**Quality in Online and Blended Learning – Research**

“The use of video/computer games as a part of digital youth work”

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What does the Research / Practice Tell Us?

From the research and practice that I have read there appears to be several organisations which have been using video games as part of digital youth work delivery. Examples found have been from the UK and more widely in different European countries. Some organisations have been using video games in a blended approach with a physical ‘gaming café’ or similar augmenting an online delivery. Others more exclusively using video games in an online capacity as a method of engagement with young people.

Some of the main points to consider as outlined by Tony Dellaquaglia from YMCA Tayside:

* Cross platform (available on mobile, console, PC etc) games which would be accessible to be the largest group of young people.
* Use of Discord as a online community platform which the gaming rotates around.
* Staff having separate accounts and being comfortable / familiar with games and systems.
* Age ratings and themes of the games plus how to create private lobbies/servers.
* Safeguarding e.g. 2 staff online, consent from parents for U16s.
* Updating of the organisation’s social media / internet policy.

The use of online video games allows for youth work to engage with a group of young people who may not have normally linked in with other activities. It allows for the creation of a familiar place where co-operative or more competitive activities can be used to build relationships with other young people and the youth workers. In many ways the use of online gaming is simply another method of engagement replacing for example a game of pool in a youth club or a game of football in a games hall. Although that’s not to say that the games themselves have no benefit. This engagement could then develop into other skills such as coding, e-ports or content creation.

How Does Research / Guidance Help us Evaluate Effectiveness?

It was difficult to find a great deal of information on this particular point with regards to online gaming projects. That said, Carlow Youth Service evaluate their gaming engagement weekly asking about one thing that they liked and one thing that could improve. In addition, they use this and other feedback to encourage and support the young people to take responsibility to run and organise their events such as competitions.

This has had the impact of improving confidence and building new social and emotional connections with other young people and the youth work staff. It also provided a pathway for ‘heavy gamers’ to engage with other services have discussions around their gaming and take part in other projects and activities.

What are the key points from this research CLD practitioners need to think about for future delivery?

The key points for future delivery would be:

* Online gaming groups can help engage with young people who have social anxiety, physically isolated or face social isolation who may not normally be able to take part in physical face to face services.
* Funding. Initial set up costs may be quite high depending of the equipment and programme needs. Ongoing costs may exist if there are recurrent subscriptions to services or new games/programmes needed to be bought.
* Training and/or familiarity and confidence with the technology and programs used e.g. different gaming platforms, Discord, the games themselves and any social media platforms used. Are you just going to focus on one game e.g. Minecraft or will there be a range offered?
* Know how to create a digital safe space for the gaming and discussions to take place in i.e. having clear rules, staff knowing how to set up private game spaces which other ‘random’ people cannot engage with the young people in an unregulated way – managing risk.
* Registration of participants – balance between keeping access open and knowing who is in the online youth work-space.
* Staff having access to appropriate technology, reliable internet access and programmes to deliver the work.
* As with much of youth work, being young person led – look at ways to develop the young people’s skills into other areas.
* Build important relationships with youth workers with could then move into other digital youth work opportunities such as youth forums or face to face engagement.

Sources

Digital youth work​ and online gaming with Tony Dellaquaglia (YMCA Tayside) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fb54yxzozis>

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