

PROMOTING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CIVIC EDUCATION AND ACTIVE ONLINE PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH ROLE MODELS: THE CASE OF ACTION PROJECT

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Abstract

Being online is a way of living for young Europeans. In 2021, 95 % of young people in the EU made daily use of the Internet, compared with 80 % for the whole population. (Eurostat, Young people in Europe – digital world, 2022). However, young people do not use the full potential of digital technologies to access information on their civic rights, on health and education issues, or to participate in decision-making processes. In 2021, only one quarter (24 %) of young people aged 16–29 years in the EU used the internet for civic and political participation – expressing opinions online or participating in online consultations/petitions. There is a clear gap in the way young people use digital technologies, and this gap is even wider when it comes to disadvantaged youth.

ACTIon – Promoting active citizenship through civic education and active online participation of youth role models is an Erasmus+ KA3 Social inclusion project that started at the beginning of 2021 to fill this gap. The three-year project aims to train young people on how to use digital technologies to participate actively in their community, and in society as a whole. The project aims to support the integration of adolescents and young people (aged 14-25) from socially disadvantaged areas, minority and refugee groups into mainstream society by enhancing access to health, education, online participation, the labour market and civic engagement.

Based on an extensive theoretical framework outlining learning objectives, ACTIon project partners adapted and developed two tailor-made training programmes for youth role models from disadvantaged groups that can be used in both formal and non-formal education: Digital Participation and Active Citizenship (DigiPAC) and Model for Opinion Leaders Activation (MOLA). In doing this, the project partners drew on three good practice models: Popular Opinion Leader (POL) model, F.I.R.E. – From Idea to Reality and Execution app and OPIN youth e-participation platform.

The ACTIon training approach was piloted by five project partners from four countries (Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, North Macedonia) with complementary expertise in social inclusion, education, digital participation and network cooperation, while a Belgium-based partner took an active role in communication and dissemination of the project results. During 2022, ACTIon partners involved over 580 young people in the training programme and built a network of over 30 youth NGOs and schools, with more than 60 practitioners in a position to deliver one of the training modules.

First evidence of the project's external evaluation suggests that (based on self-rating) the skills young people developed most during the training were in knowing what information they can believe online, and in how to take action when they see something is wrong. While practitioners saw the biggest impact on their ability to help young people critically engage with online content, as well as engaging with community action, teachers, in particular, saw benefits in the way ACTIon can help them make connections beyond the classroom to the real world.

This paper showcases the theoretical basis and methodology of ACTIon's training programmes, highlighting some major piloting outcomes in schools and community-based education settings as an alternative approach to closing the digital gap and promoting active citizenship for disadvantaged youth.

Keywords: Disadvantaged youth, online participation, media literacy, digital skills, civic education, social inclusion.

1 INTRODUCTION

Being online is a way of living for young Europeans. In 2021, 95 % of young people in the EU made daily use of the Internet, compared with 80 % for the whole population. [1] However, young people do not use the full potential of digital technologies to access information on their civic rights, on health and

education issues, or to participate in decision-making processes. In 2021, only one quarter (24 %) of young people aged 16–29 years in the EU used the internet for civic and political participation – expressing opinions online or participating in online consultations/petitions.

There is a clear gap in the way young people use digital technologies and this gap is even wider when it comes to disadvantaged youth. What's more, “young people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods face discrimination, prejudice and isolation that make it harder for them to be active citizens. (...) For democracy to be effective, young people need to be encouraged to become active citizens and, therefore, to be involved in the societal, political and economic decisions that affect their lives.” [2]

“Digitalisation, as a transformative process of integrating digital technologies into everyday life is continuously shaping our society, and it has been recognised to have a significant impact on the youngest generations. It is accelerated by new technologies and has a high social and economic impact. As a social phenomenon, digitalisation may support or hinder the efforts necessary to achieve social inclusion. During the last decade, access to technology and the internet have increased, with a large part of the population accessing it for various purposes – work, communication, information or entertainment. Nevertheless, significant gaps can be identified in terms of skills, accessibility, equal opportunities, and types of services available and provided, particularly at the national level”. [3]

Therefore, the intersection between digitalization and social inclusion has quickly become one of the major challenges that we need to address for engaging the youth in social life and political participation in Europe.

2 DIGITAL SKILLS AND SOCIAL INCLUSION OF YOUTH: AN EU PRIORITY

Promoting the development of digital competences of citizens is one of the top priorities of the EU that gained momentum, especially in the last decade with the adoption of several strategies such as Digital Agenda for Europe (2010), Digital Single Market for Europe (2015) and A Europe fit for the digital age (2020):

“The European approach to digital future is based on three main pillars to ensure that Europe seizes the opportunity and gives its citizens, businesses and governments control over the digital transformation: (1) Technology that works for people (2) A fair and competitive digital economy (3) An open, democratic and sustainable society”. [4]

Technological change requires young people to quickly build the skills and competences needed for the digital era: “Being digitally competent is more than being able to use the latest smartphone or computer software — it is about being able to use such digital technologies in a critical, collaborative and creative way, including storing information, protecting digital identity, developing digital content and ‘Netiquette’. [5]

According to the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens published by the European Commission, the digital competence areas include “(1) information and data literacy, (2) communication and collaboration, (3) digital content creation, (4) safety, and (5) problem solving”.

Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) highlights the need for “common guidelines for teachers and educators to foster digital literacy and tackle disinformation through education and training” as one of its main action points with reference to recent data: “In a recent Eurobarometer survey, 70% of Europeans who responded shared that they come across news that they believe to misrepresent reality or even be false often.” [6] “In another survey, 74% of respondents expressed concerns about the presence of fake news in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.” [7] Therefore, skills such as identifying fake information and awareness of how to navigate online safely are among the key skills for the younger generation in order to make good sense of information online and be a proactive member of society in the flux of information.

The European Commission has also emphasised the link between building skills and competences for the digital era and promoting active citizenship and social inclusion: “A digital economy can also make society more inclusive. Citizens and businesses are not currently getting the full benefits from digital services (from e-government, e-health, e-energy to e-transport) that should be available seamlessly across the EU”. [8]

“In this context, European digital inclusion is mainly focused on making ICT more accessible and using it to reduce marginalisation, which has resulted in the inclusion of the development of skills necessary in this new digital era as a specific priority within EU funding (EU Social Fund, Regional funds or Erasmus+).” [9]

While digitalization can be used as an opportunity to support social inclusion, it can also offer new possibilities to foster youth participation.

The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 [10] focuses on three core areas of action: Engage, Connect, Empower. The strategy aims to foster youth participation in democratic life, supports social and civic engagement and aims to ensure that all young people have the necessary resources to take part in society. Under the core area “**Engage**”, the Strategy aims towards meaningful civic, economic, social, cultural and political participation of young people.

Besides other actions, the strategy calls on EU countries: “(1) to encourage and promote inclusive democratic participation of all young people in society and democratic processes (2) to foster the development of citizenship competencies, through citizenship education and learning strategies and (3) to explore and promote the use of innovative and alternative forms of democratic participation e.g. digital democracy tools.”

“Participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement is also one of the top priorities of the Erasmus+ Programme which supports the creation of formal education and non-formal learning opportunities to foster citizen participation in political and social life in Europe with focus on the development of social and intercultural competences, critical thinking and media literacy.” [11]

3 ACTION: ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CIVIC EDUCATION AND ACTIVE ONLINE PARTICIPATION

ACTIon – Promoting active citizenship through civic education and active online participation of youth role models is an Erasmus+ KA3 Social inclusion project that started at the beginning of 2021 to fill the gap between digitalization and social inclusion. The three-year project aims to engage, sensitise and train young people on how to use digital technologies to participate actively in their community, and in society as a whole. The project supports the integration of adolescents and young people (aged 14-25) from socially disadvantaged areas, minority and refugee groups into mainstream society by enhancing access to health, education, online participation, the labour market and civic engagement.

3.1 Theoretical framework: Key definitions and concepts

Desk research and a scientific analysis were carried out with the aim of outlining a common understanding of key concepts and setting the learning objectives for training modules. These were developed for educational interventions in formal and non-formal settings in the four project partner countries.

The Theoretical Framework and Analysis Report [12] laid out the foundations of the work to be carried out within the ACTIon project by setting common definitions of digital citizenship, civic education, media literacy and health literacy:

Digital Citizenship: The ACTIon project links the concept of digital citizenship to digital competence, digital education, digital responsibility and digital participation based on the following definition made by Council of Europe:

“Digital Citizenship may be said to refer to the competent and positive engagement with digital technologies and data (creating, publishing, working, sharing, socializing, investigating, playing, communicating and learning); participating actively and responsibly (values, skills, attitudes, knowledge and critical understanding) in communities (local, national, global) at all levels (political, economic, social, cultural and intercultural); being involved in a double process of lifelong learning (in formal, informal, non-formal settings) and continuously defending human dignity and all attendant human rights.” [13]

Civic Education: The choice of civic education as one of the key terms in ACTIon was made in an effort to encompass many overlapping conceptual terms, such as civic education, democracy education, civic responsibility, and civic participation based on the following definition:

“Civic education (also known as citizen education or democracy education) can be broadly defined as the provision of information and learning experiences to equip and empower citizens to participate in democratic processes. The education can take very different forms, including classroom-based learning, informal training, experiential learning, and mass media campaigns. Civic education can be targeted at children or adults, in developed or developing countries, and at the local, national or international level. As such, civic education is an approach that employs a range of different methods, and is often used in combination with other participatory governance tools...”

The overall goal of civic education is to promote civic engagement and support democratic and participatory governance. The idea behind civic education is to promote the demand for good governance (i.e. an informed and engaged public), as a necessary complement to efforts to improve the practice of good governance.” [14]

Media Literacy/ Digital media literacy: Media literacy refers to the skills, knowledge and understanding that allow users to use the media effectively and safely and many digital issues cannot be understood without traditional media literacy. Therefore, ACTIon project adopted a broad definition of media literacy, also covering the new challenges introduced by digital media:

“Media literacy in the information society is the ability to judge the true value of media content and to make informed choices”. [15]

“Media literacy encourages young people to question, evaluate, understand and appreciate their multimedia culture. It teaches them to become active, engaged media consumers and users”. [16]

“Digital media literacy [17] can be understood as the ability to search, interpret (construct meanings, distinguish between different types of messages, including commercial, political, etc.), evaluate (by decoding, analysing, synthesizing) and produce (create, adapt, modify) media content”. “It contains digital skills (information technology) and cybersecurity as additional characteristics”. [18]

Digital Health Literacy/eHealth Literacy: ACTIon partners also found it important to integrate into their training programme the skills related to the handling of health-related information and decision-making related to health behaviour and wellbeing based on the following definitions:

“Health literacy is defined as the ability to access, understand, evaluate and communicate information as a way to promote, maintain and improve health in a variety of settings across the life-course.” [19]

“The ability to seek, find, understand, and appraise health information from electronic sources and apply the knowledge gained to addressing or solving a health problem is defined as ehealth literacy.” [20]

3.2 Theoretical framework: Competences

Based on its conceptual analysis and research, the ACTIon project identified the digital competences that must be acquired in order to ensure that a young individual is able to achieve and practice digital citizenship skills.

The project used as a reference point the digital citizenship competences set by Council of Europe under three areas: Being online, Well-being, and Rights online. [21] According to the Council of Europe, “Being online” includes domains that relate to competences needed in order to access the digital society and freely express oneself, “Wellbeing Online” refers to domains that can help the user to engage positively in the digital society, and “It is my right!” includes competences related to the rights and responsibilities of citizens in complex, diverse societies in a digital context. Finally, the project set its learning objectives under 6 competence domains.

Table 1. Competence domains based on the Council of Europe’s model of Digital Citizenship (2021).

<i>Being Online</i>	<i>Wellbeing Online</i>	<i>It is my right!</i>
Access and Inclusion	Ethics and Empathy	Active Participation
Media and Information Literacy	Health and Wellbeing	Rights and Responsibilities

3.3 Training programmes: DigiPAC and MOLA

Based on an extensive theoretical framework outlining learning objectives, the ACTIon project partners adapted and developed two tailor-made training programmes for youth role models from disadvantaged groups that can be used in both formal and non-formal education: Digital Participation and Active Citizenship (DigiPAC) and Model for Opinion Leaders Activation (MOLA). [22]

MOLA is a 5-month interactive offline training module based on the of Popular Opinion Leader (POL) [23] model for informal community-based education, targeting young adults, up to 25 years old. The

method is based on identifying young people with leadership potential within a socially disadvantaged community and fostering their digital competences with a focus on:

- Media and health literacy: Teaching youth to be critically engaged consumers of online information.
- Digital literacy: Empowering them to participate in digital media in wise, safe and ethical ways.

The central aim of the programme is to train digital competences of young leaders in disadvantaged communities (based on the evidence-based Popular Opinion Leader approach) and enable the use of online tools to improve health literacy in their community.

The training programme then activates these young people as online influencers (role models) and aims for an effective and sustainable behaviour change among their peers and in their wider community.

DigiPAC is a 3-day training using online tools focusing on online interaction, civic education and digital participation for formal secondary-level education, targeting children and adolescents, approximately 14-18 years old. The central aim of the programme is to train digital and democratic competences of young people and enable the use of online tools to actively participate in their community/broader society.

The DigiPAC training programme also offers knowledge on how to use online tools for digital participation:

- OPIN youth e-participation platform [24]
- F.I.R.E. – From Idea to Reality and Execution app [25]

DigiPAC contributes thus to raise future citizens with active digital participation.

3.4 Piloting of training programmes: Four country cases

The ACTIon training approach was piloted by five project partners from four countries (Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, North Macedonia) with complementary expertise in social inclusion, education, digital participation and network cooperation, while the partner based in Belgium took an active role in communication and dissemination of the project results.

During 2022, ACTIon partners involved over 580 young people in the training programme and built a network of over 30 youth NGOs and schools, with over 60 practitioners in a position to deliver one of the training modules.

In order to tailor the piloting process according to the particularities of the local and regional education contexts the ACTIon project partners followed a two-fold implementation approach. In three countries (Germany, Greece and North Macedonia) the project teams conducted a series of online or offline capacity-building for teachers, pedagogical staff and youth workers who were trained to deliver the training programmes DigiPAC and MOLA afterwards to school students or to young people in non-formal education settings. In one of the countries (Bulgaria) the project teams delivered directly the training programmes to various groups of young people in schools, in youth community centres in rural areas or in ethnic minority communities (e.g. Roma). Thus, the direct beneficiaries of the training were both education, social and youth work practitioners and young people, activated and empowered to become role models within their digital and analogous peer networks.

The piloting process featured a wide geographical coverage of background communities and education settings: one metropolitan and one rural region in Germany (secondary schools and one youth work NGO), three regions in North Macedonia (youth work NGOs), six regions in Bulgaria (capital city, three Roma communities, two municipalities in rural areas) and a country-wide scope of coverage in Greece.

First country case studies were drafted based on the piloting experience that highlight the motivation to engage with the programmes, the competencies young people acquired and the outcomes and lessons learned.

The following section spotlights some exemplary findings and success stories of enhanced digital participation and citizenship at the grassroots across Europe.

In the Bulgarian town, Samokov, after a three-day DigiPAC training of young people from Bulgarian and Roma ethnic communities during a summer camp, the youth initiated an idea-creation process for local self-organised participation projects. The young participants committed to engaging with e.g.: improving the awareness of high school graduates about opportunities for continuing education at universities in Bulgaria and abroad, increasing the sensitivity of young people to children with autism / with special

educational needs, creating a youth platform for culture – an online site presenting cultural events in the town.

In the Iztok neighbourhood of Kjustendil, a town near the border to North Macedonia 13 young mothers from Roma community participated in the MOLA training programme. Its aim was to activate them to become popular opinion leaders and role models in their communities.

The delivering practitioner reported motivation and positive attitudes, an enjoyable and productive atmosphere during the training and a high rate of activation – 80% of the participants stepped in actively as digital role models and started creating and communicating digital content related to healthy child's nutrition reaching peer mothers from the community via social media.

“The topic of digital storytelling caused great interest among them. During the session on digital stories, emphasis was placed precisely on the power of these short videos to convey strong messages with appropriate video material (pictures, photos, text, music). They were very inspired and created interesting products. They managed to do so extremely independently. (MOLA trainer, Bulgaria)

“The group brought me amazing experiences with great moments and many positive people. I would recommend my close friends to participate in such a group, I think it is useful for others to participate because they will learn a lot of new things. Everything was more than fine.” (a young mother, MOLA participant, Bulgaria)

In the region of Brandenburg, a youth work practitioner delivered an adapted programme based on DigiPAC to a small group of adolescents, some facing learning difficulties. Among the major highlights was the relevance of the topics of DigiPAC to the youth even at younger ages than the usual ACTIon age groups. The training activities and methods were seen as definitely relevant for the target group. The topics of being and interacting in the digital realm are very relevant to participants' generation and are part of their lives in an integral way. Furthermore, the importance to explore together the implications of “being online” for the well-being of adolescents was highlighted by the trainer. Gathering participants' own experiences and sharing with one another, e.g. what [media, channels, tools] they use online, and engaging in conversation, and responding to questions, such as “What have you experienced online so far?” helped to create a trustful basis to introduce and handle more sensitive issues, such as “Social-media and me”.

“I think the focus on ‘Who am I?’ and ‘How do I present myself?’, ‘How do others present themselves?’, and ‘How does this affect all of us?’ is very interesting for the youth. I think it is very important to deal with these questions” (DigiPAC trainer, Germany)

4 CONCLUSIONS

First evidence of the project's external evaluation suggests that young people indicated (based on self-rating) the skills they developed most during the training were in knowing what information they can believe online, and in how to take action when they see something is wrong. While practitioners saw the biggest impact on their ability to help young people critically engage with online content, as well as engaging with community action.

According to one young person from North Macedonia: *“I realised I'm quite good at searching online media and can assess and understand people on social networks and in person.”*

An even more encouraging outcome is the fact the majority of young people felt they had improved their readiness to take action when they see something is wrong. It underscores the potential of ACTIon interventions to improve young people's sense of agency, not only equipping them with stronger analytical skills but enabling them to do something about the challenging situations they face.

In line with the outcomes for young people, practitioners agreed the training had had its biggest impact on their ability to help young people critically engage with online content, as well as engage with community action. Teachers in particular were beneficiaries of seeing how ACTIon can help them make connections beyond the classroom to the real world.

In terms of delivering DigiPAC and MOLA, the message has come through from young people and practitioners that less is more, and that slimming down the number of activities in sessions or expanding the intervention over time will help young people digest and integrate the content. As partners roll out the interventions, they have an eye to exploring how this can be done.

Another lesson learned was that despite its flexible module-based curricula the DigiPAC and MOLA training programmes have still to be further tailored by delivering practitioners and adapted to the learning needs and resources of the youth. In such a way a delivery in “smaller bits” over a longer period of time can better support youth from socially disadvantaged contexts in organizing their own learning and (digital) participation.

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