Empowering Youth Through Online Community Engagement

Illustrated By The Sharing Perspectives Foundation's Flagship Virtual Exchange

Online Community Engagement as an approach holds great potential for empowering youth with competencies like critical thinking, communication, empathy, collaboration and leadership skills. These transversal competencies in turn are key to reinforcing social inclusion and cohesion, and as such can have a positive contribution to the prevention of violent extremism.

Although you might think that having a generation of digital natives as a target audience means a sure success for your Online Community Engagement Activity (OCEA), youth prove to be harder to engage online on a *longer* and *deeper* level than other age groups. This is because with your OCEA you are competing for their attention and commitment with a large amount of online courses, applications, games, social media, and other platforms.

After a decade of experience with designing and implementing OCEAs for youth, the Sharing Perspectives Foundation (SPF) has found that focusing on building transversal competencies and on youth activation in your online efforts will enhance the levels of engagement as well as empower a young target audience.

The following three pieces of advice are key to answering how OCEAs can be employed to empower youth audiences:

➔ Make the OCEA participant led;

➔ Foster online safe - and brave - spaces where youth can voice their thoughts and opinions freely and feel heard;

➔ Include skill building and capacity strengthening activities in the OCEA

All of these can be achieved by the design, planning, and facilitation of your OCEA. This article will illustrate how to accomplish this, and introduce you to the design of SPF's flagship OCEA, a Virtual Exchange programme for youth.

The Sharing Perspectives Foundation On Virtual Exchange

SPF's flagship OCEA is international and intercultural, targeting youth audiences roughly between the age of 20-35 years old. They engage in the virtual exchanges as part of a learning path, i.e. as part of their higher education trajectory or informal learning processes. The objectives of these virtual exchanges are to facilitate a meaningful exchange between young people who are different from one another and who typically wouldn't meet each other in their regular day-to-day life. The live, weekly dialogue sessions provide a safe space where participants can confront challenging and sensitive issues, address power dynamics, and gain confidence to speak to their peers with honesty, empathy and curiosity. This experiential learning process stimulates the practice of 21st Century skills such as cross-cultural competence, critical thinking, empathy and communication skills.

All the Virtual Exchange programmes of the Sharing Perspectives Foundation have the following characteristics:

✓ They are learner-led, meaning that participants are the main drivers of the learning process;

✓ They combine synchronous, live and direct dialogue sessions with asynchronous interactions between participants;

✓ They are supported by trained facilitators who are monitored and supported through a strong quality assurance process;

✓ Participants are expected to prepare their interactions by engaging with bite-sized content on specific topics;

✓ Reflection on both the content and the dialogue process is structured through assignments.

Below you will see a visualization of the OCEA's structure:
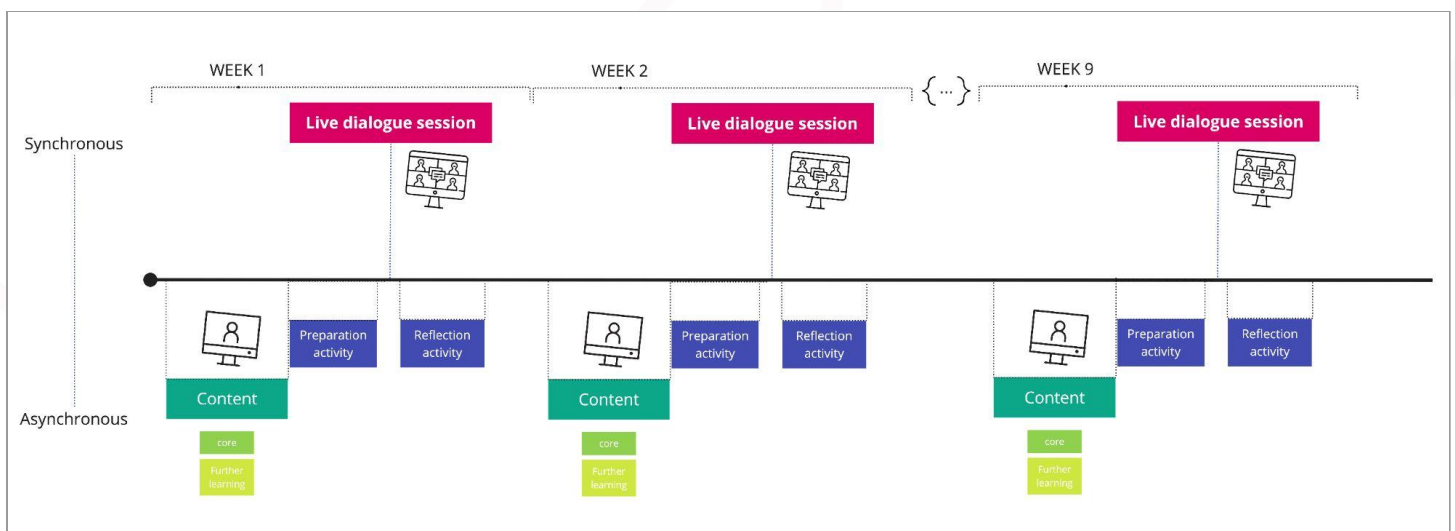
This example shows the weekly structure for a 9-week Virtual Exchange in which groups of 8-12 youth participants meet online in dialogue sessions for two hours each week. Participants stay with the same group and designated facilitator(s) throughout the entire exchange, which allows them to build strong interpersonal connections and trust.

In between their online group sessions they watch or read audiovisual content and submit preparation assignments and reflection activities. This is done asynchronously, in a self-paced fashion, but with a weekly deadline.

This structure has proven successful in creating youth empowerment. The following sections illustrate how the three previously advised practices are integrated into the design of the Virtual Exchanges, and how they could be built into any OCEA.

Make the OCEA Participant Led

In a participant-led approach, youth take center stage in the process and share from their own life experiences and knowledge. During the live online group sessions, the conversation starters or questions prepared by facilitators often aim to bring forward their personal stories and experiences instead of academic knowledge.

A participant-led approach fosters leadership skills and builds self-esteem amongst youth in the OCEA, as it values their input and engagement. Facilitators ensure that there is space in the live sessions for participants to raise questions, suggest discussion topics, and select online group activities they are interested in. Through regular reflective activities youth develop an awareness of their individual learning, the process of their group, and the overall purpose of the OCEA. This, in turn, stimulates youth to take ownership over this process.

In the end, making your OCEA participant led and youth centered will inherently increase the investment of participants, as they will develop a feeling of ownership over the experience.

Foster Online Safe - and Brave - Spaces

Although there are many spaces online where young people can connect, find entertainment and information, it may be difficult to think of accessible **online spaces where youth can share their perspectives and thoughts freely and experience their voices being heard**. The live online sessions in SPF's virtual exchanges offer this type of space, where participants can progressively build trust and connections with their peers, setting them up for deep and personal conversations and explorations of their perspectives.

Essential to achieving this are relationship building and trust building. including group activities, moments for lighthearted and fun interactions, and icebreakers in every online group meeting is strongly recommended. Make space for these when designing your OCEA and give facilitators tools and suggestions for activities to use (see the 'Group Process Framework' and the 'Online Dialogue Activity Bank' for examples).

Facilitators should be mindful of group dynamics and potential challenges. They should be trained in recognizing, assessing and responding appropriately when needed. Facilitators also play an important role in modeling positive behaviour, such as active listening and showing interest by asking follow-up questions. Techniques like summarizing and mirroring provide participants with the reassurance that they are being heard and valued.

Include Skill-Building and Capacity-Strengthening Activities

SPF's virtual exchanges always include interactive assignments and activities geared towards the development or strengthening of transversal skills like communication, critical thinking, collaboration, empathy and reflection. In the live group sessions, facilitators use specific tools and activities to help participants build a certain skill. Empathy building can take place, for example, through activities like 'Life Stories' or 'Switchedp Storytelling.' Critical thinking can be stimulated by meta-conversations and the 'Awareness Test' activity. In addition to these, the following interactive assignments offer opportunities for learning and skill building:

- ✓ Preparation assignment: Before each session, participants are expected to watch or read assigned materials/resources and submit a written response containing a question, their opinion, or something that especially piqued their interest from those materials. This allows them to practice communication skills by formulating their own opinion and sharing it coherently.

- ✓ Reflection assignment: After their weekly live group session participants submit a contribution to their 'reflection diary.' Through a short webform they answer reflective questions such as 'what was a learning moment for you this session' or 'name a highlight from today's session.' This exercise prompts them to practice reflection skills and critical thinking, as well as keep track of their progress throughout the OCEA.

- ✓ Collaborative assignment: Participants work together on one multi-week project, for example on an awareness initiative on a chosen topic. They do this partly asynchronously by preparing elements using digital tools, and also synchronously during the group sessions by discussing approaches or providing feedback on each other's ideas. This assignment offers participants the opportunity to practice using digital tools, creating ideas, supporting each other through providing feedback, and more.

  Offering some form of certification for skill development with your OCEA can be a great tool to attract youth and increase their commitment.

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The [Sharing Perspectives Foundation](#) is a not-for-profit offering contemporary online learning experiences for people to interact constructively across divides, whether national, cultural, social, or political. We use Virtual Exchange as an inclusive pedagogical approach offering people a meaningful international and cross-cultural experience. We provide training and consultations to businesses as well as educational institutions and nonprofit organisations who need support in the online engagement they offer or use as part of their work.