

From Emotions to Critical Thinking: Co-Creating Digital Citizenship with Young People and Youth Workers

What does it really mean to educate in the digital age?

Knowing the rules is no longer enough. Today, digital education requires understanding the language of the online world, its nuances, and its invisible consequences. Every click leaves a trace. Every word can build or harm. Every interaction shapes identity. Digital citizenship is not just a set of technical skills — it is a complex emotional and cultural space that must be navigated with awareness and responsibility.

This vision lies at the heart of **Youth Digital Leaders (LED)** (nr. 2024-1-IT03-KA220-YOU-000243926), an Erasmus+ project funded by the European Union. Between June and September 2025, the project organised training and co-creation events in Italy, Czechia, and online, bringing together youth workers, educators, and young people in dynamic spaces of shared learning.

Participation Beyond Technical Training

The LED workshops were not designed as traditional training sessions. They were built as transformative experiences.

Rather than treating digital education as a subject to study, participants explored it as a shared environment to question, analyse and understand. Through active methodologies, participatory exercises and guided reflection, young people and youth workers engaged in open dialogue about digital life — as a space for relationships, risks, rights and responsibilities.

This approach encouraged authentic exchange and strengthened awareness of what it truly means to live online ethically, critically and consciously.

The Rome Workshop: Words, Emotions and Online Identity

Among the nine events organised, the workshop *“What if you regret it?”*, held on 16 July 2025 in Rome at Il Muretto Youth Centre, was one of the most meaningful moments of the journey.

Co-organised by The Apartment APS, project coordinator, and EDI Onlus, the event involved nine adolescents aged 11–18 and four youth workers from educational organisations working in socially vulnerable areas of the city.

There were no frontal lectures. Instead, participants took part in experiential and narrative activities that explored digital identity through emotions, language and daily online interactions.

A particularly engaging session, *“Portraits in Words”*, led by writer Christian Bergamo, invited participants to reflect on social media comments, impulsive posts and misunderstandings. Through storytelling exercises combining words, emotions, music and online experiences, young people explored the power of language in digital spaces — how it can hurt or heal, distort or honour.

The safe and non-judgmental environment allowed participants to express themselves openly. Many shared that they felt truly heard.

“I now pay more attention to what I write online,” said one participant.

“I feel more confident when using social media,” added another.

The workshop concluded with the collective creation of an original song inspired by the reflections that emerged during the day — a creative and powerful expression of shared awareness.

Measuring Impact: Skills and Awareness

Across the nine LED events, 56 participants took part.

- 93% would recommend the experience
- 98% positively evaluated the organisation
- Nearly 90% found the methodology useful

The most strengthened competencies included critical thinking, media literacy, emotional intelligence, digital ecosystem awareness and knowledge of online rights.

These results demonstrate that digital citizenship is not only about acquiring knowledge. It is about developing the ability to evaluate, choose, listen and interact responsibly.

Towards a Flexible and European Training Model

The insights gathered during the LED workshops are now shaping a concrete training programme: online, participatory and transferable modules designed for youth workers, trainers and young adults.

Rather than simply transferring knowledge, the aim is to activate processes — empowering participants to become agents of change capable of navigating digital spaces critically and responsibly.

The next steps include the finalisation of a European certification framework for Youth Digital Leaders, reinforcing the project’s systemic and long-term vision.