

# Evidence Brief

## Four Key Considerations & Five Promising Practices to Support the Delivery of an Online Curriculum

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### How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using various combinations of key terms, including: "online curriculum," "online curriculum design," "online group facilitation," "online group learning," "online learning," "online lessons," "online youth engagement," "social emotional learning," "youth," and "best practices."

### Summary of Evidence

#### A) Four Key Considerations

##### 1. Access to Technology

Equal access to technology remains an issue for many young people (Wicks, 2010). Consider whether your participants will require a computer, tablet or smartphone, and whether they have access to a secure internet connection (and perhaps if or how your program can support access to the required technology).

The availability and usability of the application for curriculum delivery must also be considered, and may be dependent on the age of the participants, their needs, any requested accommodations (Wicks, 2010), and/or the availability of parents or caregivers to provide support.

##### 2. Curriculum Design

Manage your expectations for how much content can be covered in an online (as opposed to in-person) setting, and "pare down to the most essential outcomes" (Rewa & Hunter, 2020, p. 25) by breaking content into smaller pieces (California Department of Education, 2020). For example, you may need to streamline the type and number of activities you have planned for each session (Rewa & Hunter, 2020). You might even consider having youth participants contribute, as "[i]nteractive and collaborative design is an important part of ... online curriculum design" (Wang, 2014, p. 444). Be sure to create space in your agenda for an opening and closing (possibly to allow participants to connect outside of the content being presented and shared), for mitigating any technical challenges, and for breaks (Rewa & Hunter, 2020).

An important consideration in designing curriculum for online delivery is the age of the young

people participating. Younger participants have less capacity for short-term memory, so content being broken down into smaller components will be important for their learning and understanding (Musgrove & Musgrove, 2004). Attentional capacity is also more limited for younger participants, so simplicity and consistency (for example, presenting information in a sequential/linear way, and repeating important messages) is also critical (Musgrove & Musgrove, 2004).

### 3. Educator/Facilitator Preparedness

There are several skills for online education and engagement that facilitators should be supported in developing before they are tasked with delivering an online curriculum:

- a) Facilitators must have **heightened communication skills** (Wicks, 2010). Evidence shows that effective communication is key in the development of online relationships. This includes sustaining a frequent pace of communication, mutuality, trust, responsiveness, and empathic communication (Hooley et al., 2016; Shpigelman & Gill, 2012). Like mentors, effective facilitators could consider using a warm, conversational style (as appropriate), while their less effective counterparts might use a more formal and distant tone (Shpigelman & Gill, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Be mindful of tone and “pay attention to the nuances of words” (Wicks, 2010, p. 26).
- b) Facilitators must be able to **recognize, and adapt to, different learning styles, needs, and abilities** (Passey, 2017; Wicks, 2010). Consider how program participants are able to focus in three ways (Passey, 2017, p. 30): **socially** (are they able to engage with others?), **emotionally** (can they accommodate the emotional demands of online learning?), and **cognitively** (can they accommodate the cognitive demands of online learning?).
- c) Facilitators must be able to **manage time and energy** (see also practice #4, below).
- d) Facilitators must be able to **prepare for sessions in advance**. More planning is required for learning in online (as opposed to in-person) settings (Rewa & Hunter, 2020; Wicks, 2010).
- e) Facilitators must **practice the technology ahead of time**. Teaching participants how to use the technology will be part of those first sessions, and the facilitator will be the go-to expert for answering questions and responding to concerns about the platform (Rewa & Hunter, 2020).

### 4. Policies & Procedures

Programs should develop clear and accessible policies and procedures that cover a variety of

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<sup>1</sup> There are a variety of text-based communication strategies used to develop rapport with young people in therapeutic relationships that could possibly be adapted to online learning environments. See the Appendix for definitions and examples.

aspects specific to online programming (Garringer et al., 2019; Coleman & Broderick, 2013), including:

- appropriate use of technology and other guidelines for communication
- guidelines for in-person contact and/or online communication between participants outside of the curriculum delivery platform
- privacy and confidentiality, including steps that the program will take to monitor and ensure the safety of participants<sup>2</sup>
- how to access technical support
- post-program contact, both in-person and online

Program staff should ensure that policies and procedures are clearly and consistently communicated to facilitators and youth, as well as parents or caregivers, before the start of programming (Schwartz et al., 2014). This may help to prevent challenges before they arise.

## **B) Five Promising Practices to Support the Delivery of an Online Curriculum**

### **1. Be present and foster ‘attentive connection’.**

Interpersonal relationships between educators and students are critical in online learning (Nicholls, 2003). Facilitators must be **intentionally present** during sessions (California Department of Education, 2020); minimize distractions so that you can be engaged and attentive, with your camera and microphone on, and responsive to the needs and concerns of youth, however they may be raised or expressed on the chosen platform (i.e. ‘raising hands,’ asking questions in the chat/discussion forum, or even sharing an opinion with an emoji).

**Be aware of who is and is not participating**, and check-in with young people throughout each session using tools that may already be built into the platform, including polls to ask questions or posts in the chat/discussion forum (Rewa & Hunter, 2020, p. 11). When youth do participate, be sure to **let them know you “see” them**; the “more seen people feel, the more they are likely to engage” (Rewa & Hunter, 2020, p. 12). **Be attuned** to the ways that “dynamics of oppression play out. Marginalized groups and those with oppressed identities often tend to participate less frequently” (Rewa & Hunter, 2020, p. 13), and this can be compounded by technology (Rewa & Hunter, 2020). Facilitators have the power to **be invitational** to ensure that less-heard voices are encouraged, and able, to contribute (Rewa & Hunter, 2020).

An **attentive connection** is created when facilitators prioritize intentionally connecting with

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<sup>2</sup> Although the platform’s capabilities for data protection and online safety are important (Ellett, 2020), privacy and confidentiality must be considered more broadly (for example, whether the facilitator and participants have access to spaces from which they can communicate privately), as must the need for parental/caregiver consent or engagement (depending on the age of the participants).

program participants, ensuring that each young person feels “supported and motivated to thrive” (Nolan, 2016, p. 94) and develops their own capacity “to listen, self-regulate, effectively collaborate, and motivate themselves” (Nolan, 2016, p. 103). For many online educators, “having a purposefully created strong and caring relationship or connection to their students is an intrinsic part of being a teacher” (Nolan, 2016, p. 117). Facilitators can foster attentive connection using **social emotional learning**, the “process through which young people enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and behaving to achieve important life tasks” (as cited in YouthREX, 2016; Nolan, 2016). The purpose of education and engagement, then, becomes not just about achieving learning objectives related to the content or topic of study. In an online setting, attentive connection is created “in a virtual learning space, [but] it is an explicitly human connection” (Nolan, 2016, p. 117).

Being present and fostering attentive connection includes **honouring young people’s emotions**, especially in times of uncertainty, crisis, or trauma.<sup>3</sup> Recognize that “every participant is going to bring their emotional state into their sessions” (Rewa & Hunter, 2020, p.9). A few tips for facilitators to support this work (Rewa & Hunter, 2020, p. 10-11) could include:

- Creating space for youth to acknowledge their emotions.
- Creating space to check-in (and check-out) with participants about how they are feeling.
- Modelling grace and patience in your facilitator role.
- Using frequent breaks.

## **2. Establish group norms.**

In an online setting, teaching is a “facilitative process” (Esarco, 2009, p. 8); information is “communicated through interaction, which is facilitated through communication” (Esarco, 2009, p. 106). Although the program may have already outlined appropriate policies and procedures for online curriculum delivery, facilitators may want to engage with participants, early on in their sessions, to co-create group norms – an agreed-to code of conduct that provides guidelines for using the platform (Crosby, 2018) and for appropriate online behaviour (Ellett, 2020; Barbour & Plough, 2009; Esarco, 2009).

## **3. Use different approaches to engaging with youth.**

Consider a variety of approaches in the delivery of an online curriculum (Crosby, 2018). This will not only allow facilitators to adapt to different needs and abilities, but also to maintain levels of interest and engagement throughout and across sessions.

Facilitators can consider offering:

- Opportunities for **active learning**, which could include a combination of lectures, discussions, videos, audio clips, activities, and individual work (California Department of Education, 2020;

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<sup>3</sup> This Evidence Brief was developed in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rewa & Hunter, 2020).

- Opportunities for **facilitator-participant and participant-participant interactions**, including creating smaller (i.e. breakout) groups (California Department of Education, 2020; Crosby, 2018; Esarco, 2009).
- Opportunities for **participants to give voice and have choice** so that they view their experience as “relevant, engaging, and fun” (Crosby, 2018, p. 144).
- Opportunities for **different types of projects or assignments**, including multimedia options like “slides, videos, podcasts, blogs, data visualizations, websites, infographics, etc.” (California Department of Education, 2020).

Facilitators should try, however possible, to **minimize multitasking and discourage distractions** during each session. A few tips for facilitators (Rewa & Hunter, 2020, p. 7-8) could include:

- **Setting expectations** by encouraging youth to set themselves up to avoid distractions (for example, participating from a quiet space or using headphones with a microphone).
- **Setting the tone** at the beginning of each session by acknowledging that distractions are a challenge, or by inviting participants to remove distractions from the outset.
- **Using distractions to engage participants** (for example, by having youth use their smartphones to participate in a poll or other activity).

#### **4. Be mindful of the time and be aware of pacing and the energy of participants.**

In an online setting, a facilitator can get lost in responding to each participant, or may try to create space so that every participant has an opportunity to be heard. Given time constraints, facilitators might keep a tally to ensure that they respond to each participant at least once, and that each participant can have at least one chance to contribute in a single session (California Department of Education, 2020). Again, be sure that your agenda creates space for an opening and closing, as well as time for managing technical issues and for taking breaks.

Ensuring that students are working at the same pace can be challenging in an online setting. Facilitators could share the tasks or work required for the duration of the program at the beginning of the first session, and work with ‘windows of time’ instead of specific due dates for projects or assignments (California Department of Education, 2020). You may even have to differentiate timelines or deadlines, depending on the needs of participants who struggle with remote learning (California Department of Education, 2020).

Members of online groups – both facilitators and participants – will experience fatigue; staring at screens takes a mental toll (Rewa & Hunter, 2020). A few tips for facilitators to help manage their energy, as well as the energy of young people (Rewa & Hunter, 2020, p. 8-9), could include:

- **Limiting the length** of the session (for example, to no more than two consecutive hours at a time).

- Again, **scheduling breaks** (at least a 5-10-minute break after two hours; if facilitators are leading more than one session in a day, a 30-minute break between those sessions should be considered), which could include moments to stretch or reposition, to close your eyes, or to get up and move your bodies (to everyone’s comfort and ability).
- **Delegating facilitation tasks**, either to participants (when appropriate) or to a co-facilitator (when possible).
- Using **different approaches** throughout a session to engage participants (see also practice #3, above).

### **5. Be available and accessible outside of scheduled programming.**

Facilitators could consider being available to participants for one-on-one conversations online, whether through the platform or a messaging/video app, or even by phone (in accordance with the policies and procedures of the program). These ‘office hours’ can create space for youth to ask questions that they may not want to raise in front of other participants, seek additional or specific resources or supports, and develop a personal rapport with the facilitator (California Department of Education, 2020).

## Appendix: Definitions & Examples for Text-Based Communication Strategies\*

### Emotional Bracketing

Important emotional content is placed in square brackets (particularly emotional information that could not be understood from the text alone). The two people communicating are able to learn more about one another, and the young person is encouraged to be self-aware and externalize their feelings. Example of a message from a client to a counsellor (taken from Collie et al., 2000):

I don't think I'm ever going to have a worthwhile relationship [very, very sad]. Richard called again to say I'm an idiot [angry with myself]. He's so mean [actually I think I'm more angry with him]. But, hmm, now that I think about what you said again, I am actually feeling angry with him [Weird. I feel pretty good just now].

### Descriptive Immediacy

This technique is used to enhance connection, particularly to highlight a moment of intense feeling. Example of a message from a counsellor to a client (taken from Collie et al., 2000):

I have just finished reading your last email, Angie, and my smile is a mile wide. As I think about your successes over guilt, I find myself nodding my head and saying the words, "You did it, you did it," smiling all the while. If you were here with me now, you would see me shrugging my shoulders with my hands in the air, as if to say, "Well...looks like guilt's power is all burned out." Congratulations, Angie.

### Mirroring

The facilitator can mimic a young person's written patterns of conversation, informal language, use of pronouns, metaphors, and/or emoticons/emojis (Gatti et al., 2016; Timm, 2011); see also below.

### Metaphor / Storytelling

The use of metaphor, similes, and other storytelling techniques can support communication and promote understanding of difficult thoughts and feelings (Simon & Mak, 2014; Timm, 2011; Shiller, 2009).

### Emoticons/Emojis

Emoticons are representations of facial expressions, used to express emotions, and emojis are digital images that can convey feelings. Both can be useful tools in text-based communication with young people.

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\* Adapted from YouthREX's Evidence Brief, *Six Promising Practices in Providing Online Counselling to Youth* (2019).

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