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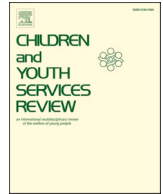
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Scrolling with young people: Transferring general youth work methods into digital spaces

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing significance of the online lifeworld in the lives of adolescents, youth work must adapt its methods to support young people's personal development and social participation in this hybrid online space. To date, there is limited knowledge on how youth workers can effectively employ methodical actions in the online environment. This paper draws on established offline youth work methods to explore their potential transferability to the online context. The research question guiding this study is: *How can offline youth work methods be used in the online lifeworld to support adolescents' developmental needs?* Using the Change Laboratory method, 26 youth workers from 14 youth work organisations in the Netherlands participated in this research. The findings suggest that while offline methods provide a valuable resource, they cannot be directly transferred to the online context without adaptation. Instead, they offer a framework for seven specific methodical actions that can be adapted or developed for the online context. They are: 1) Increasing online visibility and accessibility, 2) Orienting, 3) Signalling, 4) Making contact, 5) Building meaningful relationships, 6) Assessing needs, and 7) Providing support. By identifying these seven methodical actions which are crucial for addressing the developmental needs of adolescents online, this paper contributes to the growing body of knowledge on youth work in the online lifeworld.

1. Introduction

Youth work, as a part of social and/or educational practice, supports young people transitioning to adulthood. Youth work occurs wherever young people are present (Smith, 2013), including streets, shopping centres, sports facilities, schools, community centres, youth centres, and online spaces (Metz, 2011). Within these settings, and in third socialisation – leisure – domain (Council of Europe, n.d.), youth workers strive to build connections with young people, assess their needs, encourage their engagement, create learning opportunities, and promote their active participation. The predominant presence of young people in rapidly evolving online spaces highlights the significance of youth work in the online lifeworld. However, the developed methods for supporting adolescents in the online lifeworld remain limited. Offline youth work methods such as detached youth work, social group work and individual guidance have been scientifically substantiated through practice-based research (Dowling, 2020; Koops, Metz and Sonneveld,

2013, 2014; Rumping et al., 2017). However, to this point, knowledge is lacking on which methodical actions youth work can employ online to support personal development and social participation. The online lifeworld is characterized by different possibilities and challenges for youth work practice (Todorovic et al., 2023), so while offline youth work methods can probably be useful to a certain extent, they are probably not fully transferred to the online context.

In this paper we draw on existing knowledge about offline youth work methods to explore in a Change Laboratory setting whether and how those methods can be transferred to online youth work practice. The research question is: How can offline youth work methods be used in the online lifeworld to support adolescents' developmental needs?

This paper begins by defining youth work and outlining its core principles. Next, it delves into youth work methods used in offline youth work and their implications for digital settings. The study's framework is then introduced, followed by the research methodology, with a particular focus on the Change Laboratory approach. The findings present

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seven methods for online youth work, offering insights into their practical applications. Finally, the paper discusses the implications for professional practice and challenges of implementing the methods.

2. Youth work methods in the offline and online contexts

General youth work methods are often focused on the location where youth work practices take place (e.g. detached, outreach youth work and streetcorner work), on the specific target group (e.g. girls work) and on the type of services provided (e.g. information and advice service, individual guidance, social group work). Youth workers make contact with young people at the places where they are, either offline in the streets, parks, shops and school or online (Smith, 2013). In the offline context, youth workers employ the detached and outreach youth work method to find, reach out to and connect with young people. With this method, youth workers seek out individuals and groups of (vulnerable) young people in environments where they spend their time. They connect with them, build meaningful relationships, identify problems and needs, provide services and offer young people appropriate support (Dowling, 2020; Schellekens, 1998). Youth workers employ different youth work methods to provide this support, including information and advice services, individual guidance and social group work, and/or they refer young people to other services, youth workers and activities.

Online youth work in the Netherlands has developed and grown significantly in recent years (Hamdiui and Medendorp, 2022). The literature suggests that this type of youth work is not considered to be a method in itself but rather an area of practice where digital media and technology are acknowledged and actively employed (Höylä and Reponen, 2019). This is a hybrid environment with blurry boundaries between private and public spaces (Emmelkamp, 2004; Jones, Williams and Fleuriot, 2003), where different actors (e.g. young people, parents and other pedagogical actors) share the same space (Sheombar and Hermes, 2019). Previous studies (Hamdiui and Medendorp, 2022; Koschei and Brüggén, 2023) have pointed out that new policy, knowledge, competence and skills are needed for youth workers to reach their aims successfully and provide adequate support in the online lifeworld. For example, a study of Pawluczuk et al. (2019) reveals that youth workers struggle to fully utilize digital tools for engaging with youth and provide them support. This support can be offered either in person, in digital environments or through a combination of the two (European Commission, 2018).

2.1. Identifying methodical actions as a foundation for youth work in the online lifeworld

For the purpose of this study, we draw upon the existing offline youth work methods to see which of them are transferable to online youth work practice and if they need to undergo a substantial change. From the literature (Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services, n.d.; Koops, Metz and Sonneveld, 2014; Manders and Metz, 2017; Paananen, Piironen and Uustalo, 2022; Rumping et al., 2017) we extracted six common methodical actions that are central in the following offline youth work methods: detached and outreach youth work, information and advice service, social group work and individual guidance. The six actions in Table 1 potentially describe a general process of how youth workers connect with young people and engage in their lives to provide appropriate support as the end goal.

The overview in Table 1 shows how young people are found and contacted in an offline setting; this is followed by picking up the signals about their ambitions and problems, learning their interests and needs and providing suitable support. The structure of these methodical actions is flexible and does not always follow a strict linear progression from action one to six; the order can change depending on the circumstances, set goals and the degree of engagement and time allocated to each action (Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services, n.d.).

To our understanding, knowledge is lacking about methodical

Table 1

Offline methodical actions from detached and outreach youth work, information and advice service, social group work and individual guidance (Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services, n.d.; Koops, Metz and Sonneveld, 2014; Manders and Metz, 2017; Paananen, Piironen and Uustalo, 2022; Rumping et al., 2017).

Action	Description
1. Background research/Orienting	Gathering information about the possible locations of young people, target groups, youth population (gender, age, race, etc.), type of youth culture and interests of young people, orienting about the possible partners and agency of interest for young people, etc.
2. Signalling/Observation	Observing external characteristics of young people (e.g. do they look happy, gloomy, tired or neglected?), is there evidence of drug abuse or violence, engaging in conversation with young people and listening to what they have to say, etc.
3. Making contact	Introducing yourself, giving information about what you can do for young people, giving information about an activity and/or youth work club, showing a genuine interest in who young people are, their interests, putting young people at ease with a trustworthy attitude and promoting a good first impression
4. Building a meaningful relationship	Deepening the contact with young people, getting to know each other better, sharing more personal information, interests, views and concerns
5. Assessing needs	Learning about what young people need, what aspirations, problems and support they need, assessing the manifested and latent needs
6. Intervention/Providing support	Offering instrumental, informational, socio-emotional and cognitive support, referring and accompanying the young people to other youth workers, activities, professionals or agencies

approaches for online youth work practice. Social work – and digital social work in particular – is an area related to youth work from where we can acquire insight into acting in an online context. Pink, Ferguson and Kelly (2021) suggest that digital social work practice is characterized by a hybrid and anticipatory nature that is constantly evolving through the integration of digital, material and social elements. Within the framework of digital social work, we can learn how and which methodical actions can be employed in an online setting to support vulnerable target groups. Hartman-van der Laan (2019) proposed a Digital Social Work Model for possible actions at the micro-level, as reflected in Table 2.

Table 2 summarizes the actions social workers can take regarding online signalling and providing online support. Compared with actions in Table 1, online signalling and providing online support do not differ much from the equivalent offline methodical actions. The same conclusion cannot be drawn for the other four actions in Table 1 (i.e. background research/orienting, making contact, building meaningful relationships and assessing needs), as the Digital Social Work Model does not offer any information regarding these four approaches from offline youth work practice. Furthermore, the proposed model offers an extensive list of specific action possibilities without providing guidelines for how to implement them in practice. While Table 2 provides valuable insight, Table 1 presents a more detailed and nuanced set of options for the methodical process of youth work practice. Consequently, while not disregarding the information from Table 2, we have chosen Table 1 as the more suitable framework for addressing our research question.

2.2. Offline youth work methods and their implications for youth work practice in the online lifeworld

In the literature on youth work (and social work), we investigated how the offline actions from Table 1 relate to online context and which challenges and opportunities arise. For the first two actions, background research/orienting and making contact, the literature suggests considering that the online lifeworld changes the spaces and places where and

Table 2
Digital Social Work Model – Possibilities for methodical actions,

Social work role	Signalling and discussing	Estimating	Supporting
Micro level – online clients	General signals and discussion points	General points of interest	General interventions
	What do you do on the internet?	Is anyone in danger?	Providing information
	What do you like?	Is the online behaviour transgressive?	Media literacy workshop/ training
	What don't you like?	How media savvy is the client?	Follow along
	What feeling does this evoke in you?	Is there any question of addiction?	Being present online
	How does your social environment react?	Is there social exclusion involved?	Playing (online) games
		In what way can social inclusion be promoted?	Holding an individual conversation
		How to support online social functioning?	Holding a group discussion
			Providing alternatives
			Addressing privacy and security
			Interventions
			Referrals

adapted from Hartman-van der Laan (2019, p. 78).

how young people can be found and reached (Braam et al., 2008). Youth workers have to continue their work with young people in these fluid and hybrid digital spaces and places (Melvin, 2018), which poses new challenges but also provides new opportunities, as the literature shows that the online lifeworld offers youth workers the chance to get information about young people (Chan and Holosko, 2017), make and maintain contact with them, and reach new target groups that are invisible or difficult to reach in an offline setting (European Commission, 2018).

For signalling (action 3), the online lifeworld makes it possible to be quickly and easily informed about the expressions, trends, needs, problems and behaviour of young people (Hartman-van der Laan, 2019). A previous study on this subject has shown that young people leave traces online about their needs and problems, such as pictures of drug and alcohol use or threads and posts about sex (Chan and Holosko, 2017). At the same time, it also appears that young people online often highlight only one aspect of their situation (Lim, 2017). It can also be challenging to interpret the online signals from young people, because online platforms and the young people themselves often have their own online language, emojis, memes and abbreviations, which can be unclear and unknown to parents and other pedagogical actors (Chan and Holosko, 2017).

Building a meaningful relationship and assessing needs (actions 4 and 5) could be challenging in the online lifeworld because communication with young people is conducted at distance in digital spaces and on image-based platforms (Jaynes, 2020). This context, where nonverbal communication and a sense of presence are often missing, can pose difficulties for youth workers in building and maintaining meaningful relationships with young people and properly assessing their needs.

Fulfilling their professional youth work role in the last action (intervention/providing support) in the online lifeworld requires youth workers to be part of young people's online lifeworld (Hartman-van der Laan, 2019), including speaking their online language (Chan and Holosko, 2017). The literature has suggested several opportunities for this action. For example, online support can be offered at any time, which allows adolescents to decide when and at what pace they want support (real-time synchronous or delayed a-synchronous) (Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017). Request for support can also be done completely

anonymous (Hamdiui and Van Den Broek, 2019; Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017), and this anonymity can give young people the space to express their problems and questions more openly and honestly, as well as to ask for support (Harris and Birnbaum, 2015).

The six offline methodical actions from Table 1 and the described opportunities and challenges that arise from those actions in the online context were taken as a central point in this study for further investigation of whether these actions, based on the existing body of knowledge for offline youth work methods, can be used to support adolescents in the online lifeworld.

3. Methods

To explore whether and how the offline youth work methodical actions can be used in the online context, the Change Laboratory (CL) method was employed. CL is based on the theory of expansive learning (Engeström, 1987). It facilitates collaborative learning, research and innovation within workplace settings (Kajamaa and Hyrkkö, 2020). In our study, the CL method was chosen as an appropriate approach to make optimal use of the existing and tacit knowledge of the participating youth workers. The objective was to stimulate critical reflections; facilitate discussion and the exchange of knowledge, experiences, problems and solutions within a group setting; and to gain new insights directly from the youth work practice.

An inductive approach was employed within the CL method. By investigating youth workers' experiences from the interactions with young people in the online lifeworld, we sought to learn what use we can make of the existing body of knowledge regarding general youth work methods in differentiating appropriate actions for supporting adolescents in the online lifeworld. This process was not limited to an examination of the existing knowledge but extended to the search for potential solutions and innovative approaches. By engaging with the experiences of youth workers and integrating their perspectives into the larger framework of knowledge, we aimed, within CL, to learn new approaches that respond to the challenges and opportunities in the online lifeworld of adolescents.

A total of 26 youth workers from 14 youth work organisations across six Dutch provinces participated in this study.¹ These organisations were small (i.e. fewer than 50 employees) and medium-sized (i.e. between 50 and 250 employees), and were located in both smaller and larger municipalities throughout the Netherlands. They provide online and offline professional youth work services, including detached youth work, individual and group guiding and counselling, information and advice services, etc. The selection of the youth workers was carried out by the managers of the participating organisations. The inclusion criterion was at least one year of experience with working in the online lifeworld of young people, aiming to ensure that the participating youth workers could reflect on their actions and experiences while working online, as well as critically assess and further develop their online practice. The 26 professional youth workers were divided into four smaller groups for practical reasons while conducting CL: group 1 (N = 5), group 2 (N = 8), group 3 (N = 6) and group 4 (N = 7). Each group was deliberately composed to be heterogeneous, consisting of youth workers with diverse experiences. This included experience in online outreach to young people, online signalling, and online counselling. In the period from January to May 2021, each group met five times, with each meeting lasting three hours. In total, 20 online meetings took place via MS

¹ This study was initiated in the context of a formalized and structural partnership between our research group at (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences) and 14 youth work organisations. This official partnership is based on agreements on financing research projects, setting research agenda, conducting research and sharing knowledge. All the participating 14 youth work organisations signed an agreement with us on how the research will be financed, conducted and how the data will be managed.

Teams. The first author and a colleague-researcher moderated and supervised all group meetings. All meetings were video recorded and transcribed for the analysis.

3.1. Approach

To facilitate CL, Engeström's (1987) expansive learning cycle (depicted in Fig. 1) was used to enable the participating youth workers to analyse the current situation and problems in their daily online activities, as well as to seek possible solutions and appropriate methodical actions (MAs) (Engeström et al., 1996).

The six steps from Fig. 1 were processed as follows:

The first two steps (i.e. charting the situation and analysing the situation) were dealt with in three online meetings. During the first step, 'charting the situation', the participating youth workers were invited to bring up a case, problem or a situation from their interactions with young people online. When describing the situation, the following three questions were central: What exactly happened? Who was involved? Why does something need to be done? In all three meetings we tried to collect as many as possible situations in which youth workers experienced a challenge in acting properly in an online context. As a group, the youth workers decided which situation to choose as a subject for further analysis. The second step was processed by thoroughly examining five components related to the situation chosen in step one. These components were formulated using the basic structure from offline youth work methods:

- 1) Aims and target group: What aims can be achieved in this or in a similar situation? (This encompasses age group and extent of personal or social problems of target group you aim to reach/include in this or in a similar situation.)
- 2) Pedagogical actor: How should the physical and social environment be organized so that it contributes to the personal development and socialization of young people in this or in a similar situation? What is important in the relationship between youth workers and young people within the online lifeworld where youth workers try to stimulate and support personal development and social participation of young people?
- 3) Organisation and management: What organisational conditions are necessary for problem-free acting in this or in a similar situation? In what way can management support actions of youth workers in this or in a similar situation?
- 4) Methodical approaches: What MAs can be discerned in this or in a similar situation?
- 5) Theoretical framework: What knowledge and which existing youth work methods support actions of youth workers in this or in a similar situation? How does this knowledge relate to the online context?

The three meetings covering the first two steps were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Based on this analysis (see the Analysis section), the first preliminary findings were described.

In the fourth (online) meeting with the participating youth workers, steps three and four from Fig. 1 were processed. In this meeting the preliminary findings were presented and discussed with the youth workers. The researchers and youth workers jointly examined the findings and drafted a methodical action design for supporting youth work practice in the online lifeworld of young people. The lead question for making this design was: what knowledge from offline youth work methods can we transfer into the online context, and what knowledge is still missing? The methodical actions in this design were developed based on the knowledge gathered from the youth workers in the first three meetings in the comparison with the existing knowledge on the offline youth work methods.

After the fourth meeting, the youth workers applied the concept design in practice over the course of one month (step five in Fig. 1). Throughout their daily online interactions with young people, the

participating youth workers employed the formulated MAs and tested the applicability of these actions in the online context to determine what works well and what needs improvement and adjustment. During the testing period, youth workers registered their experiences, insights and feedback in an online form. The feedback received from this online form was used as the input for the last meeting.

In the fifth (final) online meeting, the youth workers shared their experiences in applying the draft design and the feedback received from the testing period was discussed. Consideration was given to what MAs needed extra adjustment to work properly online and what else would be needed for further development of youth work practice in the online lifeworld. After this last meeting the participating youth workers were encouraged to share their experiences and newly gained insights working in the online lifeworld with their colleagues and fellow practitioners (final step in Fig. 1).

3.2. Analysis

The data collected during the online meetings with youth workers was analysed using constant comparison analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) as a component of grounded theory. The analysis of the data gathered through CL helped to discern the actions needed to support young people in the online lifeworld. Four main stages were carried out during the analysis.

1. Open coding – The data analysis began with open coding of the data from the first three meetings of all four groups of youth workers. In this stage, no comparison was involved, and no predefined coding system was used. In this step three researchers worked separately on coding. By coding the same interviews and comparing the coded segments it was tried to keep the coding process consistent, to reduce individual biases and risk of overlooking important themes or misinterpreting responses. The open coding resulted in the initial set of codes
2. Axial coding – In this stage, the initial codes were categorized into broader groups based on the connections between the codes throughout the data from all three meetings and all four groups of youth workers (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). By categorizing the codes, we also started identifying the beginnings of an outline for possible MAs. By comparing the data from the meetings of all four groups we formulated 11 code-groups, including the following codes: Background for acting online, youth work methods, online / offline actions, conditions needed for working online, online visibility, orienting, signalling, making contact, building meaningful relationships, assessing needs, and providing support
3. Selective coding – With selective coding we further analysed and refined the 11 code-groups by comparing them with the offline MAs (see Table 1). In this stage for all 11 code-groups, sub-codes were formulated. By doing so, we were able to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between the new perspectives and challenges of youth workers in the online lifeworld and the existing knowledge from offline youth work methods. This resulted in reducing the 11 code-groups into seven core categories relevant for the online context
4. Overview writing – in this last stage, the six offline MAs were translated into seven actions for online youth work practice. An overview of these seven actions was constructed based on data derived from the sub-codes of the selective coding process, thoroughly describing each category and the relationship between the offline and online methodical actions for addressing the developmental needs of adolescents in the online lifeworld.

4. Findings: Seven key methodical actions

This section describes seven methodical actions that were discerned as crucial for youth workers when addressing the developmental needs

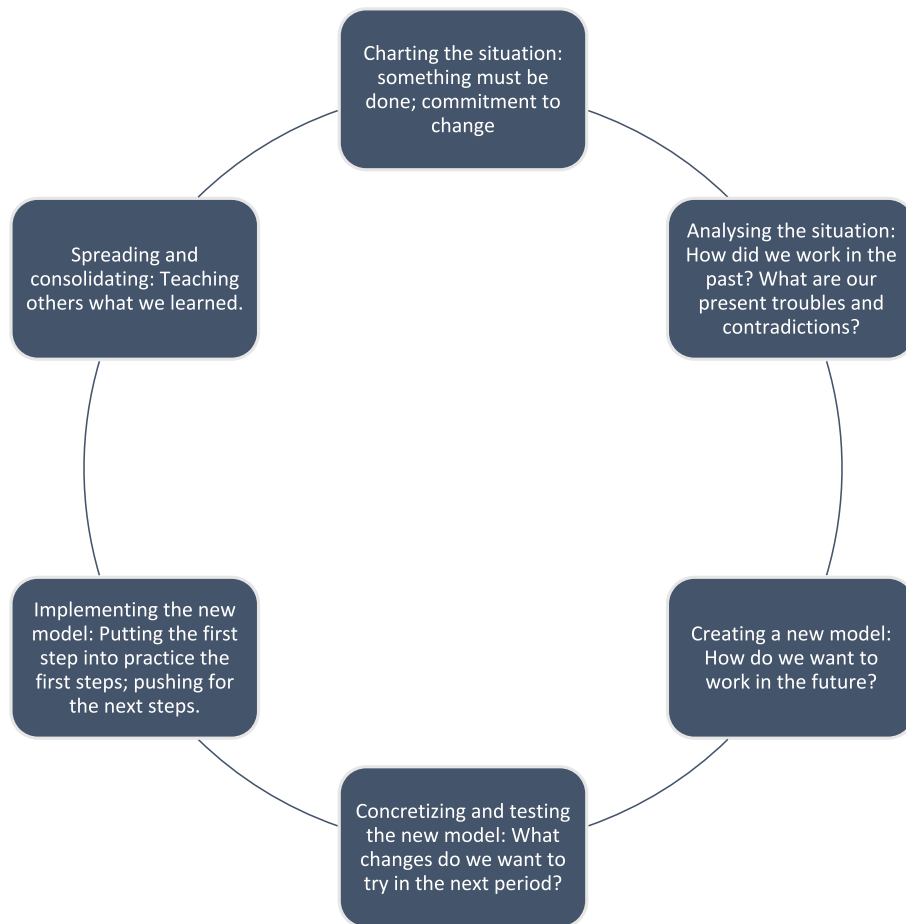


Fig. 1. Steps in expansive learning (.
adapted from Engeström et al., 1996, p. 4)

of adolescents in the online lifeworld: MA 1 – Increasing online visibility and accessibility; MA 2 – Orienting; MA 3 – Signalling; MA 4 – Making contact; MA 5 – Building a meaningful relationship; MA 6 – Assessing needs; and MA 7 – Providing support. We described the possible opportunities and challenges for every action based on the CL step ‘analysing the situation’. We reflected on action possibilities based on the offline and online contexts and described the outcomes and possibilities resulted from the ‘implementing’ step in CL. For every MA, we clarify its basis with quotes from the meetings with youth workers.²

4.1. Increasing online visibility and accessibility (MA 1)

The participating youth workers pointed out that, in an offline context, contact with young people can be made relatively easy in the streets, parks, playgrounds, skateparks or youth clubs, among other venues. Youth work centres and youth workers themselves in the offline context are present in relatively fixed locations, areas and routes that are visible in public spaces and can easily be found by young people. From the offline youth work methods, we learn the importance of reaching out to young people, making contact with them and being accessible for their possible questions and needs. However, these offline methods do not teach us how to do this in an online environment with no physical borders, distinctions between neighbourhoods, cities or provinces, and with everchanging spaces and places where young people meet peers and adults and spend their time.

The social media change a lot: it's all about your online feed. How do you create the content? How do you make sure you're reaching the right people? How do you make an online platform? If you know how to do this, then you're very visible. (Group 1, meeting 4)

This quote points out the need for knowledge and know-how to be visible and present in the online context. The CL ‘implementing’ step yielded concrete examples of how to act in similar situations; for example, while acting in the online lifeworld, it is necessary to take several actions at the same time continuously, such as having accounts on more than one social media platform; keeping these accounts active by interacting with young people, responding, sharing, creating and promoting interesting and relevant content; as well as working together with individuals, organisations and young people who have large number of online followers and who are of interest for other adolescents.

New young people also reach out to you because other young people start tagging you in their online content. For example, with an online quiz. We have already done that, and it was a big success, and we are going to do that again. And a lot of young people have shared the announcement for the quiz, and they tagged me in it, and then all these new young people started reaching out to me. (Group 1, meeting 4)

It is to be expected that these actions would contribute to youth work gaining a favourable position in the online lifeworld. With this position, youth workers can be more visible and accessible to young people, thus creating the possibility of reaching a broader target group, including young people with whom youth workers have not had any prior contact or interaction. According to the participating youth workers, reaching out to young people in dynamic and hybrid online spaces demands

² The quotes in this paper were translated from Dutch to English by the first author.

greater effort and varied approaches than navigating in static offline settings. For instance, transitioning between different social media platforms and accounts contrasts with the permanence and physical localization typically associated with youth work centres situated in specific neighbourhoods. Regarding this specific context and given the lack of knowledge from the offline methodical approaches on how to act in the online context, the data from the CL suggest a new MA for increasing the online visibility and accessibility of youth workers. This MA aims to introduce young people to youth workers, where they can be found and what they and their organisations can do for young people, ultimately leading to contact between adolescents and the youth workers. This MA needs to be continuously employed while acting in the online lifeworld because of the everchanging online spaces where young people are and the need to keep the youth work accounts active and attuned to the dynamics and trends in the online context.

4.2. Orienting (MA 2)

During the CL step 'analysing the situation', the participating youth workers pointed out that orienting helps in getting to know young people's online spaces, interests and ways of communicating online. On the other hand, one also needs to gain insights into how young people interact with the online affordances. What do young people find interesting and important online? In what ways do they communicate with each other and with their environment? Which social media do they use and how do they behave on the various platforms?

In my case, it is often that I see the same age groups on Instagram and Snapchat. And I see also that TikTok when it first started to grow, it did start first for slightly younger kids and over the years it has become popular with the older young people as well. So, I do see that they actually have the same kind of followers, but I also see that these platforms require different behaviours and actions. (Group 2, meeting 2)

This MA is important for online youth work practice as it provides youth workers with valuable information for deciding what follow-up actions are suitable for providing a suitable support.

The moment you know what behaviour which young people are exhibiting on which platform, then you can respond well to it. (Group 2, meeting 2)

This shows that orienting is an MA that can be drawn upon in a way similar to offline youth work methods. It does not differ substantially from orienting in an offline context. The CL step 'implementing' suggests that this action should be performed continuously while engaging online. It also sheds light on how youth workers can orient themselves online – for example, by following young people with a large number of followers and observing their interactions with peers, adults, and digital tools; scrolling through various profiles to discover the interests, issues, and topics of young people; and setting up targeted polls, live streams with Q&A sessions, and other online activities to gather more information about the latest trends in the online context.

4.3. Signalling (MA 3)

For this action, the participating youth workers emphasized the importance of signalling during their work in the offline and online lifeworld. Analysing the situation in CL suggested that online affordances can make the signalling process more accessible than in an offline environment. The online context provides opportunities to employ this action continuously. Young people share photos, videos and links on social media that can easily be found, and this content may offer youth workers more in-depth information about young people and their issues.

Young people share a lot of things online about what's on their mind and how they feel. They can sometimes share images or quotes about that. Sometimes I also have some young people who share very dark thoughts. In this way you can identify what is going on quite well, either with an

individual young person or with a group they are together with, as well as how that affects, for example, the reactions posted underneath. So, you do get a good picture online of what is on the minds of young people. And as a youth worker you can respond to that. (Group 2, meeting 3)

Like orienting, signalling is an MA for the online lifeworld that has the same relevance as in the offline youth work practice. Just as in offline youth work methods, online signalling involves continuously picking up and estimating the expressions, appearances, statements and behaviour of young people. Because youth work takes a developmental approach, signalling involves both positive and negative signals. Various examples of how signalling can be conducted online were shared and included creating polls, organizing live Q&As or topic online meetings, posting questions on Instagram stories or simply by scrolling through social media accounts and observing what young people are doing and what content they are sharing.

An issue raised in the CL was the ethical concerns faced by youth workers while signalling or orienting online. Contrary to the research practice, the participants perceive the access of youth workers to privacy-sensitive data as challenging, primarily because youth work organisations often lack well-developed protocols and policies to protect the confidentiality of young people.

4.4. Making contact (MA 4)

In the CL, the participating youth workers emphasized the significance of the action of making contact for both offline and online youth work practice. Without contact with young people, little to nothing can be done to support them. Making contact with young people in the online lifeworld can be done through different online activities (e.g. live streams, online gaming, social media polls and content posts). During and/or after these online activities, youth workers and young people have opportunities to initiate contact.

Sometimes I play online games with young people that I don't know, and later you get the questions like 'hey, can you maybe help me find a job or internship?' So, even if I don't know them, through gaming together, they feel more comfortable to get into contact with me. (Group 2, meeting 2)

Moreover, the online affordances provide many opportunities for anonymous, synchronous and a-synchronous one-on-one contact between youth workers and young people (e.g. direct messaging on social media, chat and video-call services).

During the meetings with youth workers, a lack of specific knowledge and know-how to succeed in making contact with young people in the online environment was noted. A youth worker shared his struggle when trying to connect with new young people online:

Normally I would walk around in a neighbourhood and I would see a group of young people standing there that I don't know. I would step up to them and chat or I would greet them for a moment and so slowly get to know them. And I also want to do that online and that's really completely new to me. Meeting new young people online is difficult. I want to put everything into meeting new young people, build relationship with them, so I know them, and they know how to find me. (Group 1, meeting 1).

In the quote above, the youth worker points out that concrete action perspectives are needed to approach and establish contact with young people online, and efforts must be made to ensure that young individuals are also aware of how and where to locate youth workers on the internet. In achieving this, it was suggested that MA 4 goes hand in hand with the proposed action 'increasing online visibility and accessibility'. This shows that the online context represents a novel environment for some youth workers that requires the acquisition of additional skills and competencies.

4.5. Building a meaningful relationship (MA 5)

Analysing the situation in the CL showed that deepening the contact in the online lifeworld and creating a meaningful bond between youth workers and young people is important to make a positive impact on adolescents' lives. The online lifeworld offers many possibilities for easy contact and showing interest in young people's lives (e.g. by actively and regularly responding to young people's online content, posts and questions, chatting on social media, using video calls).

Online you can make contact with young people through Instagram or WhatsApp, and then you keep in touch there. But the moment you want to go deeper into it, you do need to invite them and meet them offline. (Group 3, meeting 2)

According to the participating youth workers, building a meaningful relationship in an online context can be limited and time consuming. Online communication often lacks nonverbal components and a sense of presence and closeness. After the implementing step in CL, the participating youth workers suggested that this MA is better conducted in combination with offline contact and offline activities between youth workers and young people. This offline setting can lead to different types of conversations and pursuits, as well as providing an opportunity for young people and youth workers to get to know each other better and an opportunity for young people to see youth workers as someone they can trust.

4.6. Assessing needs (MA 6)

To be able to provide appropriate support to young people, youth workers have to explore what young people's (latent) developmental needs, questions and ambitions are. When young people know the youth workers better, the threshold becomes lower for them to share their questions and needs. According to the participating youth workers, online spaces offer opportunities for youth workers to talk with young people and discover their needs.

It is important to keep in touch online in a pleasant and warm way in charged situations [...] and then I think you talk with the young person to see what needs are there and what steps need to be taken, and which other individuals can be involved. (Group 3, meeting 1)

Needs assessment is done by having conversations with young people online (e.g. via chat services and video calls), by asking in-depth questions and by paying attention to non-verbal communication. The insights from the implementing step suggest that this MA in an online context occurs in addition to the offline conversations and needs assessment, which can give a fuller picture of young people's needs by offering a deeper, closer and more verbal and non-verbal communication along.

4.7. Providing support (MA 7)

For this action, the CL revealed that after making contact with young people and assessing their needs, youth workers can follow the same offline structure of providing support (i.e. determining the goals of support, creating a plan on how to achieve these goals, executing the plan). Moreover, the online lifeworld offers opportunities for practical support, individual and group guidance and counselling and referrals to other services through social media, chat, messaging and video call services. The insights from the implementing step suggest that providing support in the online lifeworld is more effectively handled in conjunction with offline youth work methods.

From the young people's point of view, online group support wasn't good enough. Then we finally switched to offline, because that was also possible. And in that sense, I think it was successful, but what would it be like if it wasn't possible at all? They asked themselves that question as

well. Of course, it is an option to provide support and get together online, but they still choose the offline option. (Group 4, meeting 1)

According to the data, the approach to this MA is to some extent interchangeable with the offline context. Depending on the situation and goals of the young persons involved, support towards the set goals can be provided online and/or offline. For example, if activities or counselling are taking place offline, the online context can be used as a space to check how this suits the young person, send updates to each other, exchange ideas, spread information faster and easier, discuss how the goals can be achieved in a low-threshold manner and what actions, tasks and responsibilities are to be taken.

Table 3 gives an overview of the seven MAs relevant for the youth work practice in the online lifeworld. Descriptions of each MA were made based on the experiences of the participants during the implementing step in CL.

5. Discussion

This study sought to learn how general offline youth work methods

Table 3
Methodical actions (MAs) of youth work practice in the online lifeworld.

Action	Description
1. Increasing online visibility and accessibility	This MA is unique to online youth work practice. It involves being active and present online, as well as profiling yourself online so it is clear who you are and what you and your organisation can do for young people. Key in this action is being visible and accessible online to all young people who may have questions or need support.
2. Orienting	Orienting has the same relevance as in offline practice. By orienting in the online lifeworld, youth workers try to get to know young people's online spaces, interests and ways of communicating online, as well as to gain insight into how young people interact with the affordances of different social media.
3. Signalling	Online signalling is an MA that has the same relevance as in offline youth work practice. It involves continuously picking up and estimating the expressions, appearances, statements and behaviour of young people.
4. Making contact	Making contact has the same relevance as in offline practice. Without contact with young people, little to nothing can be done to support them. Contacting young people online can be done through various online activities (e.g. live streams, online gaming, social media polls and content posts). During and/or after these online activities youth workers and young people have opportunities to initiate contact.
5. Building a meaningful relationship	Building a meaningful relationship involves deepening the contact with young people, getting to know each other better, sharing more personal information, interests, views and concerns. This MA in an online context can be limited and time consuming. It is suggested to conduct it in combination with offline contact and offline activities between youth workers and young people.
6. Assessing needs	Assessing needs means learning about what young people need, what aspirations, problems and support they need, assessing the manifested and latent needs. This MA in an online context occurs in addition to the offline conversations and needs assessment.
7. Providing support	This can include offering instrumental, informational, socio-emotional and cognitive support, referring and accompanying to other youth workers, activities, professionals or agencies. It is suggested that providing support online lifeworld is more effectively handled in conjunction with offline youth work methods.

can be used in the online lifeworld to support adolescents with their developmental needs. Through CL, this study developed a framework of seven methodical actions for working in an online context: Increasing online visibility and accessibility (MA 1), Orienting (MA 2), Signalling (MA 3), Making contact (MA 4), Building a meaningful relationship (MA 5), Assessing needs (MA 6) and Providing support (MA 7). The first MA is specific for the online context and differs from the ones used offline. The second, third and fourth MAs are grounded in offline actions and do not differ much from their offline iterations. MAs 5–7 can be drawn upon the offline youth work methods and applied in an online context, but their impact is greater if they are jointly processed with the equivalent actions offline. The way they are deployed – online exclusively or in combination with offline actions – depends on the situation and needs of the young people involved, the set aims and the online opportunities. All seven can be used in the online lifeworld regardless of the location, target groups and type of provided service.

The participating youth workers are well-equipped with various methods and practical knowledge for providing their services in offline settings. However, when it comes to delivering these services online, some youth work professionals encounter challenges, such as locating young people online and increasing the visibility of their services. Our study brought to light a new MA regarding this issue, namely ‘increasing online visibility and accessibility’. This action shows that the hybrid online environment and blurry boundaries between the public and private spaces require new ways of acting so youth workers are visible and present in the online environment. Unlike the offline context, where interactions are typically more immediate and localized to physical places like youth centres, parks and streets, online interactions can occur asynchronously and across various and everchanging online spaces.

The findings of our study underscore the importance of integrating online and offline youth work practices, while suggesting how some of the derived online MAs can be employed jointly online and offline. Some previous studies have already pinpointed this integration (Hartman-van der Laan, 2019; Pink, Ferguson and Kelly, 2021) and shown how online and offline practices can complement and reinforce each other (Harvey, 2016; Höylä and Reponen, 2019; Todorovic et al., 2024). For example, our findings showed that to build meaningful relationships with young people, youth workers can use social media accounts to like the content young people share and react positively to it. This can then be used offline in offline face-to-face contact as an initial topic for further conversation and to allow youth worker and young person to get to know each other better. Similar to this, the findings also showed how digital tools and online possibilities (e.g. Zoom meetings, DM on Instagram or WhatsApp) can be used to support offline group activities with young people through easier and faster online contact. Integrating online and offline youth work practices in this manner can provide a larger field of opportunities to respond better to the developmental needs of young people and to engage with them in their hybrid online/offline lifeworld (Harvey, 2016).

The CL method appeared to be quite suitable for this study and for collaboration with youth workers. Through the expansive learning cycle, participating youth workers were able thoroughly to explore their current situation in practice and the ways they engage in the online lifeworld. They brought in their already existing knowledge and experiences but also dilemmas and questions about the online youth work practice. During the ‘analysing the situation’ step in CL, they were able to deepen this existing knowledge by explicating the tacit knowledge they already possessed, sharing this knowledge and experiences with other youth workers, and learning from each other. This further supported the testing and implementing steps in CL, where new perspectives and practical knowledge were developed and acquired. In this manner it was also possible to establish how the seven MAs could be conducted in practice. It was suggested that the seven MAs do not adhere to a strict linear progression from action one to action seven – that is, it would be possible to establish a more flexible progression. It became clear that the first three MAs are continuously processed while acting

and interacting with young people in the online lifeworld. The remaining four actions are, however, meant to be deployed in a fixed order in most situations (i.e. making contact with adolescents in the online lifeworld, followed by maintaining this contact, building a meaningful relationship and finally, based on this contact, assessing the needs of young people and offering suitable support). Just like in the offline context some of the actions can be repeated or skipped depending on the target group and the situation of the involved young people (Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services, n.d.). For example, following a detected online signal (MA 3), there may be a (directly) unsafe situation involving a young person, their immediate environment, or third parties. In such extreme cases, it is possible to intervene immediately and offer support to this young person and/or refer them to other services (MA 7), without first having established a relationship with them (MA 5).

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, offline youth work methods already have theoretical underpinnings supported by evidence-based research (e.g. Boomkens, 2020; Dowling, 2020; Faché, 2016; Koops, Metz and Sonneveld, 2014; Rumping et al., 2017). Additionally, significant numbers of handbooks, practical knowledge and tools are available for professionals (e.g. Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services, n.d.; Paananen, Piironen and Uustalo, 2022; Koops, Metz and Sonneveld, 2015). However, in the Dutch context at least, youth work practice in the online lifeworld lacks theoretical underpinnings, and knowledge of best practices is limited (Hamdiui and Medendorp, 2022; Koschei and Brügggen, 2023). The findings from our study indicate that not all youth work professionals can use online opportunities, as they may require more specific knowledge and competencies that go beyond proficient verbal communication abilities, sensitivity, empathy, an open-minded approach and the like. The extra skills and knowledge required include understanding how to establish visibility and presence but also include technical competencies, information management and digital proficiency (Stefan, 2022).

A noteworthy aspect of our findings is the insight into how youth workers can methodically engage in the online lifeworld of young people and the needed practical knowledge for doing so. Moreover, as part of CL, the suggested MAs were tested by the youth workers in practice. This delivered specific examples, solutions and practical knowledge on, for example, how to increase visibility online, how to reach out to broader target groups and connect with new individuals, how to keep accounts interesting for young people and how to employ various activities on social media to pick up the signals, assess needs and provide suitable support. The implementation of online MAs or the transition of offline MAs into a digital environment was not without struggles and challenges. Aligning with previous studies (e.g. Hamdiui and Medendorp, 2022; Pawluczuk et al., 2019), our findings revealed difficulties in executing MA 1, primarily due to a lack of necessary skills and expertise in navigating hybrid online environments and managing multiple social media platforms. Implementing MA 4 and MA 5 were perceived as more time-consuming compared to similar actions in an offline setting. This can be attributed to specific characteristics of online communication, such as the absence of nonverbal and spontaneous interactions, a reduced sense of commitment and emotional availability, and the anonymity of digital environments.

Next to these challenges, the question arises what ethical concerns may be involved when employing these actions. Our findings showed that youth workers experienced some ethical dilemmas regarding access to and assessing privacy sensitive information. The CL method helped the participating youth workers to tackle this issue to some extent; however, when interacting online with young people and providing support and guidance, youth workers require clear guidelines to navigate the complexities of online privacy. The lack of standardized protocols not only places young people’s confidentiality at risk but also exposes youth workers to potential ethical and legal challenges. For example, the storage and sharing of sensitive information, online harassment, cyberattacks, and stolen social media accounts pose

significant risks. For these reasons, it is advisable to use encrypted communication platforms and store data in secure systems when establishing and maintaining contact with young people (MA 4 and MA 5). In addition, youth workers should use only their professional accounts on social media, ensuring that they present themselves as professionals. This includes using the authentic and recognisable logos of the organisations they work for and providing links to the accounts of their colleagues and organisations. In this way, it is possible to maintain distinct professional and personal digital identities, thereby preventing young people from engaging with unauthentic professionals.

Although the findings are situated within the specific context of Dutch youth work practice—with regard to digital infrastructure, policy frameworks, levels of digital competence, and attitudes towards online engagement with young people, which may differ in other countries or regions—the proposed seven MAs nonetheless offer a solid framework for the further development of youth work practice in the online lifeworld. The findings of this study can help integrate the existing body of knowledge with the new insights from the online practice, which can further promote a better overall youth work practice. These seven online MAs can assist youth workers in considering the implications of their actions in the online lifeworld and guide them through the process of supporting young people. The proposed MAs also need further exploration, evaluation and validation. Further research is needed to investigate if these MAs are sufficient on their own for adequate acting in the online lifeworld, what the ethical implications are for the support of young people and what impact the various interpretations of these actions in different online spaces have on the personal development and social participation of adolescents. Moreover, further development of competences and skills needed for implementing the online MAs is recommended.

6. Conclusions

This study explored whether and how offline youth work methods can be transferred to online youth work practice. The findings indicate that the general offline youth work methods are not indiscriminately transferable to the online context. Instead, the findings provide a resource with seven specific MAs that can be adapted or developed for youth work online. Depending on the situation and the needs of the young people involved, the set aims and the online opportunities, these MAs can be employed jointly with the youth work methods and activities offline. In this way, online and offline lifeworlds complement and reinforce each other, which can ensure better overall support to young people. Although these MAs bring new insights to youth work's body of knowledge and provide a framework for MAs online, further evaluation of these actions and the development of new knowledge, competences and skills for youth workers are recommended to provide the support that young people need.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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