

DIGITAL ATELIER FROM A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE*

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This chapter was based on the interviews with Katarzyna Michalska and Barbara Kozłowska, who created and delivered Digital Ateliers in Bytom (Poland) as part of the project.

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents Digital Atelier method from a perspective of a teacher. It points out its benefits, such as: raising level of civic engagement, providing young people with skills required on the job market and fostering relationships between teachers and students. It also provides practical tips which will help teachers and educators start their own Digital Ateliers. It concludes with reflections of two teachers involved in running Digital Ateliers on their personal benefits from participating in the project.

KEYWORDS

TEACHERS

SCHOOL

TIPS

PRACTICE

3 REASONS TO GIVE IT A GO

Digital Atelier can be an excellent addition to the core school activities. In Digital Atelier students develop their communication skills, empathy, ability to cooperate and organise their own work. These competencies are often missed out during usual lessons. Working in groups they have to face various challenges: choosing a leader, brainstorming ideas, accepting the fact, that their idea was rejected, making compromises. Digital Atelier also enhances citizenship and social awareness. Often it is the first time when students feel that they have influence on the world around them. They observe how their activity – film, happening, artwork – create specific results and provoke reaction of the audience. They realise that for this reaction to happen, some action has to be taken in the first place. Understanding this is a basis of any social and civic activity.

What is more, Digital Atelier develops competencies sought after on the job market. At school we often focus on the quality of the educational process, understood as delivering knowledge and skills related to solving specific tasks. However, success on the job market is much more dependent on the soft skills. Maybe this argument will convince your school board to experiment with Digital Atelier? It is also a way to practice creative use of new technologies, to explore how to use them in a new and constructive way. It is worth to consider this approach as an alternative to a widely spread ban on using smartphones at school.

Digital Atelier is also an excellent way to look at your students from a different perspective. Taking part in different activities they have a chance to show their extra-curricular skills, which are usually unknown to others. This allows teachers to incorporate this knowledge in planning future work, allowing students to maximise their potential. What is more, Digital Ateliers go against the idea that students are more competent in using new technologies than teachers. In practice it turns out that they interact with technologies in passive and repetitive way. Very rarely they are offered opportunity to use technologies creatively and constructively. It is teachers, who are able to show them these new activities. It creates completely new level of understanding. Suddenly we realise that we are on the same level and we can learn from each other. Therefore Digital Atelier can also be a starting point in changing relations between students and teachers.

HOW TO START? PRACTICAL TIPS

LOOK FOR INSPIRATION IN YOURSELF

Use Digital Atelier scenarios as inspiration, but do not hesitate to follow your own path. Look for topics that are of interest to you, but you haven't got time to pursue them. Be authentic. You can also consider introducing in your Digital Atelier topics from different subjects, such as: geography, history, civic education, national language or even physics. It is just a matter of your plan and imagination!

USE AVAILABLE DEVICES

You do not need PCs or tablets for your Digital Atelier. Smartphones are widely available and they are very powerful tools, which give you access to voice recorder and a camera. It fits in your pocket and can be carried everywhere. Students know their devices and do not need extra time to get familiar with some new equipment, which allows them to stay focused on their tasks.

TAKE IT STEP BY STEP

Experiment with Digital Atelier as a small project, one-off event or single after-school activity. It will allow you to test new format of working with a group and communicating with students. Very quickly you will find out that running Digital Atelier is very easy and you will see its first effects: students will be more engaged in the activities and will achieve better results. When you are ready, plan a cycle of activities and watch your students develop class after class. Tasks, which were difficult at the start, will become much easier, especially in the area of social interactions and teamwork.

GIVE YOURSELF TIME

Digital Ateliers work best in longer blocks (min. 1,5h). Switching between manual work and working with new technologies can be quite time consuming. Try to plan some extra time for problems with equipment or internet connection. Try not to hurry and not to rush your students. We are used to think that every minute at school should be occupied. However, students appreciate the fact that they can focus on something without time pressure. It allows them to collect their thoughts, think their work through and analyse their ideas. Preparing Digital Atelier also requires some work - from looking for inspirations and planning the process to testing apps, which you are planning to use.

TESTING, TESTING, TESTING

One of the goals of Digital Atelier is to let students experience how technologies can be used in creative and constructive way. It requires finding and testing different apps. It doesn't mean you have to learn all of their functionalities. Very often students will discover them during their work. Encourage students to share apps and tools that they use and to help their peers use them if necessary. Use it as an opportunity to start a conversation. How do we choose apps? Where to find good ones? Which criteria should we use to choose them?

FOCUS ON THE PROCESS

Prepare yourself for surprises. Be ready to abandon your own ideas. The final result might be different to what you expected. Try to be flexible and trust the method which will help you to achieve your goals. Do not panic, if you feel you lost control. It is one of the conditions of the creative process. The important thing is what happens to the participants, the results come second.

LOOK FOR SUPPORT

It is much easier to run Digital Atelier with two trainers. This way you can share the preparations and you can provide more support to the groups during activities. What is more, you gain additional motivation and some new perspective. Organising the Atelier after school or as a project day gives you more chance to work in a team. But what if you can't find an interested teacher? Start yourself, share the results, and the volunteers will follow!

LET THE STUDENTS TAKE OVER

When you and your students get familiar with Digital Atelier method, try to involve them in planning next meetings. Encourage them to diagnose needs and propose activities.

OPEN UP YOUR MIND

Running Digital Ateliers requires stepping out of our habits. Usually teachers enter classroom with specific plan for the lesson set out - how students should behave, what should they say, what the results will be. Digital Atelier works differently. The initial task can be completed in many different ways by the students. There is space for creativity, thinking outside the box, sharing ideas. Try not to dominate and force your opinions - the results will be positively surprising.

MY EXPERIENCE OF DIGITAL ATELIER - TEACHERS' REFLECTIONS

Today school as any other environment is affected by rush and time pressure. It doesn't leave much time to work in one's own pace and building relationships. Digital Atelier was for me a new and interesting experience. It was based on dialogue, lack of assesment and focus on the process. I had to leave room for students to make their own choices and this tested my level of openness. Switching to this new approach can be challenging. Trying to be good teachers we tend to plan students' reactions and time required to finish specific tasks. But what school calls „free time” in Digital Atelier becomes an opportunity to experiment, test, reflect and create. Students appreciate this, but it is difficult for teachers not to intervene! Another challenge is related to using mobile devices and testing different apps. But if you don't get discouraged at the start you will soon find that it can be rewarding and fascinating! What can be more satisfying for a teacher than a student who cannot wait for his/her another task? This happens in Digital Atelier; each activity becomes a surprise, an adventure. Both for students, who are allowed to work differently than during usual lessons, but also for teachers, who can get to know their students from a different perspective. What did I gain through Digital Ateliers? Confidence of working with apps. Now I use them all the time with various groups of students. I could also experience that the most important things happen when you lave a school desk, but later these skills positively affect students' academic performance. Once you open these doors you don't want to come back! (Katarzyna Michalska, 51st Primary School in Bytom, Poland)

Taking part in the **APP YOUR SCHOOL** project was a very interesting experience for me. Methodology proposed in this project, inspired by two excellent Italian teachers and artists - Bruno Munari and Alberto Manzi, connects all the elements of education which are for me the most important for development of young people. These are: communication skills, teamwork, division of tasks, creative and interdisciplinary approach to challenges, focusing on the cognitive process rather than the final effect, lack of competition and partnership in learning/teaching process. One of the main ideas behind Digital Atelier is to work with a student's potential and build their inner motivation. It is also worth noticing that in Digital Atelier teachers can follow their interests, passions, educational inspirations, even if they are outside the subject they teach. Digital Atelier is a method that encourages creative discoveries of both participants - students, as well as their creators - teachers. It proves that learning can be an amazing adventure. (Barbara Kozłowska, 51st Primary School in Bytom, Poland)