



Versie 5 Digital Learning: a Breakthrough for Low-skilled Adults

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Abstract

Adult education in The Netherlands shows a new kind of evolution: digital learning for the low-skilled adults makes sense. 'Digital learning is as easy as ordering a pizza.' With the portal Oefenen.nl Stichting Expertisecentrum ETV.nl (ETV.nl) is dedicated to improve basic skills of low-educated learners with multi media exercises. The total number of accounts is over 1,4 million. Research shows that online practising basic skills can be successful. Digital learning for low-skilled people has become a permanent fixture in our society. It achieves a breakthrough for a large group of people. It is one of the most desirable forms for low-skilled individuals to acquire basic skills, so they don't have to show in public that they have a low literacy level or poor numeracy skills. Research on the experiences of people with low literacy levels and teachers shows that digital learning for this group has a motivating effect and is successful. So its validity is present. One of the most notable results is that the low-skilled users attach great value to self-guidance. The majority indicates that they prefer to learn on their own at home. Most low-skilled participants need both a mentor and an expert. The skills required to do this are a blend of professional, didactic and educational abilities. ETV.nl focuses on educational institutions (especially Regional Training Centres for Secondary Vocational Training), public organisations, employers and line organisations. The last decade ETV.nl placed digital learning for low-educated learners on the map in Holland. Language is the common theme running through all the training programs. The embedded language programmes are the most commonly used and very popular. The materials are developed for individual use. The monitoring system makes it possible for organisations to communicate with participants, to set up homework and to follow their results. This way it is possible to use the materials as a method in a course. New in 2013 is the method NLvaardig. The learner does most of the learning online. A professional teacher supports him, mostly online. A volunteer supports the learner in his own environment.

1. Learn more about basic stuff

The Netherlands counts approximately 4 million low educated adults that cannot function properly in the knowledge-based economy because of their poor literacy and numeracy skills. That includes e.g. the 1.1 million illiterates (10% of the 16-65-year old). In several researches it appears that over a million citizens has insufficient language and computer skills to do important digital activities. ETV.nl (started in 2003) took the initiative to realize a portal to improve basic skills of low educated learners with multi media exercises. Since 2011 Oefenen.nl is online. A research respondent described the general content of the programmes very clearly: 'Learn more about basic stuff' [3]. The core words are basic skills and basic knowledge and the programmes are made for (young) adults with little education. Language is the common theme in the training programs. Adults use the programmes to become more independent, to maintain skills, to strengthen their position on the labour market and for social reasons. As a result they have more basic skills, they enhance their language skills and they get more confident and proud. For many adults, learning in a group is not possible, because there is no suitable course in their neighbourhood, the courses are not at a good time, and sometimes because they rather not participate in a group. For mainly illiterates the step to some kind of organised learning is very big and the possibility to learn at home, behind your own computer whenever it suits you is a good alternative.

2. Digital learning is as easy as ordering a pizza

Adult education in The Netherlands shows a new kind of evolution: digital learning for the low-skilled adults makes sense ('Digital learning is as easy as ordering a pizza'). ETV.nl's portal Oefenen.nl is the starting point for people who want to improve their basic skills on the computer. In the period 2006 to 2011 ETV.nl gave an important impulse to the development of a digital learning environment for illiterate adults with their multimedia programmes 'Read and Write'. [1] The programmes consist of a website with online exercises, workbooks and television programmes on regional TV channels. ETV.nl was one of the executors of the national programme to attack illiteracy of the Ministry of Education,



Culture and Science. This meant a breakthrough in reaching illiterates. Other countries have also developed training material for practising basic skills online. Research shows that digital learning can be successful. [2] Digital learning for low-skilled people has become a permanent fixture in our society. It achieves a breakthrough for a large group of people. It is one of the most desirable forms for low-skilled individuals to acquire basic skills, so they don't have to show in public that they have a low literacy level or poor numeracy skills. Research for ETV.nl [3] on the experiences of people with low literacy levels and teachers with the programme 'Read and Write! Language at your workplace' shows that digital learning for this group has a motivating effect and is successful. The myth of low educated adults having great problems to learn digital is invalidated by this investigation. One of the most notable results is that low-skilled users attach great value to self-guidance. The majority indicates that they prefer to learn on their own at home. This does not mean that mentoring is not necessary, it could also be distance mentoring. Most low-skilled participants need both a mentor and an expert. The skills required to do this are a blend of professional, didactic and educational abilities. During a study, these skills were presented to current mentors and a skills profile was documented. [4]

2.1 Learn basic skills with Oefenen.nl

You can find all ETV.nl-programmes with online exercises on the portal Oefenen.nl. From this portal people exercise reading, writing, numeracy and digital skills in an informal way. The exercises are visually attractive, accessible and reliable and the navigation is simple. The materials are embedded: language related to practical and functional situations and actions. So as learners improve their basic skills, they also learn about subjects they can relate to, e.g. money, work, health or upbringing. The focus is on informal and non-formal learning. The materials are being used in non-formal education by a wide variety of social sectors and institutions. They are even the most important non-formal materials that organisations use. Individual use of Oefenen.nl at home is free. The programmes are developed for individual use. A monitoring system makes it possible for organisations to communicate with participants, to set up homework and to follow their results. This way it is possible to use the materials as a method in a course. Organisations pay for multiple accesses and the monitoring system. The total number of accounts is over 1,4 million, of which 127 thousand first registered in 2012. Users speak 90 different native languages. Users appreciate the portal with an average of 8,2. [5] A considerable number of these users are low-educated learners. They try to improve their basic skills via digital learning so they can improve their place in society or even move on to a training course or (other) work. The greater part of accounts is from individual users (95%). 65% of the active users is low or mediate educated and 65% works or is looking for work (18%). The researchers also concluded that not everybody is active. Although we reach a huge group of potential basic skills learners, there is a lot to gain in how much learners practice their skills. Good opportunities lie in offering more support, e.g. from volunteers. Companies, welfare and educational organisations can play a significant role in this.

2.2 Online language learning

The language programmes are most commonly used and very popular. This is true of both reading and writing programmes and vocabulary programmes for second language learners: the Read and Write! programmes and the Taalklas.nl-programmes. The nine Read and Write! programmes for learners with Dutch as native language, the three Taalklas.nl-programmes for learners with Dutch as second language (level A1 to A2). The purpose of the Read and Write! programmes is to stimulate illiterate adults to use their language more often, to improve their reading and writing skills and to start learning with more pleasure. From the start in 2007 this has been a great success. The number of adults that wanted to participate in a read and write course grew strongly. The adult education embraced the learning material right away. They had a great need for good and suitable material. Most popular is Taalklas.nl. Although teachers/mentors were hesitant about digital learning at first (2003), now they have completely accepted and welcomed the materials. In actual practice both programmes are being used for both groups of language learners. The Read and Write!-programmes are even mostly used by learners with a foreign mother tongue. New in 2013 is the method NLvaardig. The learner does most of the learning online. A professional teacher supports him, also mostly online. A volunteer supports the learner in his own environment. The programmes for reading and writing comply with the national standards for language levels. That also goes for numeracy and digital skills programmes. The programmes for Dutch as a second language fit in the framework that is distracted from the Common European Framework of Reference. We are always looking how we can improve our learning programmes using new digital developments. This year we launched our first App



Taalklas.nl Plus (in App store and Google Play). With our new programmes Taalklas.nl Plus and NLvaardig we now experiment with voice recognition technology.

3. Connect and co-operate

We must co-operate to make sure Oefenen.nl remains a basis facility that ensures the low-educated Dutch of a digital learning environment. Collaboration with libraries, education, volunteer organisations, welfare and especially municipalities is necessary for further development and warranty. All the Dutch libraries have a licence for Oefenen.nl. With the sheltered workshops we developed the SW-portal, based on Oefenen.nl and extended with digital materials of themselves. With the right use of digital means and more attention for informal and non-formal learning we can make all kinds of arrangements that make (language) learning for low educated adults more flexible and cheaper: It's as easy as ordering a pizza. [6]

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