

SWITLO

Iryna Biriuk's story: SWITLO brings teachers together, dissolves distance and leaves what matters – humanity, collaboration and a shared commitment to the outcome

Iryna Biriuk is headteacher and an English teacher at Gymnasium No. 3 in the city of Shakhtarske, just 20 kilometres from the front line in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast. She has led the school for four years through profound change – from the New Ukrainian School reforms to the upheaval of war. Even amid instability, constant air-raid alerts and danger, Iryna holds on to calm, optimism and the power of mutual support. She continues to teach and to nurture a professional community of English teachers in her hromada (a local community, an administrative unit in Ukraine) through SWITLO (Skills and Well-being in Teacher Learning Opportunities).

The full-scale invasion changed everything – and not only for students.

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I didn't understand how a teacher should work in this reality. How can you take responsibility for others when you are barely holding on yourself? The British Council course 'Teaching and Learning in Difficult Times' brought me back down to earth and made me rethink my work from the ground up. I realised that safety and basic needs come first, and only then learning. If a child is hungry, exhausted or frightened, they simply can't take anything in

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At school, Iryna introduced simple, human-centred classroom rules: students could drink water, have a snack and step out when they needed to. She also ran training for the whole staff, regardless of subject. The ideas she brought back helped teachers understand students better and become more flexible and attentive – above all, to ensure every child feels their needs matter.

If she joined her first programme to meet her own needs as a teacher, it was her role as head that pushed her to join SWITLO and build a teachers' community. Two years of distance learning had made it clear that teachers, as well as children, need connection and support. The war disrupted the old professional associations; there simply wasn't the capacity for them. Teachers worked double shifts as fatigue and uncertainty mounted by the day.

With the support of fellow headteachers in her town, Iryna applied to the programme and soon launched Shakhtarske's first professional community of English teachers. She brought together 11 educators from five local schools, as well as one teacher from a neighbouring hromada.

The group has tackled trauma, challenging behaviour and learning support, alongside practical issues from regulations to updated assessment.

"Whatever topic we raise, someone can back it up with lived experience – and that matters. Those stories have bound us together. They show how much we share, and where we differ."

Participants value mutual support, the relevance of the themes and the practical methodological work. Together, they have revisited gender equality, social and emotional learning, creating a positive classroom climate and recognising psychological triggers that may distress a child.

"I've changed too," Iryna notes. "I used to insist cameras were on during online lessons. Now I ask those who are uncomfortable to switch them on just for a minute. Many



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After the full-scale invasion, school communities changed dramatically. Many displaced families arrived, bringing new students and new colleagues. Our meetings helped us truly get to know one another and grow close. Schools used to compete – over subject competitions, achievements and enrolment. Now we've stopped competing and become a community. We hadn't experienced such warm, open, non-competitive communication before

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displaced students feel shy about their new living conditions.”

One session focused on navigating adolescent behaviour.

SWITLO has also reshaped Iryna’s approach to leadership and teaching. As headteacher, she now strives for more than a staff ‘team’: she wants a true community. She says she has become more open, gentler and more attentive to the emotions and needs of both colleagues and students.

“I used to be a strict teacher, fixated on outcomes. SWITLO opened my eyes. Results matter, but the child comes first. Before tests I remind students we’re assessing their understanding of a topic, not them as people, and I show them where they might focus their attention. Outcomes do matter – but the process matters more. And the most interesting thing is that their test results have improved. I’ve heard similar reflections from many in our community.”

Preparing for the sessions became a catalyst for Iryna’s own growth – searching for materials, exploring new topics and getting to grips with digital tools and AI.

“When we realised some tasks could be done in five minutes, my colleagues’ eyes literally lit up. I hadn’t known how to create English readers, build a presentation in two minutes, or record a lesson in one take. I learned all that either while preparing for meetings or directly from my colleagues.”

Another strand of development was her own English.

“We English teachers don’t always use the language daily outside school. If you don’t use it in everyday life, your level drops quickly. At our meetings we spoke only English, which expanded our vocabulary. At first everyone was nervous, then even the quiet ones found their voice. It did wonders for confidence.”

Iryna is convinced SWITLO would benefit every teacher. She encouraged her colleague Kseniia to complete the

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It wasn’t easy – and it wasn’t cheerful – but we worked through it. Soon colleagues reported results. One teacher finally reached a displaced boy who had made it clear he didn’t care and wouldn’t engage. She told him, ‘Don’t do anything else – just copy these words into your notebook.’ Gradually, he began to work. There were many stories like this. We all saw it first-hand: when the teacher changes, the class changes too

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facilitator training and launch a community of her own. As the English teachers were already involved, the new TAG opened its doors to anyone interested. Eight teachers from other subjects joined and are now progressing through the SWITLO programme. Another colleague, Viktoriia, has founded a new English teachers' TAG at Lyceum No. 5.

“Competition has become healthy – grounded in collaboration. It’s like a chain reaction: SWITLO spreads to other schools. After these meetings, teachers leave energised – and carry that light back to their students.”

For Iryna, SWITLO teaches more than how to build communities and support one another; it builds self-belief – the sense that your voice matters. That confidence prompted her to apply for another British Council initiative, UK-Ukraine School Partnerships.



For me it was the natural next step. SWITLO brings teachers together; partnerships bring children together. Projects like these dissolve borders and leave what’s essential: humanity, collaboration and a shared commitment to the outcome. I’m glad I jumped on this train when I did. I’m sure many teachers feel the same

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[More about the programme.](#)