

Challenges and benefits of running online groups

Experiences of HEY partners during COVID-19.

These notes come from a discussion between HEY partners working with LGBTQIA+ young people in Victoria in 2020.

Notes compiled: September 2020

Challenges

Lack of engagement

(Some of the reasons for the challenge with engagement are explored further in other sections)

- Lack of engagement from young people is one of the major challenges faced. It is difficult to get the engagement to start with, and difficult to maintain it. When a group is very small it makes it harder for workers and makes young people questions whether they should bother attending.
- A large decrease in participation has been reported, which has slowly been building back up, but the average has dropped significantly. There is a widely held belief that this is due largely to the fact that online engagement is not what the young people are looking for.
- It is a challenge to find an appropriate platform for the group that is easy for them to engage with. Workers need to navigate the ins and outs of a platform which requires time for trial and error.
- It is also challenging to find meaningful material to use in the online space, online games or quizzes etc.

Online space fatigue

- Online space fatigue is experienced by both workers and young people. There is a common desire to return to meeting in physical spaces.
- Young people like knowing that there are things on offer, but they are often too busy or over-burdened by life to attend.
- The lack of engagement with online spaces also increases the workload for workers who may find themselves doing more one-on-one work involving phone calls and messages.
- Young people have so much screen time in their day already, with school and other social connections. They may also have scheduling conflicts with other online events.
- Some young people experience anxiety around using online meeting platforms. They may not want to see their face on screen, and some may not feel comfortable even with their camera off
- There's a sense that the online space does not provide the desired sense of connection that many young people are looking for. As one worker put it:

"It's kind of a 'mono' experience for them – there's not real light and shade – they're generally going online from the same space day in and day out and missing experiences they can physically inhabit so there is an increase in the sense of disconnection."

Lack of access to tech and/or unsupportive home environment

- Barriers to access for young people can come from a lack of accessible technology or from a home environment where they are not supported – either to gain access to the technology or to feel safe enough to engage with online groups.
- Technological and connection issues can be a barrier. Problems such as poor or no internet connection, drop-outs/poor reception or limited data availability. Some young people in rural areas do not have access to a device, access to data on that device or access to internet service.
- Interactions with young people at home can be fragmented and distracting in a group environment. Some of these distractions include mics and cameras being turned on and off by various participants, late arrivals and early departures, background noises, pets, other household members etc. This may mean young people are distracted or don't feel safe participating.
- Equitable access to a safe environment to engage, where there is privacy and appropriate support to use technology can be particularly problematic for young people when there are added barriers of disability and literacy.

An example given by a worker:

“A 17 YO transgender young person living with a disability in a regional town who is in a low income family and has no device or stable internet has not been able to access our online group. Due to COVID we have not been able to visit them and therefore they are missing their peer connections and interactions.”

- Parents who are unsupportive create a barrier in attempts to establish communication with younger people (12-13 YO's). Previously those young people would have been engaged in an education setting, and an assessment of risk and consent made, but COVID-19 has made that very difficult.

Benefits

Peer support, connection and referrals

- The peer support and connection that young people get from each other, as well as the support, information and referrals from workers, has continued. It is important for services to stay visible and keep offering the opportunity to connect, even with limited engagement.
- Young people enjoy mentoring each other and sharing information about services they would recommend others use, or suggest they avoid.

Increased connection and collaboration

- The removal of geographical limitations has opened up space for increased collaboration and broader connections for both workers and young people.
- For workers, collaborating with others doing similar work has proved hugely successful and allows different group members the chance to meet each other. This provides opportunities for young people to make more LGBTQIA+ friends which helps them to understand their own experiences. This has been a major benefit of online groups.
- The wider reach and potential of collaboration with online groups makes running workshops or inviting special guest presenters more viable as there is a larger audience.

Tips and suggestions

Flexibility and easy to use platforms

- The flexibility of virtual spaces works well when taken advantage of. Groups can be held on alternate nights or different times to suit the participants.
- Finding the right platform for your group that is easy to use is important. What works for some young people doesn't work for others. Zoom meetings work for some or Facebook groups and chat (private/closed groups). Instagram, online events or consultations are other ways to get young people involved. Text message reminders of upcoming events tend to be best as only the older young people use email.

Well promoted, relevant, rewarding content

- Short videos or creative images can help attract young people to a group or event. Opportunities to meet or hear from someone they admire also tend to draw more interest, including workshops run by people from the LGBTQIA+ community. The chance to be involved in a paid consultation can also increase engagement.

One on one engagement

- Consistent one to one communication using text messages or Facebook chat can help keep some young people engaged but does take more time for the worker than group messaging.
- There is a recognised need to give the message to young people that it's OK to switch off(line). Even in this era of technology, workers and young people are recognising that face-to-face interaction cannot be replaced. As one worker states:

" ... based on the feedback I'm getting, that the solution to keeping our young people feeling connected needs to not rely solely on online spaces/events/meetings etc."

Beyond digital connection

The observations made by the HEY workers in this discussion show the value of providing opportunities for connection online, but also point clearly to the limitations of solely digital communication.

This observation made by a worker was widely agreed with among others:

“Probably my biggest learning is that although the majority of young people see their devices and online connections as essential, they still have a strong desire for face to face/ human contact and an understanding that online interactions do not provide the same satisfaction.”

Some of the ideas being shared around finding ways to introduce forms of connection that provide a different feeling of satisfaction to online spaces:

- Care Packages – ‘queer care packs’ distributed via post to young people, or more generic ‘care packs’ if there are safety or confidentiality concerns. Queer care packs could include Minus18 pride packs. Personal notes and messages from staff could also be included.
- Letter writing project for LGBTIQA+ young people to write letters or create art for other LGBTIQA+ people across the regional areas. Everyone loves to find a handwritten envelope in the mailbox. There are possible barriers here if young people don’t feel comfortable to create for these projects at home or can’t access stamps or the post office.

This conversation will continue...

The connections between workers formed through the period of restricted face-to-face contact, and the new-found opportunities for collaboration, are a positive outcomes for 2020. The lessons learned will continue to be relevant.