Lowering the threshold to libraries with social media

The approach of “Digital Literacy 2.0”, a project funded in the EU Lifelong Learning Programme

Susanne Bernsmann and Jutta Croll
Stiftung Digitale Chancen, Berlin, Germany

Abstract

Purpose – Digital literacy has become one of the key competences to ensure social cohesion, active citizenship and personal fulfilment. The objective of the project Digital Literacy 2.0 is therefore to develop and to implement an ICT-based approach to lifelong learning addressing especially disadvantaged groups and vulnerable social groups of people with special needs. Since educational disadvantage is closely linked to social exclusion and poverty, there is a need to empower the really “hard to reach” learning distant groups and to enable them to make use of ICT. This paper seeks to address these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – The project partners are piloting a two-step approach to attract learning distant groups by offering an attractive starting point to information and social bonding: staffs at non-formal learning places like libraries will be trained for the use of ICT in their daily work with hard-to-reach target groups; they will gain competences in how to motivate socially disadvantaged clients to learn with the help of ICT/social media; adults from learning distant groups will be attracted to the places of non-formal learning by the use of social media thus improving their motivation to learn and empowering them to participate in social life.

Findings – The project builds on the experiences gained so far in teaching digital literacy: special target groups can be attracted to learning offers by topics relevant to their daily life and offers that do require only a small first commitment to learning. Besides DLit2.0 will establish a new approach of non-formal education with the help of ICT. Social media make it possible to provide learning offers tailored individually to the learners’ needs and thus increase the learning effects. Taking also into account the new opportunities of online participation and user-generated content, the concept of teaching digital literacy will be developed further in the project’s lifetime and beyond.

Originality/value – The network develops an approach to improve the collaboration between the non-formal education sector and the social sector. Staff from both areas will obtain knowledge and skills how to better understand the mode of practice of the other sector as well as to identify synergies and efficient procedures and to improve their collaboration. Information society has the potential to make a difference to the lives of people who often feel marginalized or isolated because of their social and cultural situation – DLit2.0 want to spread this issue to maximize this potential.

Keywords Adult education, Training methods, Internet, Social inclusion, Learning methods, Public libraries

Paper type Case study

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Background
Social media are a tool for taking part in social life and communities. Social media can also be a powerful tool to address those who are not yet included in the communities they are living in and should be part of. Moreover, social media like Facebook, Twitter, blogs and wikis rather lower the threshold to computer and internet as they do not require a full range of technical skills and capabilities – they lower the threshold to information and learning itself as they make it easy to obtain the knowledge one needs. The potential of the internet for everybody is enormous and homeless people can benefit from making use of the internet and social media like everybody else. Libraries can play an important role in harvesting this potential.

In the European project “Digital Literacy 2.0”, funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme, libraries from Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany and Poland in co-operation and exchange with welfare organisations from Germany, the UK and Portugal are piloting a two-step approach to attract educationally disadvantaged target groups like homeless people to libraries by offering them an attractive starting point to information and social bonding.

Introduction
Digital Competence or Digital Literacy has become one of the key competences to ensure social cohesion, active citizenship and personal fulfilment. The objective of the project Digital Literacy 2.0 (DLit 2.0) is therefore to develop and to implement an ICT based approach to lifelong learning, addressing especially disadvantaged groups and vulnerable social groups of people with special needs. Since educational disadvantage is closely linked to social exclusion and poverty there is a need to empower the “really hard-to-reach” educationally disadvantaged groups and to enable them to make use of ICT. Thus, they will be empowered to overcome social exclusion and to fully participate in digital economy and society.

The DLit 2.0 partnership identified a common need to develop programmes which respond fully to social media providing plenty of learning opportunities and lowering the threshold to education. The project picks up the given situation that with the availability of social media and mobile devices like smart phones and tablet PCs the time has come for a new strategy to address socially and educationally disadvantaged groups without access to traditional learning offers.

The role of social media
In all European countries statistical data give evidence that so-called educationally disadvantaged people and people living in socially disadvantaged areas are less likely to use the internet (Seybert, 2011). Nevertheless, the internet provides the opportunity to address those people and also to make them interested in using the internet to improve their daily lives. This pays into the strategies of social workers and librarians to reach and attract their usual or unusual target groups.

Data from the current German Library Association’s survey on reasons for the non-use of public libraries reveal that “non-users” or “no-more-users” ask for interesting offers like events and media usage. Digital offerings have a great potential to attract further visitors to libraries. Targeted investments that allow a higher up-to-dateness of the media, a wider selection of DVDs, CDs and digital media, and also a higher number of internet workstations are only a few of the practical measures that allow libraries to
increase their attractiveness and extend their portfolio (Deutscher Bibliotheksverband e.V. and Institut für Lese- und Medienforschung der Stiftung Lesen, 2012).

Within the three-year nationwide initiative “Internet erfahren” (funded by the Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology), Stiftung Digitale Chancen rolled out a pilot project for women in the low-wage sector and evaluated what triggered their usage of the internet in private and professional life. The results show that this target group is very interested in topics relevant to their daily life like user settings on Facebook and how to better understand their children using social media (Inklusive Internet, 2010).

In the training campaign “Surfen zum Job” (www.surfen-zum-job.de/jobsurf/content/sections/index.cfm), co-ordinated by Stiftung Digitale Chancen, social workers were enabled to use the virtual job market and to train their clients for “surfing to the job”. Youth without apprenticeships or employment learned to use the internet for job search, gained digital literacy and improved their chances for apprenticeship and employment. As these topics are of great importance for young people they were very motivated to participate actively and to obtain the relevant skills. While using PC and internet practically for their search and application for jobs they picked up digital literacy along the way. In summary it can be said that special target groups can be attracted to learning offers by:

- topics relevant to their daily life; or
- offers that require only a small initial commitment to learning.

Although the project DLit 2.0 builds on the experiences gained so far in teaching digital literacy, it will establish a new approach of non-formal education with the help of ICT. Social media make it possible to provide learning offers tailored individually to the learners’ needs and thus increase the learning effects. Taking also into account the new opportunities of online participation and user generated content the concept of teaching digital literacy will be developed further in the project’s duration and beyond.

Social media and making use of Web 2.0 require “Digital Literacy 2.0” – that is, the users’ ability to make use of the internet adjusted to one’s own needs and also to act online in a safe and responsible way respecting the needs of other users. Thus, these tools are ideal means to help to bridge the digital gap because their potential effects are two-fold: enhancing the users’ digital literacy but also their ability for learning in general. The use of social media engages educationally disadvantaged people in the process of acquiring knowledge and skills as well as in producing content.

**Approach**

Libraries from Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany and Poland in co-operation and exchange with welfare organisations from Germany, the UK and Portugal are piloting a two-step approach to attract educationally disadvantaged target groups like homeless people to libraries by offering them an attractive starting point to information and social bonding.

In the first step staff at non-formal learning places like libraries will be trained for the use of ICT in their daily work with hard-to-reach target groups. They will gain competences in how to motivate socially disadvantaged clients to learn with the help of ICT and social media and they will be supported in developing their own strategies to involve socially disadvantaged adults in non-formal learning.
In the second step adult learners from socially disadvantaged and educationally disadvantaged groups will be attracted to libraries and other places of non-formal learning by the use of social media, thus improving their motivation to learn and empowering them to participate in social life. Staff of non-formal learning places are intermediaries and thus they know about the skills and handicaps of their clients and potential obstacles for successful employment – vice versa, they are known by their clients as persons they can trust in, a helpful pre-condition to spread important information and knowledge.

The strategy of DLit 2.0 is built on the two areas of expertise that are covered by the consortium partners: social institutions working with socially disadvantaged people having the knowledge how to address this group; and non-formal education institutions providing access to knowledge resources and having experiences in the use of ICT. Linking these areas of expertise, DLit 2.0 is able to address the target group of educationally disadvantaged people and to make them benefit from the project’s strategy. Learning to know how social media can help to cope with their daily life situation will provide a positive learning experience to the target group that has the potential to further improve their motivation to acquire knowledge and skills in general.

The development of the curriculum is the “core” of the project. The curriculum will serve as an efficient and sustainable tool to contribute to the quality of vocational training and adult education as well as a model to enhance progress in the lifelong learning services for disadvantaged adults. Furthermore, the curriculum builds the basis for outreach to educationally disadvantaged groups. A strategic plan for the motivation and recruitment of adult learners among socially and educationally disadvantaged people will support the project’s strategy. For example, local co-operation with migrants’ or homeless people’s organisations that co-host events in the libraries may help to attract those target groups.

For the staff training the curriculum will comprise the following content:

- web 2.0 applications and social media;
- methods to make use of these tools to engage educationally disadvantaged adults; and
- mediated use aiming at improving efficacy of ICT offers of community based organisations, to their ICT illiterate end-users.

Staff from libraries and other places of non-formal learning will learn to collaborate with each other and how to provide digital inclusion training adequate to user needs. The course will further improve their methodologies, enlarge their empathy and enable them to reflect and to assess the situation at their local institutions.

For educationally disadvantaged adults the curriculum will comprise the following content:

- ICT basic knowledge;
- web 2.0 applications;
- autonomous, safe, secure and responsible use of social media;
- e-citizenship; and
- citizen journalism skills.

The curriculum will consist of different modules, each integrating a small number of very simple and short tutorials, to help to address challenges such as obtaining the
citizen’s card, paying taxes on-line, creating a CV or a self-introduction letter or publishing small pieces of content (like blogs, etc.), i.e. issues that are relevant to people’s daily life. In this way the deepening of ICT skills becomes meaningful for end-users as it enables them to cope with real life problems.

The curriculum will be piloted in the participating countries and shall be transferred into other European countries later on as part of the exploitation and valorisation after the project’s end. The training curriculum and the training material will be provided online in English and in the six other languages of the consortium (Dutch, French, German, Polish, Portuguese and Bulgarian).

**Outlook**

The project network develops an approach to improve the collaboration between the non-formal education sector and the social sector. Staff from both areas will obtain knowledge and skills in how to better understand the mode of practice of the other sector as well as to identify synergies and efficient procedures to improve their collaboration.

It is crucial to the project’s impact and sustainability that the staff taking part in the training courses will be enabled for new strategies to engage socially and educationally disadvantaged people in new ways of learning supported by social media. With altogether about 500 people qualified for this task during the project, DLit 2.0 will have a great outreach to this group and will successfully address them with non-formal learning offers based on the use of ICT and social media. As the training course is based on a comprehensive and adaptable method, DLit 2.0 also serves as a reference model for the inclusion of other marginalised and disadvantaged groups.

Once the staff is trained the spreading of the training for staff described above and the multiplying in courses for adult learners will also come into effect naturally after the project’s lifetime and will spread the benefits of the courses widely around the non-formal education sector and the social work sector. DLit 2.0’s approach to reach educationally disadvantaged adults through skilled staff at non-formal learning places sustains itself through multiplying effects. The staff that is trained throughout the project’s duration thus is enabled to carry on with the task of qualifying the end-users and especially educationally disadvantaged internet newbies later on.

The training curriculum will be available on a platform and will therefore be available for any organisation throughout Europe that will take up the strategy and roll out its own training campaign. It is very important to ensure the quality of the provision of training courses after the project’s end. Therefore, it is necessary not only to provide the curriculum and training material later on but also the instruments to evaluate the quality of work in each training carried out afterwards and a platform for exchange of experiences among staff involved in the training campaigns.

It is the project’s purpose to exploit the outcomes of the project as much as possible. Therefore, the DLit 2.0 approach shall be adoptable to every institution of non-formal learning throughout Europe. The partners of the project will ensure the exploitation directly in their daily work and through their sustainable networks or organisations.

Information Society has the potential to make a difference to the lives of people who often feel marginalized or isolated because of their social and cultural situation – DLit 2.0 wants to spread this issue to maximise this potential.
References

Corresponding author
Susanne Bernsmann can be contacted at: sbernsmann@digitale-chancen.de