via web browser.

PROS	CONS
<p>High-definition video and audio</p> <p>Meeting recordings</p> <p>Screen sharing</p> <p>Suitable for desktop version</p> <p>24/7 customer care</p> <p>Security</p>	<p>Not properly optimized for mobile devices</p> <p>High pricing compared to other similar platforms' plans</p> <p>Requires a very stable connection to the Internet</p> <p>Outdated interface</p>

### **Lifesize<sup>5</sup>**

Lifesize is similar to other video conferencing platforms, consisting in three pricing plans varying in features. The free version, however, includes several characteristics which would facilitate a proper meeting between the social professionals and the beneficiaries. With its user-friendly interface and easy to use features, Lifesize is an option worth taken into consideration.

<b>PROS</b>	<b>CONS</b>
Cost-effective	Duration limit for individual use (free version) up to 40 minutes
Highly secured software	Issues operating on iOS devices
User-friendly experience	Can be used as a guest (via web browser)
High audio-video quality	Difficulty in cancelling the subscription

## **42 Social Media**

### **Facebook<sup>6</sup>**

With its 2.89 billion worldwide users, Facebook is by far the most popular social media network. Therefore, it is a tool worth using in maintaining social connections with beneficiaries if this communication approach is appropriate for both parties (caregiver and beneficiary). With the Messenger application embedded, direct communication is easier, being able to make phone or video calls through the app. The features are available for desktop and mobile and everything is free of charge. However, issues with security must be mentioned when referring to Facebook Messenger, as calls are not encrypted by default, unless the “secret conversation” feature is turned on.

### **WhatsApp**

Although owned by Facebook, WhatsApp is an encrypted application, making it more suitable for social work interventions via social media. It is easy to use as it only requires your phone number. However, for security reasons, the users must assure the location sharing is turned off, especially after updates. WhatsApp calls should be made only via a work phone to keep the professional standards.

### **Instagram**

Instagram provides a video chat option as well, being also owned by Facebook. It is mainly destined for sharing content (images and videos), and it used for entertaining

reasons. Although a good place to find inspirational resources, Instagram might not be the most professional platform to conduct social work interventions. Nonetheless, if after an assessment of options, the social professional considers it proper to maintain communication with the beneficiary on Instagram, they should choose accordingly.

### Other platforms

#### Signal<sup>7</sup>

For privacy matters, Signal is one of the best choices for a video chat platform, as the video calls are end-to-end encrypted. Signal does not collect customer data; hence, this makes it one of the most secure messaging apps. Compared to other platforms, Signal is not as notorious as Facebook or WhatsApp. So far, the application allows only one-on-one video calls and is available exclusively on mobile devices.

#### FaceTime<sup>8</sup>

FaceTime is an easy-to-use video chat application; however, it is only available on iPhone. It is free of charge, end-to-end encrypted. On the other hand, Apple collects customer metadata, including information like who you communicated with, what time you called, etc. At low internet speed, the audio-video quality is poor.

#### Google Duo<sup>9</sup>

Google Duo provides a high-quality video call experience on various software, from Windows, Android, MacOS and iOS. Although it has an end-to-end encryption, Google makes use of user metadata. Hence, this aspect should be considered when choosing the video chat platform to be used in social work interventions.

#### Google Drive

Google Drive is among the most well-known collaborative platforms, allowing sharing of various types of documents. It is useful in case there are documents needed to be shared between the social professional and the beneficiary. The platform is intuitive, easy-to-use and has a user-friendly design. A Google Drive document can be accessed without having a Gmail account if the owner has granted access to external users. Accessible from any device, desktop or mobile, Google Drive could be an interesting bonus tool to add in the digital social work.

### **Considerations regarding the suitability of different digital media according to characteristic of target groups**

Depending on the target groups' characteristics, social professionals should adapt their approach regarding the use of digital technology in social work. Before choosing the

most suitable platform or digital tool to be used during a meeting, a target group analysis should be conducted. The social worker should consider the following:

- **Age of the target group.** For younger people the adoption process even of new digital technology might be easier as they already engage in online activities, compared to an older target group. For example, 50% of people aged 18-34 are using the Internet, compared to 31% of people aged between 45 and over 65 years old (according to 2019 statistics)<sup>10</sup>.
- **Degree of appropriateness for online interventions in relation to the target groups' situations.** Although during the COVID-19 pandemic society has managed to digitally adapt almost every aspect, due to the client's situation, perhaps a digital professional relationship could not be formed. Reluctance to online tools, mental health or cognitive problems could be factors that could harden the social worker's choice of communication environment.
- **Digital literacy level (if possible). In relation to the target groups' age, this aspect must be considered.** Working with a client with basic digital knowledge suggests that an easy-to-use platform should be implemented during the work, that does not require app downloading, creating an account, or installing a desktop app. Social media could be a good alternative for clients with basic ICT knowledge, such as WhatsApp. For more digitally advanced target groups, platforms like Zoom or Google Meet could be implemented.
- **Owning/being able to access any sort of electronic device that can facilitate online communication.** Depending on the client's available device, the social worker can further decide whether they could use any digital tool in their communication, or what specific platform would be the most appropriate. Some platforms are available only for iPhones, for example. In some cases, the beneficiaries are people with a precarious financial situation, and they don't have the resources to access such a device. Therefore, social professionals must be ready to adapt and find solutions to create/maintain the communication with the beneficiaries.
- **Internet connection stability.** This is extremely important as a poor connection could compromise the entire meeting session. Experiencing interruptions is unpleasant for both the client and the social worker. Therefore, as previously mentioned, some platforms require a more stable connection, while others are better optimized for less stable ones.
- **Location of the client.** An important aspect to be taken into consideration is the location of the client due to privacy and confidentiality reasons. For example, we have a young pregnant woman who needs support in deciding if she wants to keep the baby or not. The social worker should be sure that the client has the right space to discuss this kind of details without being interrupted or even judged/influenced by others.

To assess the abovementioned aspects, the social worker could make an initial analysis of the situation and agree if a further communication over the case can be done online and decide together with the beneficiary what channel to be used.

Important! Social workers must be mindful of the secure privacy settings when implementing digital media into their work with clients in order to avoid boundary violations that could compromise the professional relationship (Tunick et al., 2011 apud Halabuza, 2014)<sup>11</sup>.

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# Social Connections

TRAINERS FOR E-SOCIAL WORK

## 6. EMPOWERING LEARNERS



## 6. Empowering learners

### 6.1. Accessibility and usability – learners' willingness to adapt to changes

Facing a new social reality due to the Corona crisis with very restricted or even no social interaction, a need for increased digital social interaction with close family and friends arose.

Accessing and using digital social media and communication platforms might be easy for the younger generation. For the older generation or for ill or disabled persons however, this is not always the case. Adapting to a new reality of digital social connection not only requires an open attitude and a mental readiness, it also requires the necessary digital tools and the ability to use them. The ability to suddenly adapting to social distancing or even social exclusion, coupled with an adaptation to a new social digital reality, may be overwhelming. A need for help, in terms of understanding and using digital tools and media is required. The need for digital help may vary from individual to individual, depending on the range of disability and the digital skills. Two aspects in particular apply to the use of digital media, accessibility and usability. Dealing with digital tools and media, the aspect of accessibility primarily focuses on people with disabilities. Many digital accessibility requirements actually often improve the usability experience for everyone. Attention should be paid to the fact that even though some elderly has age-related functional limitations, they may not identify these as "disabilities". Accessibility addresses aspects related to equivalent user experience for people with disabilities<sup>1</sup>.

Digital accessibility means that people with disabilities, counting elderly or disabled persons, can equally perceive, understand, navigate and interact with various communication platforms and digital tools. However, currently many websites and some communication platforms are unintentionally developed with accessibility barriers making them difficult for some people to use. The internet, including digital communication platforms, is fundamentally designed to work for all people, regardless of their hardware, software, language, location or ability. When the internet and communication platforms meet this goal, they are accessible to people with a diverse range of hearing, movement, sight and cognitive ability<sup>1</sup>. Of course, this presupposes that the elderly or disabled persons know how to use the digital possibilities rather than considering them as barriers. If websites, communication platforms, applications, technologies or tools are badly designed, they can create barriers, excluding people with various disabilities from the web, rather than including them. Thus, there should be an awareness that not all digital tools and media are equally suited when it comes to digital social connections. This attention applies not least to the social workers who assist the elderly disabled persons in handling digital tools. Considering this, it is equally essential, that the social worker her- or himself knows how to use specific digital tools or communication platforms prior to engaging elderly or disabled persons in digital activity. Understanding the functionality and usability

of digital tools and communication platforms, contributes to a credible and convincing training and will promote the motivation to adapt to change. Willingness to adapt to change, in terms of using digital media for social connection, is strengthened if elderly or disabled persons clearly see the benefits in using digital media when it comes to social connections.

### 6.2. Digital inclusion

Accessibility supports social inclusion for people with disabilities such as older people with changing abilities due to ageing, temporary disabilities due to illness or people with “situational restrictions”, as is the case with the Corona pandemic and the subsequent social restrictions. As mentioned earlier, certain accessibility requirements relating to user interaction and visual design must be met in order to include the user with disabilities.

Inadequate design can cause significant barriers for people with disabilities. To ensure a good usability experience, websites or communication platforms need to have understandable instructions or feedback. Websites and communication platforms with inclusive design, considering the accessibility requirements, will benefit the user experience for people with low digital literacy. Several aspects regarding the interface design of websites or communication platforms are important for people with age-related impairments, such as declining:

Vision, including reduced contrast sensitivity, color perception and myopia, making it difficult to view websites, read webpages and navigate on digital platforms.

Physical ability, including reduced dexterity and hand tremor, inhibiting fine motor control, making it difficult to use a mouse and click small targets.

Hearing, including difficulty hearing mumbling speech or higher-pitched sounds, especially when there is background noise.

Cognitive ability, including reduced short-term memory, difficulty concentrating being easily distracted, making it difficult to follow navigation and complete online actions.

The above-mentioned impairments are not necessarily related to age alone, but they are important factors for successful digital inclusion<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the social worker must consider these issues, when considering which digital tools and communication platforms would be the most suitable, accommodating basic digital accessibility requirements. Digital tools and communication platforms meeting the accessibility requirements will promote digital inclusion, making social inclusion and connecting through digital media easier, instead of constituting a barrier. The social workers themselves must of course equally be well acquainted with selected tools and media, being able to assess whether one tool or platform is better suited than another. The assessment should be based on knowledge of the person’s disabilities. For example, for some people it might be easier using the swipe function of an iPad or tablet, than using a mouse. For some

people, in order to reduce distraction from background noise, it may be a good idea to offer the person headphones. These considerations are closely linked to an accessible user experience of the person with disabilities. An accessible user experience promotes digital inclusion and feeling digitally included promotes the motivation for engaging in digital social activities. The experience and importance of feeling digitally included thus applies to both the social worker and the digitally impaired person. If both parties have impaired digital skills, it is crucial that the social worker becomes familiar with the digital tools prior to the training of elderly or disabled persons.

### 6.3. Differentiation and personalization

When engaging elderly, disabled or inexperienced users digitally, the social worker should consider their individual learning needs. Digital support therefore needs to be tailored to the individual's need and interests. Delivering digital support, the social worker should know to apply certain principals of good practice, as follows<sup>2,3</sup>:

**Tailor to their needs:** The end user may not be convinced about the importance of using digital technology to deal with their daily needs. The social worker must try to capture their attention by playing to their interests. E.g. when a senior learns that they can easily catch up with an old friend, or they can chat with their granddaughter, they most likely will warm up to using digital technology.

**Flexibility and relevance:** Concentrate on helping the end user to do what *they* need and want to do online, rather than what is sensible from your point of view.

**The right pace:** To learn new digital skills as elderly or inexperienced users takes longer and they will progress their learning at different paces. It is important not to stress their learning – a patient approach is the key.

**Repetition and reflection:** A patient approach also allows time and space for repetition and reflection on the learning as an important factor for success.

**Understandable language:** Avoid using digital jargon – focus on the task, not the technology and try to translate your knowledge into simple, everyday language.

**One-to-one encouraging support:** A strong trainer-learner relationship is key to building a learner's confidence. The end users are better motivated to learn when they are encouraged. Show them recognition of their progress.

**Time to build relationships:** Plan with enough time to build communication and trainer-learner trust. This helps to maintain learner's digital interest, increasing their self-efficacy.

**Ongoing guidance and support:** Digital guidance and support should be open-ended, allowing learners to return with questions and technical problems over time. Do not do it on their behalf, guide them and let them solve any issue themselves if possible.

**Co-design:** Developing a training program, it is a good idea to involve a wide range of users in the shaping and the design, to ensure the relevance and effectiveness for the end user.

### 6.4. Actively engaging learners

A key focus for the social worker is to arouse learners' active and creative engagement. The above mentioned co-design of digital training, involving the learners through co-creation and an iterative process creating solutions that address their needs, is an engaging approach. Facing the fact, that it may not always be possible for the social worker to go to people's homes, they should be aware of adapting engagement methods in order to deliver support whilst working remotely<sup>4</sup>. User engagement work entails working with a wide range of people with different cognitive, physical or social challenges, who might not have had access to a computer, a laptop or a smartphone.

When planning to actively engage and involve learners, e.g. by creating an online chat forum or workshop based on mutual interests, there are however different approaches of remote digital engagement to be considered. First you need to break down the barriers of digital engagement. It is important to assess, whether the end users are comfortable to engage digitally. As mentioned earlier, effort should be made, prior to the workshop, to establish if they have the right equipment, and if so, if they are confident in using the software. When dealing with online group sessions or workshops consider support techniques including:

One to one training and support in advance of the group session/workshop so they can practice in a private environment and get comfortable with the technology.

Allowing additional time prior to an online group session/workshop (up to 20-30 minutes) for people to join online and get comfortable.

Providing a telephone number ahead of the group session/workshop and displaying during the session on screen for anyone who is struggling with the technology being used can call for instant support (this requires a facilitator who is there to resolve technical issues).

Group conversations and creative activities can be facilitated online via Facebook, WhatsApp groups or group video calls on Teams or Zoom. These platforms enable a group dynamic where participants are able to build on each other's responses as well as offering the participants the opportunity to share and hear from other people with similar experiences or interests<sup>4</sup>. Workshops could be planned beginning with an open discussion around common topics of interest, creativity or news topics. A consistent

approach, bringing together the same group of participants, helps building a social aspect and make participants feel increasingly comfortable to share their thoughts and feelings with the group. The social aspect of digital inclusion (online) classes can be equally or more important to elderly og disabled people, helping to reduce loneliness<sup>5</sup>. Undertaking engagement with the same group over a sustained period of time, ideally in smaller groups, helps develop a sense of community. However, the social worker/facilitator of the online group needs to consider the size of the group. In larger online groups it can be difficult for an organic discussion to flow.

Remote engagement can effectively allow people with lived experiences to continue to be involved in inclusive and meaningful ways. This said, having a mixture of remote methods alongside face-to-face engagement is a powerful way of developing solutions that are best suited for the users involved<sup>4</sup>.

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# Social Connections

TRAINERS FOR E-SOCIAL WORK

## 7. FACILITATING LEARNERS DIGITAL COMPETENCES



## 7. FACILITATING LEARNERS' DIGITAL COMPETENCES

Lacking digital skills is likely to cause insecurity or a feeling of powerlessness in the inexperienced user. For the caregiver it is important to reassure the elderly that basic digital skills are sufficient to use digital tools and navigate on digital platforms. The best digital literacy support should then start with identifying the person's needs to select the most suitable digital tools. For a person with impaired digital skills, learning by doing, slow learning and repetition are the key to understanding functionality so digital literacy requires time and patience, for both parties. Therefore, when training digital skills, the caregiver needs to consider the time aspect. In order to create a safe and confident framework for the training, it is important that the learner does not feel under time pressure. Time pressure risks creating a learning barrier because there is not enough time for contemplation and repetition of actions.

### 7.1. Digital media literacy

The online presence, specifically on social networks brings a bunch of benefits to the learner, for instance: easy and immediate access to services and information, fast communication and communicability, emotional and social presence, and finally, but not least, the feeling of inclusion in this new social world. In this sense, it is important to know the basics on how to use the internet to stay socially connected.

In the last years, the education and training sector faced radical changes with the use of new technologies that support new learning approaches. This was particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic. The new learning models involve a more active or participatory approach of the learners instead of a passive, instruction based approach and hence offer the possibility to construct a more personalized learning method for adult education. Social workers are not exempted from being challenged by these new technologies and pedagogical methodologies so they should be introduced to the best practices to make the best personal use of these technologies.

The DigComp 2.1, the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens presents a large set of competences organized in eight proficiency levels for Digital Literacy and examples of use. The DigCompEdu, the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators is a complete framework describing what it means for educators (all education levels) to be digitally competent and providing a general reference frame to support the development of educator-specific digital competences in Europe. DigCompEdu's focus is not on technical skills but it rather details how digital technologies can be used to enhance and innovate education and training. It presents 22 competences organised

in six Areas: Professional Engagement, Digital Resources, Teaching and Learning, Assessment, Empowering Learners and Facilitating Learner's Digital Competence.

Using these frameworks educators can detect gaps in the digital literacy of the learners and incorporate digital learning activities to support and improve the digital literacy of the users. This can be done with a variety of models and tools:

- **Digital Curriculum:** educators can use **rich digital content, multimedia** and **free online resources** to create personalized study programmes. Educators can also create and share their own resources. Educators can use **videos, audio clips,** and **interactive games** to improve learning and the motivation of students. For example, serious games stimulate the mind and learners can develop decision making based on their cognitive capacity, dragging their attention and enhancing their psychological functioning.
- **Digital classroom models:** Besides the totally online learning model, **blended learning** combines online and classroom lessons. During class the teacher can use screencasts, podcasts, PowerPoint presentations, etc. In the **flipped classroom** model students are introduced to a topic at home at their own pace, typically with the use of video material, and then practice it in class.
- Giving learners more options beyond the traditional essay, poster, or report: Learners can deliver a multimedia slide PowerPoint or a comic created with animation software to convey their understanding of a topic.
- Using digital tools can help the educator to gather immediate feedback on learners' understanding and use the information to customize lessons.

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There are also a variety of free e-Learning platforms that support different pedagogical models and help teachers to share information and to communicate with their students, like Moodle, ATutor, Forma LMS, Dokeos, ILIAS, Opigno and OpenOLAT.

## 7.2. Digital communication and collaboration

### To use digital technologies for communication and civic participation

The advance of new technologies and the digital possibilities available allows to surpass the confining frontiers of time and space, with methods to communicate live disregarding the geographical borders. The access to information through technology should be considered as an efficient and cost-effective way of tackle social exclusion, since the computer mediated communication evolved the ancient ways of sharing information, for instance, with accessible long-distance communication, many-to-many communication and the possibility of using several types of multimedia to express oneself. Access to digital online tools became a necessary and key condition for overcoming social exclusion. Although it is not the only variable that should be taken into consideration, if implemented in the right way, the digital online tools can work as a multiplier of social inclusion actions, whereas improving education, governmental-relation with the civic population, and healthcare access. (Warschauer, 2004, p. 30) Some studies were done

in the scope of Internet usage and its contribution towards influencing acts of formal political participation, and hypotheses say that the new technologies do indeed foment political participation and engagement (such as voting). It also explores the relation there is between communication enhanced through electronics and the social collaboration, trust and solidarity acts (Bimber, 2000, p. 329).

In this sense, the Internet, electronic and digital gadgets can play an important role in surpassing social challenges and engaging people in social participation, because even though social movements emerged online, they can connect with other local based participants and converge into face to face interaction. In this regard, it is fair to say that in today's world, the social network can be perceived as more than just a chatting platform, it is now a source of knowledge, awareness, information, social connection, and collaboration.

The great variety of communication and information-handling tools enables the internet to entail a diverse range of actions. A variety of online communication methods, such as email, instant messaging, social media, browsing for civic information, making consumer transactions, and participating in chat rooms or multi-user environments can be used to start exploring these perks. Social networks like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or communications tools like Skype, WhatsApp or Zoom are widely prevalent nowadays.

### 7.3. Digital content creation

The new age of the online revolution has turned the internet user into a digital content creator and sharer. Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat or Pinterest in addition to all the social networks previously mentioned allow users to create and/or upload content in multiple formats.

This can be translated in the education and training world when educators generate learning activities and assignments requiring learners to express themselves through digital means, therefore creating digital content that goes beyond the traditional delivery formats. This can also be done collaboratively allowing learners to develop skills such as creativity, innovation, problem-solving thinking and collaboration (Ivers & Barron, 2015).

Besides the previously mentioned platforms, educators and learners can use available free digital content creation tools for use in their teaching and learning assignments. Some examples are:

- **Bongo Virtual Classroom**, a platform where teachers and students can make video assessments in a virtual classroom environment.
- **Edpuzzle**, a free assessment tool that offers an opportunity to create interactive online videos for students and teachers. Students can also create and upload videos of their own for the teacher to review them.
- **Scrcast-O-Matic**, a screencasting and video editing tool that allows to capture any area of the screen and add narration. It also allows the teacher to have lectures from home and students to attend lectures online.

- **Canva**, a very user-friendly website where users can create posts for social media, birthday cards, CVs and much more from scratch or there are also simple templates that are easy to edit.
- **Kahoot!**, a quiz-game based platform suitable for all kinds of learners, from different ages or backgrounds.

## 7.4. Responsible use

As people get more and more connected and dependent on technology and digital devices for completing our basic daily tasks, data privacy and ethics are at stake. In this scope, the EU launched in 2017 the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation), a common EU approach to the protection of personal data as an approach to reinforce trust by putting individuals back in control of their personal data and at the same time guaranteeing the free flow of personal data between the EU Member States. The directive related to this policy framework - 95/46/CE Data Protection, is constantly under reform to take into consideration societal changes brought by the new technologies.

This action is particularly important to ensure that online companies and individuals are doing everything they can to protect the information they obtain from users. This act requires companies that have EU users to update their policies and promote more rigorous privacy strategies, to ask users for permission to collect, retain or sell key pieces of their data and to give users the right to access and request their data to be deleted. In particular, when companies use this data to profile a user. Profiling refers to the use of sophisticated pattern recognition algorithms to distil meaningful information from mass data and classify the user according to his/her preferences.

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On the user side, it is important to understand the concept of Internet identity, also online identity or internet persona, which is a social identity that an internet user establishes in online communities and websites. Therefore, the online identity is social and actively constructed as a copy (or not) of the users' own identity, a reproduction in the parallel online social structure. Risks involving the online identities relate to identity theft and cyberbullying. Users should always be aware of their digital footprint left by their online activities and presence.

In social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok or LinkedIn, where the user can share, co-create, or exchange various forms of digital content, including information, messages, photos, or videos, it is especially important to keep in mind that this content is curated by the user to show only the aspects that he/she favours. This incomplete (sometimes even false) depiction of the offline identity may lead others feeling that they have to try to live up to the lives they falsely believe others are leading. Many studies link the use of social media and the development of compulsive behaviour and addiction, since it is difficult to refrain from its use because comments and likes act as positive reinforcement triggers. (Bashir & Bhat, 2017, p. 126).

These characteristics encompass risks and dangers, because they lead to consequences impacting psychological wellbeing and mental health.

Another current concern about the digital online world relates to the fact that many users get information and news primarily from social networks, whereas the rise and uncontrolled widespread use of fake news is a tangible reality. Fake news not only can affect people's private life, but also the public sphere where alternate facts are spread through social media leading very easily and dangerously to misinformation.

### 7.5. Digital problem solving

When educators provide all the information that the learners need, these tend to adopt a passive behaviour when it comes to searching for information and finding the answers on their own. However, when educators provide an opportunity and the necessary tools for the learners to seek the information by themselves, the students become more active and rely more on their own capacity of discovering the answers for their questions by themselves.

Active learning corresponds basically to any pedagogical method that requires and fosters the involvement of learners in their learning process and therefore recognises and promotes their personal experiences in social contexts. Project- and problem-based learning, experiential learning, action learning, agile learning, design thinking and inquiry-based learning are examples of active and learner-centred methodologies that can be used to scaffold active learning. These methodologies normally are applied by having students working together in groups, but they can also be used to foster individual reflection (Vaz de Carvalho and Bauters, 2021). Supporting active learning through digital tools (virtual community's platforms, personalised learning platforms, games, simulations, virtual labs, virtual and augmented reality systems, etc.) creates learning environments where the "digital native" student feels comfortable and is motivated to learn (Batista & Carvalho, 2008).

In problem-based learning, the student is confronted with a problem and he/she must actively go through some steps to solve that problem. First, he/she has to study, identify and reduce the problem to a concrete formulation, therefore setting goals for its resolution. He/she then formulates questions that will lead towards his/her own process of information search, collection, analysis and synthesis. Learners then identify possible solutions and eventually implement and test those solutions to validate their answers.

Therefore, in the digital era educators should move away from outdated models of educating, and let their work and learning reflect inventive thinking and creativity.

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# Social Connections

TRAINERS FOR E-SOCIAL WORK

## 8. FACILITATING LEARNERS DIGITAL COMPETENCES



## 8. DIGITAL FEEDBACK

### 8.1. Feedback to learners

#### **The usage of digital technologies to provide targeted and timely feedback to learners**

This section will provide you with several characteristics of an effective feedback, followed up by the recommended digital platforms for sharing feedback to learners. Constructive feedback fosters students' improved performance and by providing insightful, practical, and tailored suggestions, not only will the learners evolve, but you will be able to build trustful relationships with them. Before we dive in, we shall highlight the key aspects any trainer should be mindful of when giving feedback.

- Have a positive attitude and make sure that the feedback is empowering and constructive, even if it touches the negative aspects.
- Provide specific examples and avoid vague and general phrasing.
- Be careful with your language – strong words such as “poor” or “weak” could demotivate the learner. A balance should be kept in wording in order to consolidate learning.
- Focus on the behaviour/actions, not on the person.
- Tailor the feedback to the learner – it should take into consideration each individual with their learning needs, achievements, personality, and learning style.
- Be timely – feedback should be delivered either straight away or within a day or two.
- Be mindful of your tone and do not be judgemental when presenting the negative aspects.
- Focus on solutions and what can be improved.
- Make sure the feedback is a two-way conversation.
- Follow-up.

Our recommendation is that the trainer uses a learner-centred feedback approach. According to Blumberg (2009) (apud Costelo, Crane, 2010), this model has the following characteristics:

- Understanding reason for learning content.
- Self-awareness of learning abilities and knowledge acquisition.
- Problem solving.
- Retrieving and evaluating learning situations.
- Communicating their knowledge in real-world contexts.

## Synchronous feedback

### Live feedback (oral)

After the trainers' evaluation of learners, they should schedule an individual feedback session to provide oral feedback. Speaking facilitates communication, mitigating the risks of not being fully understood and allows the trainer to use his voice inflections to emphasize on certain topics. Active listening is also an important skill learners should be equipped with, therefore, listening to their feedback is a good occasion to practice it. An appropriate video conference platform should be chosen for the session – it could be whether the one where the classes took place initially or another one at the convenience of both the trainers and the student.

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## Asynchronous feedback

### Recorded feedback (oral and written)

To preserve all the advantages of speaking, recorded oral feedback can be an efficient alternative. The trainers record themselves and then share the audio and/or video with their learners. The video conferencing platforms mentioned in Chapter 5 which include a recording feature can be used to provide this sort of feedback. Additionally, below we provide you with some platforms suggestions you could make use of.

[Vocaroo](#) is an online voice recorder which allows trainers to provide oral feedback under the form of an audio podcast.

[Mote](#) and [Kaizena](#) are great tools to provide online audio feedback for learners. Mote has a transcript feature for the audio comment for students to read. Kazeina has more features, however, they are included in the paid subscription.

[TechSmith Capture](#) (formerly Jing) is a platform combining screen audio and video content. Trainers can screen record the learners' assignments and provide verbal

feedback. After completion, a video link can be shared with the students, alongside with the grade (if case).

[Audacity](#) is a free open-source platform which allows instructors to create audio files, edit them and share them with students later on.

[Online voice recorder](#) is a completely web-based platform destined for audio recording, easy-to-use and efficient for providing feedback.

[QuickTime Player](#) is a video feedback platform, available for desktop, however, better optimised for the Mac OS.

[Knovio](#) allows instructors to provide more complex feedback, being able to create a presentation on the feedback, play the presentation and use a camera to add your own video to the feedback.

[Screencastify](#) allows users to record up to five-minute videos in the free version in which trainers can provide feedback. It is a screen recording extension from Chrome, useful for video comments.

**Useful tip!** Keep it simple. We recommend choosing only one or two methods for providing feedback, hence the instructor and the learner do not get confused by technicalities. Before recording your comments – in the case of asynchronous methods – make sure to communicate how the feedback platform works and the students understand its features. Before the synchronous feedback sessions, check your internet connection and kindly ask the learner to do the same in order to ensure an uninterrupted discussion. In addition, the instructor should agree in advance with the learner on the digital platform to be used during the feedback session.

### Three principles of learner-centred feedback

**1. Sensemaking:** *Learners are actively seeking dialogues with various sources (e.g., academic staff, peers) to enhance meaning-making. Feedback information provided by these sources is carefully designed to help them understand the key messages (Nicol, 2010).*

**2. Impact:** *Feedback information is designed to be actionable and to have a beneficial impact. While this impact can be cognitive, metacognitive, affective, motivational, or relational, the underlying assumption is that it will improve trainees' future learning or performances (Henderson, Ajjawi, Boud, & Molloy, 2019a).*

**3. Agency:** *Learners have the volition to seek, use and evaluate feedback information from a range of sources for their own benefit (Carless & Boud, 2018; Nicol, 2010). They also have sound evaluative judgement skills, which is “the capability to make decisions about the quality of work of oneself and others” (Tai, Ajjawi, Boud, Dawson & Panadero, 2017, p. 467).*

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