

Article

From Shared RE to a Shared Digital RE Strategy: Navigating the Post-Digital Transformation of RE Organizations—Results of a Swiss Participatory Research Project

Jasmine Suhner ^{1,2} 

¹ URPP Digital Religion(s), University of Zurich, 8006 Zürich, Switzerland; jasmine.suhner@theol.uzh.ch or jasmine.suhner@unilu.ch

² Faculty of Theology, University of Lucerne, 6002 Lucerne, Switzerland

Abstract: Religious adult education, characterized as non-formal religious education (RE) that has often been established over many decades, is frequently marked by patterns of institutional separation, local conditions and denominational divisions. This is also the case in Switzerland, where in each canton various church academies and RE organizations generally offer their respective programs along both denominational and cantonal lines. The increasing digitalization of society, and consequently of education, alters the original situation for these actors, both on an individual and organizational level. This article discusses the challenges of religious adult education in navigating the post-digital pivot. It addresses the issues of changing forms of teaching and learning, dealing with shifts in authority, and the growing need for collaboration and shared strategies among RE organizations in post-digital society. A participatory research project involving nearly 60 Swiss RE organizations investigated how these organizations are dealing with digitalization, analyzing the perspectives of the organizational leaders, the teachers, and learners through mixed methods. The findings provide insights into factors influencing the intent to offer or use digital RE courses, as well as factors contributing to the readiness to cooperate in the digital educational field.

Keywords: digital RE; RE organizations; digital religion; participatory research; modes of approaching religious traditions; Switzerland; digital transformation; shared strategy



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1. Introduction

“We want to move beyond the emergency mode”. This statement made by the umbrella organization “plusbildung”—Switzerland’s ecumenical association of nearly 60 RE organizations—marked the starting point for the study presented in this article. “Moving beyond the emergency mode” in this context means consciously adapting to the digital reality of religious adult education. The digital reality affects religious pedagogy profoundly, it influences the emergence of new opportunities and risks in RE, and even more so, theology itself. “There is a new world coming, and it is coming much faster than most people realize” (Mercer and Trothen 2021, p. 3). The new world ushered in by digitalization leads to a fundamental societal transformation: It shapes processes of perception, thinking, and acting, takes hold of societal production of values, knowledge, dialog, and sense-making, and affects all kinds of learning processes. The number of publications in the field of “digital learning” is growing exponentially, with the sector of “Educational Technology” (EdTech) expected to see a 16% growth between 2022 and 2026 (Global Data 2022). In 2020, the OSCE announced that: “Digital technologies can play an integral role in celebrating and upholding freedom of religion or belief when harnessed for outreach and dialogue. At the same time, the rise in intolerant discourse and hate speech directed at religious or belief communities during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the risk of the digital space becoming a forum for incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence on grounds of religion or belief” (OSCE 2020). Provocatively, Mercer and Trothen argued that, “The

religions of the world will come to an end, or thrive, depending on how they respond to the Technological Future” (Mercer and Trothen 2021, p. 3). This article situates itself within this dynamic.

The term “post-digital” in the subtitle refers to the life circumstances of contemporary society as a whole: Digital culture inherently blurs the boundaries with the so-called analog or offline world. Online and offline worlds intertwine into a “post-digital” world (Schmidt 2020), in which the analog can no longer be distinguished from the digital (Stalder 2016). Humans do not merely “use” an analog or digital medium; they think, act, and feel within an analog-digital space of possibilities. The challenge of navigating this post-digital pivot in religious adult education constitutes the first—societal, theological, religious educational—departure point of this article.

The other departure point is the current debate on “shared RE”. For various reasons (theological, financial, digital, and more), actors in the field of RE are tasked with examining, discussing, and communicating challenges and approaches for interdenominational or interreligious cooperation, questions regarding shared strategies, interdisciplinary, and interprofessional collaboration—in short: questions concerning how, based on which criteria, methods, and intentions joint action in the context of RE is desirable, necessary, and sensible.

This article links these two starting points and presents empirical findings from a recent research project conducted between 2021 and 2023 and implemented collaboratively with approximately 60 Swiss RE organizations using mixed methods. Its focus lies on religious adult education—thus, on the non-formal education sector—with its main characteristic being that it links both perspectives, namely, the individual and organizational levels of action.

To appropriately contextualize the study and its results, this article begins with a brief outline of recent developments in digital society—also from the perspective of “sharing” as a phenomenon of these developments—as well as the ensuing questions and implications for religious learning in a post-digital culture (2). Following this, the aforementioned study is presented. The findings highlighted hereafter focus on the results of the quantitative-explorative part of the study (3). The article concludes by arguing for an increased awareness of sharing not only with regard to interdenominational, interdisciplinary, and international cooperation but also for the knowledge transfer between the various levels of action in RE, as well as for the recognition of “sharing” as a profoundly theological task (4).

2. Welcome to a Culture of Networking and Sharing: (Inter-)Religious Adult Education in a Post-Digital Culture

2.1. Recent Development Lines in Digital Society: A Narratological Ramp to the Present Day

When examining the genesis of the expanding digital culture, the recent developments can be traced back to the 1980s (Kergel 2020). This is when the personal computer (PC) revolution had its breakthrough. The upheaval was explicitly understood as opening access to a power tool previously reserved for a few men. The PC evolved from a remote wartime technology to a tool of emancipation for modern citizens. Later on, in the early 1980s, optimistic theories about a globally networked future of society were developed (Turner 2008). Numerous societal discourses adopted the “network” as a new structural metaphor. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari demonstrated that culture could be imagined as decentralized and non-hierarchical, like the rhizomatic root structures in nature (Deleuze and Guattari 2004). Flusser elevated digital networking to a technique of altruism, suggesting that to be human meant to be “linked” with others (Flusser 2009, p. 251). Network utopians dreamed of the Internet as a type of post-identity space where religion, gender, and cultural affiliations could dissolve comprehensively (e.g., Haraway 1985). Sociologist Manuel Castells attested that the emerging society would flatten hierarchies and transcend traditional boundaries of companies and institutions, leading to new, especially shared, forms of power (Castells 2000, 2010). It was a time when this “new locus of the mind” (Barlow 1996) was envisioned as a place of connectedness on an unprecedented scale.

By the mid-1990s, the Internet had entered many private households, and the World Wide Web was created. The Internet was discovered as a new market. Initially, approaches that replicated existing media in digital form were predominant: Concepts from the physical world were transferred into the digital realm. The sharing of all types of information—such as advertisements, opinions, invitations, or news—was thus expanded to an unprecedented extent. Gradually, *new* media emerged that did not attempt to replace their analog counterparts but were made possible by the networked structure of the Internet. Social networks like Myspace and Facebook were born. “Web 2.0” became the buzzword that created a new, social network. Consequently, consumers of previously static websites became producers, creating and sharing their own content online, thereby becoming new authorities with their own audiences (Aigrain 2012; Wittel 2011). Notably—and without wanting to draw premature causal conclusions—this was also the time when theologizing as a methodological-didactic approach and research field became increasingly topical in RE: from consumers to producers, “doing theology” under one’s own authority and responsibility (Green 2009; early also Tracy 1983).

From the mid-2010s, the strands of digitalization processes in society multiplied. Two aspects shall be emphasized below that are particularly relevant to the context of “shared RE”:

The Sharing Economy: The growing social web increasingly facilitated a paradigm shift from owning to using goods and/or services. Unlike the traditional market model based on ownership, a “Sharing Economy” is built on the use and sharing of products and services with others (Puschmann and Alt 2016). The principle of sharing resources per se is not new but has proliferated (especially regarding consumer-to-consumer transactions) and resulted in new ways of thinking about the potential of sharing. Several drivers can be identified for this development: (a) *The growing number of people with mobile devices:* A strong enabler for accessing services conveniently has appeared with mobile smart devices, such as smartphones and tablets. (b) *Social networks:* Networking among peers is mainly enabled by social networks and community platforms. They link consumers who are willing to share their goods. Online community platforms reduce the formerly high sharing costs (e.g., information and transaction costs), creating mechanisms for trust and reputation in anonymous markets (van Dijck et al. 2018). (c) *Changing consumer behavior:* While ownership has been a predominant model for using goods in the past (e.g., cars), temporary usage has become more attractive for many consumers (Rifkin 2014, p. 32ff).

New Forms of Community Building: Late modern societies are generally influenced by megatrends of globalization, migration, critique of traditions, and individualization, leading to increasing heterogenization and hybridization. Wolfgang Welsch, for instance, pointed to the concept of transculturality, suggesting that cultures interpenetrate each other (Welsch 1999; Welsch 2020); Homi Bhabha discussed commingling in a third space (Bhabha 1990), while sociologist Andreas Reckwitz described how hybridization of society already happens in the analog space (Reckwitz 2006). The digital transformation further reinforces this hybridization: New ways and forms of community building emerge, significantly oriented around the sharing of common experiences (Müller et al. 2021; Campbell 2012). Across established groups, denominations, nations, and parties, new connections take shape, while at the same time, new boundaries are drawn up, creating “digital tribes” (Grant 2020)—which, in turn, influence “analog” forms of community.

2.2. The Consequences of Digital Culture for Religious Adult Education

It would be misconceived to compare RE in digital culture with offline RE by simply adding a “+digital” tag. Furthermore, the way in which religious organizations and actors operate—and thus react to the digital transitions—vary significantly, influenced by denominations, political and economic circumstances, historical path dependencies, and other factors. Several characteristics previously considered inherent to RE must in fact be entirely reevaluated within the context of digital culture.

Three areas influenced by digital transformation are particularly relevant to this study, each one being specifically linked to the phenomena of connectivity and sharing:

- The *religion-related* (theological, sociological, psychological) field: particularly the transforming dimensions of power distribution and positionality;
- The *general educational field*: fundamental transformations of teaching and learning processes in a digital society;
- The (*educational*) *organizational and organizational psychology* field: the organizational level of digital transformation.

2.2.1. The Religion-Related Perspective: Redistribution of Power and “Diversification of Religious Substance”

The dynamics of digitalization particularly transform two aspects that are relevant to theology and religious education, namely, authority and “religious substance”.

Authority. This aspect is central to “Digital Religion(s)”. Digital networking and sharing culture enable new forms of authority. “Who’s got the power?” is the title of a publication by Heidi Campbell as early as 2007 (Campbell 2007). Whom digital actors assign authority to, or where they derive their own authority from, changes significantly in a digital society. For instance, YouTube users may either be passive viewers or active commentators. The same applies to blogs, forums, virtual worlds, etc. Research in digitalized Western societies indicates that the authority of religious institutions (and particularly the church) is declining significantly (e.g., Cloete 2016; Evolvi 2020; Kołodziejska and Neumaier 2017; in the Islamic context, refer to Solahudin and Fakhruroji 2020). Overall, the new network structures of the Internet lead to a shift in claims to authority, possibilities for authority, and pathways to authority, flattening some hierarchies, while religious and ideological affiliation “levels” appear in greater diversity and dynamism. At the same time, this dynamic also enables established religious actors to expand their influence and power through, e.g., social media channels (Cheong et al. 2011).

“Religious Substance”. The second aspect is by no means independent of the first and yet it must be considered separately. New authorities, new forms of community, and thus new spaces for religious-related language and dialog also promote theological-substantial diversification. The term “religious substance” therefore refers to the religious nature of the contents being discussed. The spectrum ranges from religious fundamentalism through non-fundamentalist mono-religious orientations to multi- and interreligious, even to transreligious settings (Leirvik 2020; Suhner 2023). This diversification process seems to be accelerating in the context of digitalization.

Within this special issue’s topic of shared RE, these dynamics are particularly significant: “Shared RE” has largely referred to institutionalized actors, focusing on, for example, ecumenical, interreligious, or inter-organizational cooperation. However, the aforementioned dynamics stress the increasing potential and need to acknowledge and consider non-institutionalized, private actors as viable partners for cooperation and sharing, too.

2.2.2. The General Educational Perspective: Digital Education as Its Own Didactic Form

Teaching and learning are based on processes of communication and interaction. In the digital culture of a network and knowledge society, the availability of learning opportunities, provision of knowledge, and knowledge transfer have been fundamentally transformed and expanded within just a few years (Kümmel et al. 2020). At this point, I do not want to focus so much on methods or models for specific teaching and learning practices in digital culture but to identify from a meta-level the conditions and possibilities of digital education as *its own didactic form*.

Ubiquitous Didactic Presence: The Internet, through its spatiotemporal seamlessness, which philosopher Luciano Floridi aptly defined as the “infosphere” (Floridi 2015), allows for the connection and integration of various media into a cohesive learning context, thus turning into a hypermedium that is independent of time and space. Learning and teaching can happen anytime and anywhere, creating a sort of ubiquitous didactic presence. This does not simulate presence-based learning but rather brings forth new forms of learning in the sense of virtual reality and digitality. The seamless infosphere may not only be

perceived as a receptive virtual educational space but also as a performative virtual space for thinking and acting, enabled through non-linear networking (Noller 2022). The altered spatial and temporal logic of the Internet brings learning subjects in a post-digital culture closer together, creating a context of knowledge that gains in complexity with each new connection (Passey et al. 2022). This complexity should not be understood merely in terms of a quantitative increase, such as more information or larger file sizes. Rather, what is crucial for learning in a digital society are the qualitative dimensions that arise from the networking and densification of information. In other words, the Internet as a hypermedium differs from “analog” teaching tools not only by enabling faster access to information but by representing a fundamentally different form and organization of information, a form built on networking and sharing.

Collaborative Networks and Sharing Educational Knowledge: Learning in post-digital contexts can always be procedural and relevant, for unlike “analog” teaching materials, it does not require new editions, which must be updated at certain intervals. In fact, the procedural dimension of learning processes is explicitly open for cooperation, participation, and sharing (including content that may not necessarily be considered of added value). This culture of sharing affects learners, who can organize themselves into groups and thus increasingly become teachers themselves; it also affects teachers, who as individuals or as members of organizations, gradually grow into expanding networks of sharing, cooperating, as well as competing. On the one hand, such initiatives may follow up on initiatives that were not necessarily driven by digitalization—such as the educational initiative in Northern Ireland that “aims to promote social cohesion and school improvement by encouraging sustained and regular shared learning between students and broader collaboration between teachers and school leaders” (Duffy and Gallagher 2017, p. 107). On the other hand, such opportunities and initiatives may specifically arise thanks to digital culture and its possibilities, such as initiatives for knowledge exchange among teachers (e.g., Van Acker et al. 2013).

Transformation of the Teaching Concept: The traditional distinction between teachers and learners—already blurred in pre-digital contexts—is increasingly fluidified through the networking structure and the semantic web, though not entirely eliminated overall. Research results on the digital society indicate a shift away from settings, where the teaching authority was clearly assigned, towards a learning process that is much more autonomously driven by learners, with teachers providing individually supportive functions: “As teachers became more proficient with tablets through training and cross-cultural networking, they adapted their teaching style and approach, thus becoming facilitators of learning rather than teachers on the stage” (Shonfeld et al. 2021).

Regarding the topic of “shared RE”, it is important to highlight the substantial consequences of digital transformation on the sharing of educational knowledge by teachers and the sharing of learning experiences by learners in various locations—both synchronously and asynchronously. This sharing expands the potential reach of both teachers and learners, creates greater opportunities for insightful comparison, and promotes the beneficial exchange of religious educational content. However, it also enhances competitive environments and facilitates the spread of problematic “educational” content such as recruitment by fundamentalist groups, fake news, religious hate speech, and more—necessitating new reflections and clear criteria regarding responsibility within sharing networks.

2.2.3. The Organizational Level of Education-Related Digital Transformation: A Research Gap

Subscribing to a medium- and long-term strategy, our focus should not be restricted to teachers or learners alone. Digital culture also influences organizations as systems. For example, contactless payment with smartphones influences not only the daily shopping behavior of individuals but also affects retailers, banks, their processes, and global financial systems and their dynamics. Therefore, educational institutions must consciously align themselves with digital culture implying different levels of action. “Innovation doesn’t happen in a vacuum but requires openness and interactions between systems and their

environments. This is also very much the case for education”, as noted by the OECD (2016, p. 3). Similarly, Bröckling et al. recently stated that “Requirements caused by the digitization that have an impact on educational organizations require holistic changes in the organization. It is not enough to simply acquire technical equipment and to designate an IT representative that is responsible for the digitization. Rather, profound changes and sustainable strategic decisions are necessary in the context of digital transformation, media-related organizational culture, and learning-space development” (Bröckling et al. 2021, p. 15). Likewise, in the context of “Shared RE”, it is evident that “sharing” cannot be effectively implemented by concentrating solely on individuals; rather, it necessitates the involvement of organizational levels in the medium term.

Accordingly, in recent years, both educational practice and corresponding research have seen projects that bring various stakeholders and levels of action into dialog (Serpa et al. 2022). For instance, Shonfeld et al. emphasized that digital transformation in educational contexts must include at least the following perspectives: those of learners, those of teachers, those of the education system as an organization, and those of the post-digital environment (Shonfeld et al. 2021). Not only the well-known “change of perspective” in RE but also the “change of perspective regarding levels of action” is gaining relevance here: a sharing and shared development of needs, necessities, and knowledge between individual and organizational actors. However, the organizational consequences for the educational sector in a digital society remain a marginal topic in research (Ifenthaler and Egloffstein 2020). “While there are extensive studies on the influence of new media on teachers and those that receive the knowledge, especially at the level of educational organizations, the relationship between the organization, actor, and digital transformation has so far been little examined” (Dörner and Rundel 2021, p. 62).

Creating a link between the organizational level of action in interplay with the individual level of action is the focal point of the study presented hereafter.

3. Results from a Swiss Participatory Research Project

3.1. The Umbrella Association “Plusbildung”

“Plusbildung” is the name of a Swiss umbrella organization comprising educational institutions, competence centers, and organizations from the Catholic, Protestant-Reformed, and ecumenical sectors. “Plusbildung” offers a broad range of religious adult education, distinguishes itself by its theological openness, and is committed to ensuring that a network of RE organizations collectively address the dynamics and tasks of (inter-)religious learning—promoting knowledge transfer, joint advertising, unified web presences, collaborative projects, and shared strategies. Its program includes interreligious, spiritual, personal development, cultural, as well as environmental, political, and economic educational offerings (Dachverband “plusbildung” 2024).

As of 2019, the umbrella association “plusbildung” includes 59 formal member organizations across the linguistic regions of Switzerland (German, French, Italian) (Dachverband “plusbildung” 2019) (Figure 1).

The structure of the umbrella association “plusbildung” comprises three levels (Figure 2):

- The *individual level of action* pertains to the specific cultural and educational offerings of the individual organizations. Here, the primary actors are the teachers and learners.
- The *organizational level of action* is relevant to the umbrella association “plusbildung” in two respects:
 - Firstly, the members of the umbrella association are independent organizations (organizational level 1);
 - Secondly, the umbrella association itself is a national organization (organizational level 2).

The work of the umbrella association pertains to the non-formal education sector. The individual member organizations operate within both the ecclesiastical and the public education and service markets. Therefore their transition to digital means is driven by the need to remain competitive in a rapidly changing educational landscape and to improve

their educational offerings, pedagogical efficiency, and economic performance, while also continually reviewing the educational content to determine how and in what ways the digital education market—which has a much broader reach than the pre-digital—presents new competitors, options for collaboration, and new educational content.

The global COVID-19 crisis caught the member organizations of the umbrella association “plusbildung” unprepared as was the case with the majority of educational organizations worldwide. Against the backdrop of various experiences during the COVID-19 crisis and conscious of the aforementioned factors, the umbrella association “plusbildung” set out to approach its next steps toward its positioning in a digital society. This goal first required an understanding of how the digital culture is being approached within the member organizations. This is why an accompanying research was initiated with the University of Zurich, URPP Digital Religion(s).

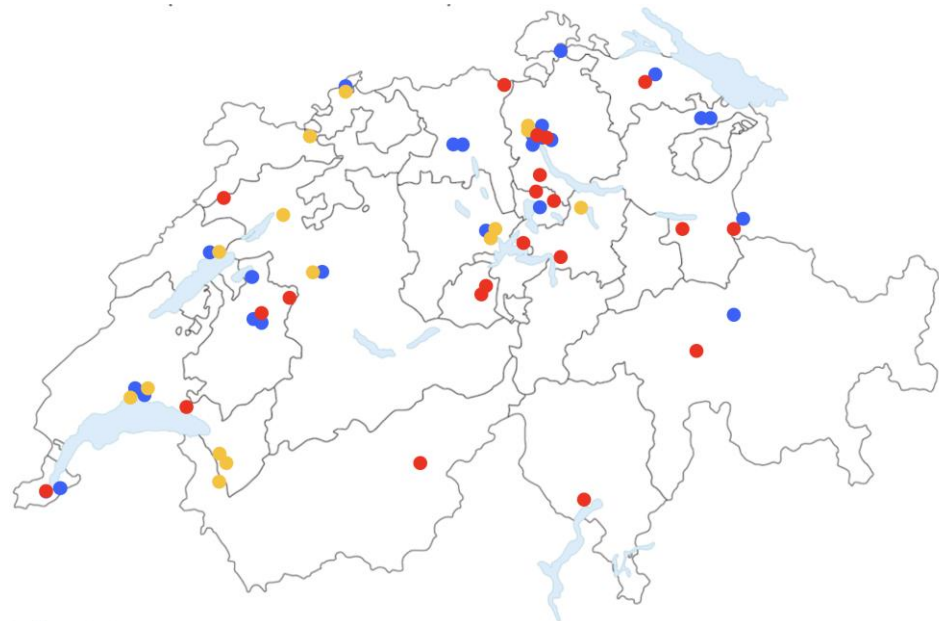


Figure 1. The member organizations of the umbrella association “plusbildung”. Red = church academies; Blue = RE competence centers; Yellow = other RE organizations. Source for the number of member organizations: Annual Report of the Umbrella Association ‘plusbildung’ 2019; Illustration: (J.S.).

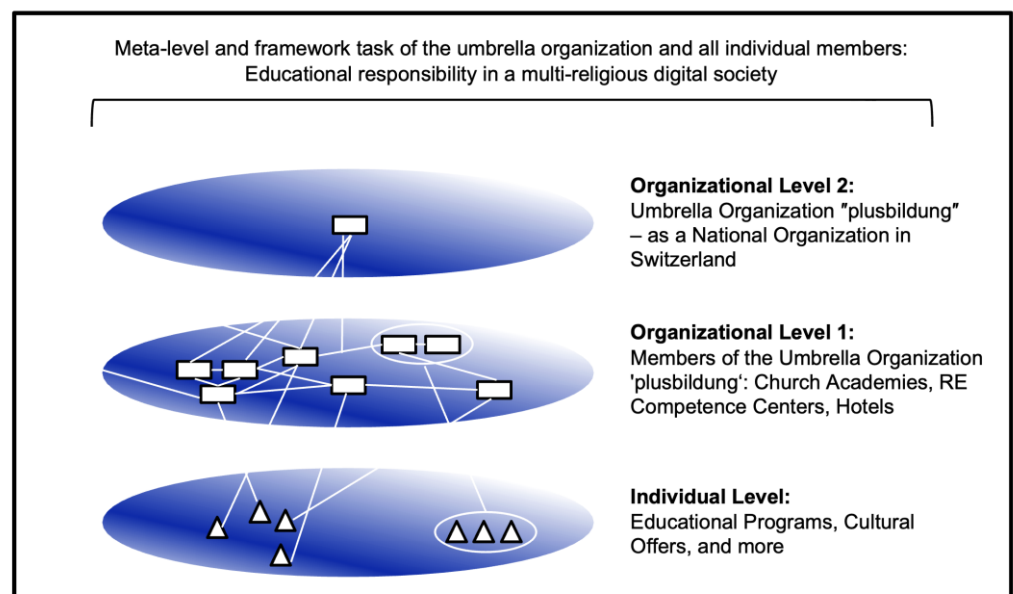


Figure 2. Infographic on the different levels of action of the umbrella association “plusbildung”.

3.2. Research Design and Progress

The accompanying research was conducted in a participative manner—not least to reflect the aspect and growing significance of “shared power” methodologically: Under the term participatory research, approaches are subsumed that aim to explore, understand, and change social reality within a system of shared (interpretative) power, thereby contributing to the empowerment of societal actors (termed “experts by experience” or “co-researchers”). These approaches fundamentally represent a link between application-oriented and theory-based, knowledge-driven research. As a result, both theoretical knowledge (“theoretical findings”) for the research discourse and results relevant to the actors’ actions and their life worlds (“findings related to the field of practice”) are generated (Bergold and Thomas 2012).

Another crucial decision for the research design was to focus on the self-reporting of the three stakeholder groups (leaders of the member organizations, teachers, and learners). This methodological preliminary decision acknowledges that sustainable digital transformation must also be viewed from the perspective of the various individuals involved.

A combination of the following four methodological approaches was selected:

- A *case study* at a representative member organization, specifically focusing on one of its digital education modules (participant observation and individual interviews with participants of this educational module);
- A *quantitative-exploratory online survey*;
- *Qualitative expert interviews* with teachers and leaders of the member organizations;
- *Web scraping and topic modeling* of all websites of the member organizations of the umbrella association “plusbildung” (Schneider 2024).

The research project started in March 2021 with initial discussions between the umbrella association “plusbildung” and the University of Zurich, URPP Digital Religion(s), involving representatives from each. The interpretation of data was completed in December 2023. The progression of the research unfolded as follows (Figure 3):

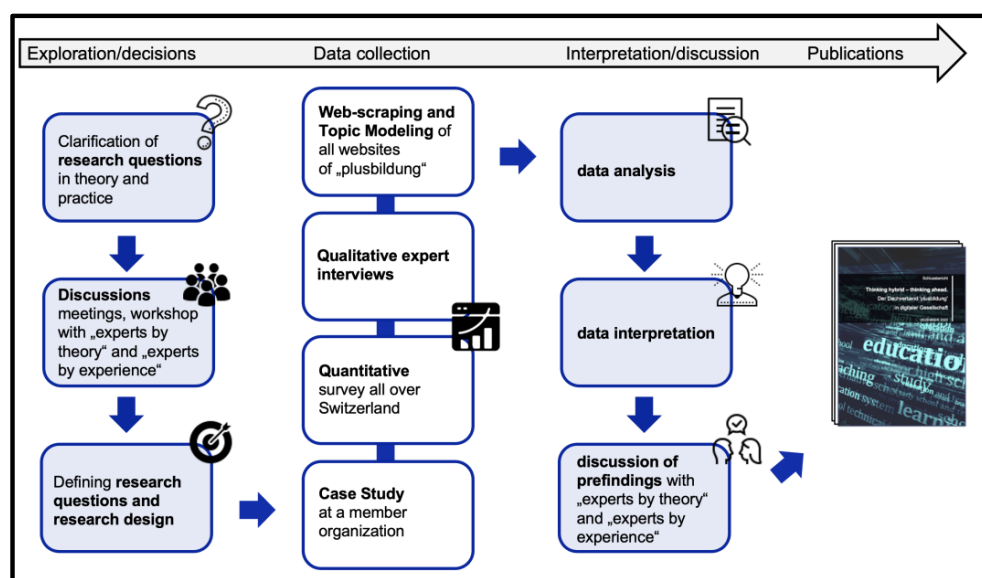


Figure 3. Infographic on the research timeline from March 2021 to December 2023.

3.3. Research Questions

The design for the accompanying research was exploratory, factoring in various hypotheses. Three central research questions were established:

1. *What are the most significant factors influencing the intent to offer/use religiously themed digital educational offerings? That is, who uses and who offers digital RE services at “plusbildung”? Why?*

→ The dual focus of this question illustrates that motivations for digital educational offerings shall be analyzed by comparing “offering” and “using”. The operationalization of this research question considers both specifically digital aspects and the content orientations of the educational offerings.

2. *What are the influencing factors for good practice experiences with digital/hybrid RE offerings? That is, which digital offerings are perceived as successful by teachers and learners? Why?*

→ The focus here lies on the quality of learning processes, the experience, or the assessment thereof with regard to digital educational offerings. There was significant interest from co-researchers in how learning through encounter and dialogical learning in digital settings may be perceived as successful, given that this type of education particularly applies to the umbrella association (regarding dialogical learning as a specific feature of religious education cf. Nelson 2018). This question again has a dual focus, as it captures the experiences and assessments of both providers and users. The operationalization of this research question incorporates different aspects of both successful and unsuccessful practical experiences.

3. *What are the factors influencing the willingness of individual member organizations to see digitalization as a call for shared strategies and further joint development? That is, what next?*
→ This research question focuses on the assessments of “experts by experience” regarding potential future opportunities for a joint, shared strategy. Organizational action levels 1 and 2 and their interplay are considered here.

Key decisions related to the research design include the following:

- *The term “digital”* also includes hybrid offerings. For pragmatic reasons, the study does not explicitly distinguish between different forms of digital teaching and learning processes.
- The questions illustrate that *three different perspectives* are included: This decision was based on recent research findings and the interest of the umbrella organization’s members, to collect the voices of three groups: learners, teachers, and leaders.
- *Three languages*: The quantitative survey was conducted in three languages (German, French, and Italian).
- *Ecumenical approach*: The study is both personnel-wise and content-wise ecumenically oriented: Both researchers and co-research partners belong to different denominations (and in some cases different religions); the theoretical background of the study and the umbrella association are ecumenically grounded. This decision does not deny denominational differences but reflects the willingness of denominations to cooperate and the perceived necessity by the co-researchers for ecumenically shared strategies.

3.4. Online Survey Results

This article presents selected findings from the online survey segment of the study.

3.4.1. Questionnaire Design

The decision was made to use a standardized questionnaire for the online survey, incorporating several semi-standardized questions, and concluding with two open-ended questions. The questionnaire was designed in two versions:

- *For the Employees*: A comprehensive version (duration: approx. 25 min) intended for employees of the member organizations of the umbrella group, targeting the two stakeholder groups, leaders and teachers. A specific question at the beginning of the questionnaire facilitated an additional distinction between these groups in data analysis
- *For the Learners*: A shorter version (duration: approx. 12 min) intended for participants in educational modules, i.e., the learners. This abbreviated version mirrors the comprehensive one but leaves out several questions. Additionally, some of the phrasings in the shorter version were modified to focus on the utilization of an educational offering rather than its provision.

The questionnaire encompassed three areas:

- *Part I*: Sociodemographic data including religiosity, church proximity, and educational intentions in educational settings in general. The items on religiosity and church proximity were derived from validated instruments for religiosity (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2009).
- *Part II*: Digital competencies and educational intentions as well as experiences in digital contexts. The items on digital competencies were adapted from validated instruments for assessing the digital competencies of teachers (Vuorikari et al. 2022; Redecker and Punie 2017) and tailored to the context of RE. Educational intentions in Parts I and II were captured using various items (see operationalization notes below).
- *Part III*: Reasons for cooperation and future assessments concerning adult RE. These items were developed in reference to recent research findings (Bröckling et al. 2021) and in collaboration with various members of the umbrella organization “plusbildung”.

Both versions of the questionnaire were created using the survey software “Unipark”. The survey was launched in December 2022 and promoted by the umbrella organization “plusbildung” among its member organizations. Data collection concluded in early April 2023.

3.4.2. General and Sociodemographic Results

A total of 122 individuals participated in the online survey: 78 learners and 44 teachers and/or leaders. The low response rate was primarily due to internal challenges within the umbrella organization; this should, however, not be interpreted as a lack of willingness to participate. Out of these 122 completed surveys, 118 are valid: 78 from the learners and 40 from the teachers and/or leaders.

The majority of *learners* are between 46- and 55-year-old individuals of working age (40%). Another 32% of the learners are aged between 26 and 45 years, and 28% are over 56 years old. The age distribution of *employees* is largely comparable, with the exception of the group aged 56–65 years (Figure 4).

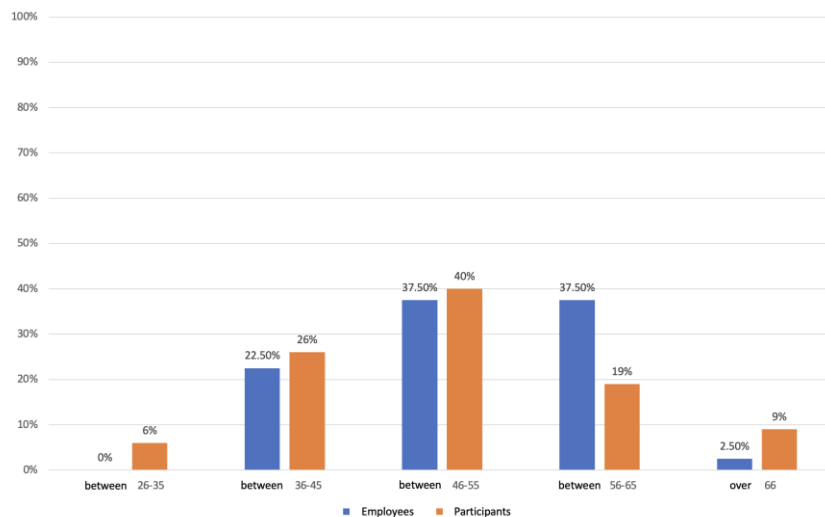


Figure 4. Comparison of employees and participants by age.

Participants were asked about their highest level of education achieved, so as to better understand the social milieu in which both the teachers/leaders and learners evolve (Figure 5). Additionally, the items concerning age and highest educational attainment also provide clues about potential prior experiences with digital teaching. Although the global COVID-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated the digitalization of education, many professional contexts had already been digitalized in various respects before 2020, fostering basic digital competencies.

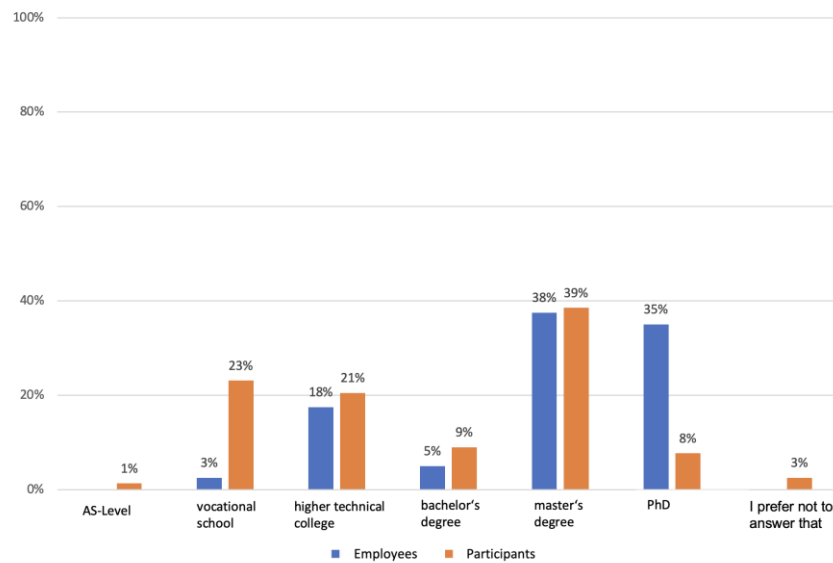


Figure 5. Comparison of employees and participants: highest educational qualification.

Both employees and learners have a high rate of master’s degrees. The educational achievement of the *employees* is almost exclusively (97%) at the level of higher vocational schools or academic degrees. The distribution among *learners* is comparatively broader. Notably, just under a quarter of learners with the highest educational qualification have completed vocational school; on the other hand, higher vocational schools (21%), bachelor’s and master’s degrees (together accounting for just under half at 48%), and doctoral degrees (8%) indicate a generally high level of education.

Thus, while the age distribution suggests that both the employees and learners of the umbrella association “plusbildung” are largely not “digital natives”, the comparatively high level of education still suggests a certain familiarity with basic digital communication settings.

Overall, more Catholic than Reformed individuals responded: Among the *employees*, 58% of respondents are Catholic, 33% are Reformed, 3% identify as belonging to no religion/denomination, and 8% as spiritual. Among the *learners*, 83% of respondents are Catholic, 12% are Reformed, 4% identify as spiritual, and 1% belong to another religion or denomination. Multiple responses were possible for this question (Figure 6).

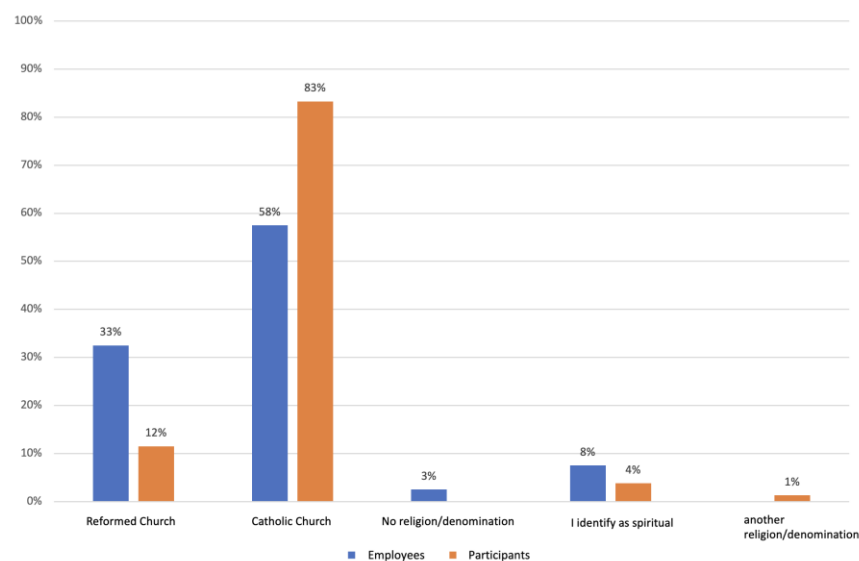


Figure 6. Comparison of employees and participants by religion.

Additional items concerning religiosity and church generally indicate a pronounced religiosity and belief in God or some divine power among both employees and learners. This is hardly surprising, given that even when general cultural topics are broached, these are either thematically aimed at people interested in religion or are predominantly perceived as such by the public.

3.4.3. Mind the Gap: Between Encounter-Based and Digital Learning

From the outset, the co-researchers focused on operational questions regarding methods, staging, and performance of religious educational processes in the digital realm; for example, which methods are successful in a digital context? Which methods succeed with the use of which digital tools? However, focusing solely on specific methods would be too detailed for meaningful results. In operationalizing these questions (see Research Questions 1 and 2), the system developed by theologian Karlo Meyer served as a foundation. His meta-analysis of current didactic approaches to interreligious learning culminated in a four-part diagram to categorize the majority of the models commonly discussed in the academic debate on interreligious learning (Meyer 2021, pp. 105–28; see his article in this volume). Its focus is not on the educational *content* but rather on the “*mode*”—the manner in which the educational content (as taught or learned) is perceived, processed, and potentially explored further. These modes of approaching religious traditions are directed toward the objective of teaching and learning processes, in both a didactic and motivational sense. The modes do not directly relate to methods; however, certain methods and forms of staging can be tentatively assigned to them. Notably, this four-part diagram can be applied not only to interreligious educational contexts but also to religious ones, even more so when adding the term “experiences” to the title, as well as some “opening aspects” to the third and fourth mode:

1. The first mode, hereafter referred to as “subject-specific and methodological learning”, refers to the ideal profile of a scholar of religious studies, initially concerned with the objective perception and interpretation of phenomena, statements, and sources in general. The particular hermeneutic emphasis is on scientific objectivity.
2. The second mode, hereafter referred to as “existential learning and reflecting”, puts the focus on the ideal profile of the existential thinker. The particular hermeneutic emphasis is on personal reflection, which leads to the reconsideration or first emergence of one’s own positioning and is expressed verbally or otherwise creatively.
3. The third mode, hereafter referred to as “learning for/through encounters”, refers to a situation-sensitive, socially and ethically justified handling of religion-specific situations. It encompasses both socio-practical and hermeneutical skills that are to be developed. This mode includes not only encounters in everyday situations where religious topics play a role but also behavior in “indirect” encounters with religious representatives and religious artifacts in the classroom. This mode also applies to general religious education; however, it should be specified here that the term encounter-based learning—learning through encounter, in dialog—is important, that is, not only in contact with traditions but also with experiences.
4. The fourth mode focuses on the “glocal” actor, hereafter referred to as “learning and preparing for action”. The particular hermeneutic focus is on understanding social interactions between one’s personal world—school, region, entire environment—and (inter-)religious challenges and implies a regional or geographically broader interest that also intersects with sociopolitical issues. Regarding general RE, this mode can be divided into religious-community-specific engagement and general engagement.

The modes of approaching religious traditions and experiences can be visually represented as follows (Figure 7):

The various modes can be combined. The diagram provides less of a clear-cut classification than an orienting pattern, especially when used in the form of a network/spider diagram.

In regard to these modes of approaching religious traditions and experiences, several sets of questions were created for the questionnaire, in total 34 items. One set of questions focused on the intentions (in the case of teachers) and perceptions (in the case of learners)

regarding educational settings of the umbrella association “plusbildung” in general (independent of the educational format). The other set of questions focused exclusively on digital educational settings. Multiple selections were possible for both sets of questions, and responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale. Each of the 34 items can be assigned to one of the four modes of religious engagement according to Meyer (Table 1).

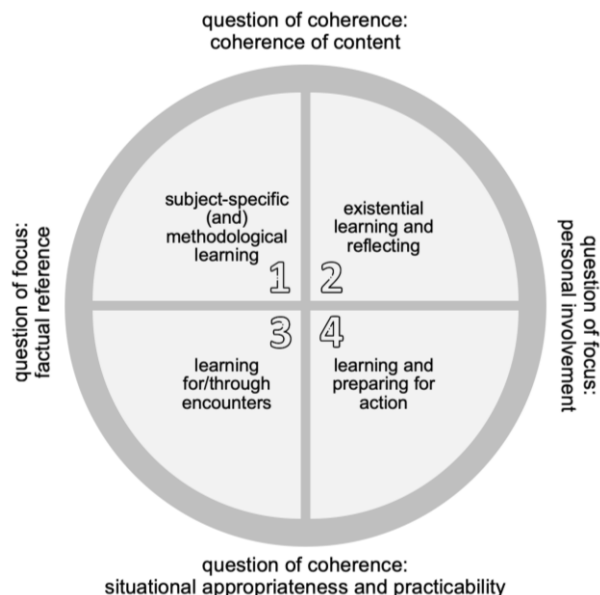


Figure 7. The four modes of approaching religious traditions and experiences as a graphical model, adapted from: (Meyer 2021, p. 113). Visualization and wording modified (including numbering of the four quadrants) (J.S.).

Table 1. Example items from the employee questionnaire.

Quadrant/Modes of Approaching Religious Traditions and Experiences	Example Item from the Employee Questionnaire
1 subject-specific and methodological learning	How important is the following goal in your educational offering: Participants should be able to view religion from a scientific standpoint.
2 existential learning and reflecting	How important is the following goal in your educational offering: Participants should be able to develop their own religious identity.
3 learning for/through encounters	How important is the following goal in your educational offering: Participants should learn to approach members of different religions openly.
4 Learning and preparing for action	How important is the following goal in your educational offering: Participants should learn to engage with (inter-) religious issues in society.
<p><i>In this quadrant, the study made an additional differentiation beyond Meyer between:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>general/societal engagement (4g) and</i> - <i>engagement in specifically ecclesiastical activities (4e)</i> 	

When the items are clustered according to these four modes, the following picture emerges for general educational intentions (Figure 8):

- The primary focus of the *teachers* is on Quadrant 3, with a strong tendency of agreement at 90.8%. The second-highest focus is on Quadrant 1, with a 78.2% tendency of agreement. Quadrants 4g (72.5%), 2 (64.1%), and 4e (54.1%) show lower levels of agreement.
- The primary focus of the *learners* is on Quadrant 1, with a strong tendency of agreement at 87.1%. The second-highest focus is on Quadrant 3, with a 78.3% tendency of agreement. Quadrants 4e (69.3%), 2 (64.4%), and 4g (60.5%) show lower levels of agreement.

In comparison, it becomes evident: In *general* educational settings (both analog and digital), the two highest-rated quadrants for teachers and learners are the same but in reverse order, i.e., Quadrants 3 and 1 for teachers, and 1 and 3 for learners. Notable is the almost identical, comparatively lower percentage for Quadrant 2 and the also lower rating for Quadrant 4. Here, Quadrant 4e among learners has a significantly higher percentage of tentative agreement compared to employees: 69.3% versus 54.1%. Despite the low number of participants, these results are considered significant, as the combination of items provides greater reliability.

The results for *digital* educational settings are markedly different (Figure 9).

- The primary focus of *teachers* here is on Quadrant 2, with a strong agreement of 89.7%. The second highest focus is on Quadrant 3, with a 71.3% agreement. Quadrants 1 (70%) and 4 (57.5%) have lower ratings.
- According to *learners'* perception, the primary focus is on Quadrant 1, with a strong agreement of 72.7%. The second highest focus is on Quadrant 2, with a 54.8% agreement. Quadrants 3 (40.4%) and 4 (34.2%) have lower ratings.

In comparison, it becomes clear: In *digital* educational settings, *teachers* primarily aim for existential learning and, with a high percentage, also emphasize the mode of encounter-based learning. However, from the *learners'* perspective, academic-methodical learning predominates, while the other three modes are significantly less valued. Particularly striking is the discrepancy in the perception of encounter-based learning: While teachers indicate this as the intention of their activity with 71.3%, learners perceive it at an average of just 40.4%. The difference regarding existential learning is also significant: Teachers, according to their self-assessment, focus on this aspect with an average agreement of 89.7%, whereas learners perceive it with 54.8% agreement.

Quadrant / modes of approaching religious traditions and experiences	General educational settings	
	Teachers	Learners
1 subject-specific and methodological learning	78.2 %	87.1 %
2 existential learning and reflecting	64.1 %	64.4 %
3 learning for/through encounters	90.8 %	78.3 %
4 learning and preparing for action	4g: 72.5 % 4e: 54.1 %	4g: 60.5 % 4e: 69.3 %

Figure 8. Table comparing the values of teachers and learners regarding the intention or perception of the mode of religious engagement in general educational settings. Percentages rounded to one decimal place. Coloring: the darker the background color, the higher the value.

Quadrant / modes of approaching religious traditions and experiences	Digital educational settings	
	Teachers	Learners
1 subject-specific and methodological learning	70.0 %	72.7 %
2 existential learning and reflecting	89.7 %	54.8 %
3 learning for/through encounters	71.3 %	40.4 %
4 learning and preparing for action	57.5 %	34.2 %

Figure 9. Table comparing the values of teachers and learners regarding the intention or perception of the mode of religious engagement in exclusively digital educational settings. Percentages rounded to one decimal place. Coloring: the darker the background color, the higher the value.

These results provide significant insights when juxtaposed, comparing the outcomes of general and digital educational settings (Figure 10).

Quadrant / modes of approaching religious traditions and experiences	General educational settings		Digital educational settings	
	Teachers	Learners	Teachers	Learners
1 subject-specific and methodological learning	78.2 %	87.1 %	70.0 %	72.7 %
2 existential learning and reflecting	64.1 %	64.4 %	89.7 %	54.8 %
3 learning for/through encounters	90.8 %	78.3 %	71.3 %	40.4 %
4 learning and preparing for action	63.3 %	64.9 %	57.5 %	34.2 %

Figure 10. Table comparing the values of teachers and learners regarding the intention or perception of the mode of religious engagement in general and exclusively digital educational settings. Percentages rounded to one decimal place. Coloring: the darker the background color, the higher the value.

Two findings shall be particularly highlighted at this point:

- In digital teaching and learning settings, the aforementioned general result for teachers shifts significantly (consciously or not): from encounter-based learning (90.8%) and academic-methodical learning (78.2%) to existential learning (89.7%) and, to a lesser extent, encounter-based learning (71.3%).
- There is also a clear difference in the perception between teachers and learners: The two modes primarily mentioned by employees (leaders and teachers) as their intention in

digital settings are precisely those that learners rate significantly lower than employees (existential learning: 54.8%; encounter-based learning: 40.4%).

Looking at individual items further clarifies this overall result. Both teachers and learners identify the lack of encounter in the digital space as one of the biggest challenges in digital educational settings. Learners rate the item “Digital events provide me with too little contact with participants” as accurate or very accurate, with 75% agreement. A control item—“digital events lack encounters between participants”—yields a comparable result (79%). While these items generally confirm each other among learners, they indicate different objectives for teachers. The result shows that teachers (including those leading digital interreligious encounter learning) rate their own contact with learners significantly better (49% perceive this type of encounter as successful) than that of the participants (21% perceive encounters as successful). Building on this, the question arose whether a typology of certain individuals (or groups) could be garnered from the data, to identify characteristics that make it easier for certain people to engage, share, exchange, teach, or learn in the digital mode.

3.4.4. Two Axes of RE-Related Digital Affinity

Exploratory bivariate analyses of the data reveal the following: Notably, all possible levels of digital affinity (emotional aspects regarding digital education) and digital competence (skills and abilities regarding digital education) are found at every age level and independently of gender or religiosity. Therefore, it cannot be stated, for example, that older employees are less digitally inclined or that women are more digitally inclined than men.

However, the quantitative data show a significant correlation between the variables of enjoyment, memory retention, and sense of presence in digital contexts. This means that individuals who report enjoying the use of digital tools, media, and platforms feel more engaged in digital events than in analog ones, according to their self-perception ($p = 0.49$), and also report better memory retention of digital events compared to analog ones ($p = 0.42$) (Table 2).

Table 2. Correlations between the variables of enjoyment, memory retention, and sense of presence in digital contexts.

		Using digital tools, media, and platforms brings joy.	Feeling more present in digital events	Memory of digital events is less vivid
Using digital tools, media, and platforms brings joy.	Pearson Correlation	1	0.491 **	−0.423 **
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<0.001	<0.001
Feeling more present in digital events	Pearson Correlation	0.491 **	1	−0.499 **
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001		<0.001
Memory of digital events is less vivid	Pearson Correlation	−0.423 **	−0.499 **	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001	<0.001	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

This affective item, “enjoyment in using digital tools, media, and platforms”, allows us to classify teachers and learners on an axis of affective digital affinity. Regarding the enjoyment of digital tools, 56% of the employees and 44% of the learners express positive feelings, while 15% of the employees and 29% of the learners find using digital tools explicitly tedious. The remaining percentages are spread in the middle range. Control items (like those regarding enthusiasm for experimenting with digital tools) confirm these figures. However, the overall number of digitally inclined individuals among both learners and employees of the umbrella association “plusbildung” is likely to be lower, as participation in the online survey itself required a certain level of digital affinity.

In a mixed-method analysis—incorporating both the quantitative data from the teachers/leaders (Questionnaire Part III) and the qualitative data from interviews with teach-

ers/leaders and learners—a further dimension of digital affinity emerged, namely, individuals who, due to digital culture, increasingly begin to ask and plan systemically. This dimension is more strategically oriented and can be viewed as an aspect of awareness regarding “shared RE strategies in a digital society”.

Overall, two complementary axes of digital (RE) affinity can be identified: The affective axis ranges between the types of “the On-Site pragmatist” and “The Digital Enthusiast/Explorer”. The systemic–strategic axis ranges between the types of “The On-Site Pragmatist” and “The Systemic–Strategic Thinker” (Figure 11).

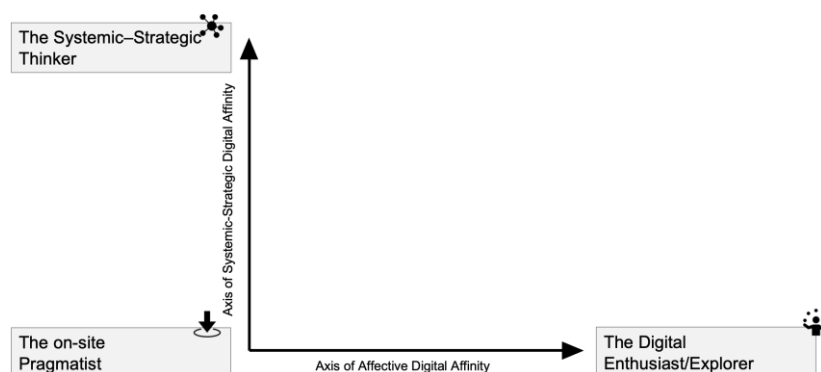


Figure 11. Two axes of RE-related digital affinity.

The approach to handling digitalization varies greatly among these different types of digital affinity.¹

- *The On-Site Pragmatist*: Digital education? “It is a hassle”. But where it is necessary, I will do it. Until I can return to in-person activities, which is the real thing.
- *The Digital Enthusiast/Explorer*: I enjoy “using digital tools, media, and platforms”. So, I experiment with them in education as well.
- *The Systemic–Strategic Thinker*: “Digital education? It is essential, not only today but also for the future. This means we must plan systematically and strategically, also conduct research and accompanying studies”.

The theological–religious educational approaches of these different types in dealing with digitalization are therefore highly diverse: ranging from the belief that in-person encounters constitute true learning, to a playful enjoyment in integrating digital aspects into education, to strategically farsighted considerations.

4. Conclusions and Outlook

4.1. Conclusions

The article discusses the challenges of religious adult education in navigating the post-digital pivot. The scenario of a post-digital society both enables and necessitates a new form of “sharing”, which influences education in multiple ways: On the one hand, the dynamics of digitalization necessitate recognizing and taking seriously non-institutionalized, private actors as influential RE participants and potential cooperation and sharing partners, alongside the traditional primarily institutional actors of “Shared RE”. On the other hand, the digital network creates a potentially global sharing network, both synchronously and asynchronously, introducing new types of knowledge transfer, new competitive settings, and new responsibilities regarding the proliferation of digital “educational” content (including fake news, religious hate speech, and more) to the RE domain. Ultimately, these new forms of “sharing” always involve various levels of action and must be addressed accordingly in both practice and research.

Arising from this context, the topic of “shared strategies” is becoming more prevalent in RE discussions. The findings of the quantitative sub-study highlight two major challenges

for the goal of a shared digital strategy in the context of religious adult education, one at the individual level and the other at both the individual and organizational levels:

- At the individual level: Here, it is evident that the general main concern of encounter-based, dialogical learning, from the teachers' perspective, loses relevance and potential in digital spaces, and from the learners' perspective, it is only marginally successful. Interestingly, this concerns the mode among the four "modes of approaching religious traditions and experiences" that can operate most effectively through "sharing"; encountering is fundamentally about the willingness to share and to enable participation. *How* this "sharing in digital RE" functions best will continuously need to be assessed, depending on contexts such as digital tools, teacher personality, and other relevant factors. A digital strategy for digital religious adult education, as pursued by the umbrella association "plusbildung", must, in any case, specifically provide and promote methods and tools for this purpose—unless the strategy consciously decides to forgo this primary concern in digital educational settings.
- At a broader level, it was examined what motivates teachers and learners, after the COVID-19 pandemic, to appreciate digital educational settings and consider them a relevant part of future digital religious adult education. More than other expected factors (financial cost, time resources, age, years of professional experience, digital competence), the affective dimension—joy and experimental enthusiasm for digital tools—is a significant predictor of whether digital educational settings will be offered or used in the future. This affective factor primarily influences actions at the "individual level" within specific educational settings. At the organizational level, it also seems to depend, additionally, on the type of employees and whether their forward-thinking is systemic. This relationship requires additional investigation from the perspectives of individual psychology (systemic thinking as a personality feature) and organizational psychology (strategy and cooperation willingness) (Church et al. 2015) and needs then to be adapted to RE contexts.²

Overall, it can be stated that for both individual organizations and the entire umbrella organization, it is highly relevant that the key to the success of a shared digital strategy will be to ensure that different types of target audiences see sufficiently strong reasons for a digital strategy and any related behavioral changes based on their own subjective perspective. However, it is also possible to strategically align only part of an organization with digital culture, with those who want to continue to act systemically—strategically and/or experimentally in this field. This is the path the umbrella association "plusbildung" is now taking.

4.2. Sharing as a Specific RE and Theological Task

At this point, it is essential to think beyond these reactive-necessary religious-educational and didactic tasks. Based on the (self-)understanding of RE as part of the humanities, it must be asked what specific proactive task RE wants to fulfill in a digital society—and from this perspective, how this task may manifest itself anew in a digital society and what this entails for the potential and responsibilities of "shared RE". Based on current research, the following questions and tasks seem particularly urgent:

- At the *methodological-didactic level*, examine the relationship between non-actively initiated but existing digital RE, the proclaimed goals of intentional digital RE processes, and the actual outcomes of the latter, as well as the consequences of potential discrepancies;
- Also at the *methodological-didactic level*, identify the interplay between non-digital media and digital media and explore which RE goals and competencies are promoted by the use of each;
- At the *public-religious-educational level*, determine which criteria, from the perspective of "traditional authorities", are essential for a future-proof RE in digital culture to sharpen one's profile in the growing market of digitally ubiquitous religious didactic presence;

- At the *RE organizational level*, determine which criteria, from the perspective of “traditional authorities”, are essential for a future-proof RE to consciously decide, based on which criteria and with which actors, “shared RE” should be actively pursued;
- At the *practical-theological level*, consider what a proactive theologically responsible stance looks like regarding the possibilities and impossibilities of sharing in the digital space, especially regarding power dynamics in the digital space (Müller and Suhner 2023; Müller and Suhner 2023);
- At the *theological level*, address the normative question of what future is desirable for humanity and which spaces theology, as a critical humanities discipline, must and can occupy; also, determining by what spirit a theologically, pedagogically, inter-religiously responsible RE is carried—and how this spirit may be credibly expressed.

Building on this last question and task, attention is finally directed to an aspect of RE that the author normatively postulates here as a characteristic of theology in general: Theology as a whole begins with a form of sharing, i.e., with the encounter with the Other. RE also fundamentally thrives on the Other, perhaps even more comprehensively so: proactively connecting with the Other, sharing oneself with the Other, and exposing oneself to the Other. The Other can be the person in front of me, the foreign within oneself, or the transcendent in the sense of small or large transcendence. This is essentially a specific type of sharing culture that is inherent in the religious.

The beginnings of the digital revolution were dominated by utopian designs: Digital networking was supposed to enable an all-encompassing experience of connectedness. However, digital hyper-connectivity and hyper-communication often do not facilitate encounters with the Other. In the worst case, the web entangles one in an ego spiral, an “echo chamber from which all otherness and strangeness are eliminated. True resonance presupposes the proximity of the Other. Today, the proximity of the Other gives way to the seamlessness of the Same. Global communication allows only similar others or other similarities” (Han 2016, p. 8). In this seamlessness, the drive for RE and theologies in general is lost.

RE—alongside humanities in general or art—has the responsibility to expose such a betrayal of sharing, encountering, and the Other, to liberate the Other from the distortion and entanglement of the small, subjectively narrow mind. The task of the actors in RE? To let the spirit of the Other speak—in the classroom, in a (networked) organizational structure, even in the digital realm. This responsibility does not just have theological but political and social dimensions as well. Indeed, it amounts to an active participation in post-digital human existence.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The research project presented in the article has complied with all ethical guidelines. Ethical review and approval were not required for this study in Switzerland.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The entire study will be submitted as a habilitation thesis by the author in 2025. Therefore, the raw data are not yet publicly available. However, both the raw data and the full research report (Suhner 2025) can be reviewed upon request from the author.

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Notes

- ¹ The direct quotes for these typology concretizations are items from the quantitative data collection, while the subsequent formulations are paraphrases from the interviews with the teachers.
- ² In this regard interesting in intention—though unfortunately less in execution—e.g., [Bashori et al. 2020](#).

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