

SWITLO

Valentyna Dunaiska's story: Knowledge is strength – how a professional community supports Ukrainian teachers in wartime

Valentyna Dunaiska heads the association of English teachers in the city of Mohyliv-Podilskyi, Vinnytsia Oblast, and teaches English at Lyceum No. 3. For more than eight years, she has taken part in British Council programmes for English teachers in Ukraine. She is also a participant in SWITLO (Skills and Well-being in Teacher Learning Opportunities) and leads a local Teacher Activity Group (TAG) in her city.

“In 2016, a new chapter began in my professional life. British Council projects changed the way I work with colleagues and students. After the courses and training, I realised these approaches and techniques needed to be developed and shared more widely. My mission grew beyond one school to our whole community,” Valentyna says.

Russia's full-scale war has meant that almost every teacher in Ukraine now works with students who have lived through trauma, been forced from their homes or lost loved ones. At Valentyna's lyceum alone there are more than 50 displaced students.

Many teachers, too, have been displaced: their schools damaged or destroyed, and their lives rebuilt in safer regions. In these circumstances, traditional staff meetings – where one person speaks and everyone else listens – no longer suffice. They need meaningful change to meet today's challenges.



VALENTYNA DUNAISKA WITH COLLEAGUE

With support from the local administration and the education department, Valentyna and a colleague moved to a new, interactive format.

“It wasn’t easy, but with two facilitators we reached all 35 teachers. Our two professional communities run in parallel and meet in person once a month. Eye contact matters – participants don’t just listen; they share problems, look for solutions together and learn from one another, with support there and then,” she explains.

Alongside this new structure – each meeting dedicated to a single theme that participants prepare for, research and read around before sharing ideas and experience – Valentyna’s community has introduced reflective practice for the first time.

“Self-reflection is essential for growth. Teachers need to know how to do it well,” Valentyna says. *“We explored different models, including the sequence and guiding questions for each. The same applies to student reflection. Our teachers now use at least fifteen strategies to help learners reflect. We’ve also learned how to give constructive feedback. It helps to have someone who can not only praise, but also gently point out areas for improvement without discouraging colleagues.”*

“Knowledge is strength” is the motto that guides her work. Valentyna believes the techniques and strategies practised in the community should spread to every school.

“Each of us works with children who have been through traumatic events. This is our daily reality. Teachers must know how to avoid sensitive topics and how to adapt learning materials and tasks to reduce triggers. We talk through these painful issues at our meetings. We learn from one another and pass that knowledge on. Ultimately, it should raise our students’ attainment and shape the way they help rebuild Ukraine and find their place within the European community.”

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I’m grateful that even in these difficult times we can keep growing professionally and build a reliable network of support for teachers and children, so education can continue

VALENTYNA DUNAISKA

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We try new methods to reduce stress and welcome newcomers so everyone feels safe in a new environment. That takes knowledge, techniques and skills – which we practise at our meetings. Crucially, after several sessions everyone agreed the shift from the traditional format to shared learning, where no one dominates, was necessary

VALENTYNA DUNAISKA

Advise

Remember that everyone is different, and each person has something to contribute. A community lead does not need to have all the answers – they help participants find their own. A good leader has “big ears”: ready to listen to everyone and hear everything.

[More about the programme.](#)