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Successful approach to train digital skills with older adults

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Abstract

Social and digital participation is a highly relevant theme among older adults. To respond to that demand, in the frame of Erasmus+ project Bridge the Gap!, a training approach was developed in which age-friendly environments issues and digital skills training were combined. Twenty-four older adults from The Hague and Gouda participated with much enthusiasm in a workshop sequence of six meetings and indicated afterward that the training improved their digital skills. The approach focused on practicing using digital skills while working on age-friendly environments topics. The main conclusion is that this approach is successful in training digital skills of older adults. It also supported people with analphabetic and motoric issues to use their digital devices by using the speaking and reading functionalities. This article is a narrative of the approaches and workshops that were held to train digital skills with older adults.

1. Introduction

Besides the Covid-19 pandemic, demographic change and digital transformation of society are two major current trends. Ageing has profound implications, not only for individuals, but also for society as a whole. According to the European Commission, to support healthy ageing, lifelong learning – investing in people's knowledge, skills and competences throughout their lives – is one of the responses because of its positive effects. [1] Digitization is visible in almost every field of society. It calls for new skills to be able to participate in society fully. Digital illiteracy may lead to social isolation. [2] To improve digital skills for all, including the labour force and ICT professionals, the European Commission launched the Digital skills and jobs coalition to shape Europe's digital future. [3]

Generally speaking, older adults are less digitally skilled than younger generations. In 2019, Dutch research [4] showed that almost one-third (32%) of people aged 75+ never used the internet. Also, 10% of the people between 65-75 years never used it. The Dutch Bureau for Statistics reported in 2020 that 76% of people in the age-group of 65-75 years make use of social media: text messages, social networks and videocalls. People older than 75 years of age are less active with social media: 34% send text messages, 17% are active on social networks and 18% use video calls [5].

In the Erasmus+ project Age-Friendly Environments Activists (AFE-Activists) (2018-2020) [6] older adults were trained to advocate for the implementation of age-friendly environments in their local communities. During these workshops with older adults in several partner countries, it became very clear that participants had difficulties using digital devices to support their requests to local authorities and other stakeholders. This was the reason to launch another Erasmus+ project as a follow-up training: the Bridge the Gap! project [7]. This project aims to train, empower and support older adults to make use of digital tools to (re-)shape their neighbourhoods. Each project partner organised a series of 5-6 workshops with older adults in their own

countries. The Dutch partner AFEdemy held workshops with three different groups of adults learners: two groups were trained in The Hague and one group was trained in Gouda. In total 24 out of 26 learners, aged 64-85 years, successfully finalized the workshops and indicated that they have gained more digital skills and more confidence to use digital devices before they started the training. This article describes the applied approach, and the self-assessment outcomes of the participants is presented.

2. Approach of the training

During the first year of the project, partners performed desk research and held inter-views to further define older adults' digital skills gaps and learning interests. Based on that information, partners developed the curriculum for the training. The curriculum consisted of information about the concept of age-friendly environments launched by the WHO in 2007 [8], learning material about digital devices and software, self-assessment tools and evaluation techniques.

Within the frame of the municipal programme of the public libraries in The Hague, "older adults in the neighbourhood" (Ouderen in de wijk), invitations to participate in the Bridge the Gap! training were sent by email and on paper. Over 30 older adults responded to the call: 21 started to participate in two groups; the others were put on the waiting list. One group met in library Leyweg, and the other group in library Spui in The Hague. In Gouda, one of the interviewees took the initiative to invite several older adults from his own network to participate in the training. Five older adults participated in the training in Gouda. After the first meetings in The Hague, 2 older adults decided not to continue the training, one because she was invited for another activity she found more interesting and the other was afraid to get affected by Covid-19. In total remained 24 older adults: Library Leyweg: 10 people, Library Spui: 9 people and AFEdemy office: 5 people. The groups mainly consisted of women (83%). 18% of the groups were 60-69; 18% were 80 years or older and the rest were aged between 70-79. The workshops were held every two weeks. Every participant, except one, brought their own device: smartphone or tablet. The workshops were held face-to-face, the meeting rooms met the requirements of Covid-19 sanitation.

During the first meeting, the participants were invited to perform a self-assessment on the digital skills they possess. Thereto we used the list of the curriculum with an over-view of devices, communication, entertainment, information, mobility, financial issues, photography, and daily life organisation topics. The self-assessed skills of the participants varied: from only possessing a smart phone provided by the children, till fully skilled. Online banking (12) and emailing (13) were the best scoring skills participants already possessed. Then we invited the participants to check on their own devices what age-friendly environments are. This exercise already showed the big differences in digital skills: it was hard to connect to WIFI or to use the search engines in the best way. After this exercise, we introduced the WHO-concept of age-friendly environments at the hand of a picture of the AFE-flower. Participants were asked to indicate which domain(s) they wanted to become active in or find essential for themselves or other older adults. The topic of infrastructure / outdoor spaces (14), social participation (11), and communication and information (11) scored best. Five participants indicated to think every domain is equally important. Based on this information the programme of the training was created. First homework for the participants was to become a "Technology detective": try to detect where technology is used.

In the second meeting the participants reported on the homework challenge. They discovered for example the heat meter, cameras in elevators, parking signs, travel apps, washing machine. All groups asked for more clarification about cookies and QR codes. The last topic was very prominent in all groups, partly because the Dutch government re-quired a QR code to enter bars, theatres and so on because of Covid-19. The workshop continued with a discussion about the topic of outdoor spaces, mobility and infrastructure. The groups were asked to check on their devices what is meant by mobility, what they think is essential to older people and which eventual bottlenecks they detected. Accessibility of public transport and outdoor spaces is mentioned as a big issue, such as difficulties with boarding, especially if one is in a wheelchair, appropriate information and safety. The groups also explored on their devices how to solve the bottlenecks. They for example discovered that they could report these issues to the transport company or to advocacy organisations.

The third workshop started with a discussion about what the group discovered during the past two weeks. Several issues were practiced with the participants on their devices, such as repeating the QR code, downloading apps, dictating instead of typing to search for information and the storage of pictures. The AFE theme of the third meeting was social participation. At first, the groups discussed with the help of value cards what they think is important of social participation. Several values were mentioned, such as enjoying doing nice things together, being connected, keeping up to date, using one's capacities, personal development, and dignity. The groups continued to discuss whether it matters whether one is male or female, higher or lower educated, or has a higher or lower income concerning social participation. The workshop concluded with an exploration of social media that are available: WhatsApp, Facebook and Messenger, Instagram, LinkedIn, Polarsteps, and Twitter were further explored. With the help of guest speakers and a smart screen we further discovered what each social medium is. WhatsApp is already being used by most of the participants, the groups reported.

Communication and information was the theme of the fourth workshop. Main focus was on communication with official bodies. The group of Leyweg is confronted with major infrastructure and housing restructuring of their neighbourhood. The participants were worried about its consequences for them. They also suffered information, so we used this topic to jointly further explore which information we could find. We found the invitation to go to participation evenings and surveys and found more information on newspaper websites. The other groups also explored what is essential for them in terms of communication and information. Examples of usage are: referrals to "see our website", use the QR code, use the official Digital Identification Codes to get access to governmental information, accessibility of websites, and the "My"-domains of retirement funds, health insurance, government, energy companies. The groups also found that using the telephone to contact official organisations is discouraged: it is hard to find a telephone number on websites if any is available. Dutch authorities encourage digitalization with specific pro-programmes to enable citizens to learn digital skills and create information points in every public library [9].

The fifth workshop was a study visit to a smart home, the iZi house and the Techno-theek in The Hague [9] [10]. The last one is a second-hand shop that offers services to rent and use home technology. Additionally, one group made an inventory of what care and support mean for older adults: contacts, regulation, accessibility/being mobile, domestic help, meals and against loneliness were the main mentioned topics.

The final workshop was dedicated to accessibility. The groups were invited to check on their devices what accessibility is in their respective hometowns. Online and physical accessibility were further explored. Challenges with accessibility were discussed, such as inadequate accessibility of governmental websites, wrong parking, bad maintained pavements. With the help of digital devices and guest speakers, the groups learned how to report and how to contact the government or advocacy organisations. The final topic of this workshop was the evaluation and the handing out of the certificates to the participants. The oral evaluation learned that the group size of a maximum 10 works fine. The interaction between the participants and the trainers, and the interaction among the participants themselves were well appreciated. Some participants would have liked to have a longer duration of the training.

3. Evaluation

During the workshops, we noticed the strong interest and enthusiasm of the group to come to the training and to become active. Besides of the two participants who left at the start, no other participant stepped out. The participants brought in their own topics of what they want to learn, were supportive, and actively discussed the age-friendly environments' themes.

In the final workshop, the participants filled in the evaluation forms. Also they performed the self-assessment of digital skills again. In one group, we used a blank form; the other groups asked to receive their old forms again to indicate their progress. The participants were asked to note a + or a ++ in case they made progress. Also the participants filled in if they had learned new skills. Every participant indicated to have gained additional digital skills, except for financial issues as one participant noted.

The evaluation forms were filled in by 22 participants. The results are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Evaluation of the trainings in means

	Gouda (N=5)	The Hague (Leyweg) (N=9)	The Hague (Spui) (N=8)	NL (N=22)
1.1 The information handed out prior to the training was informative and useful.	1,8	1,78	1,5	1,68
1.2 The group of participants was well composed.	1,8	1,44	1	1,36
1.3 The duration of the training was adequate.	0,6	0,78	1,25	0,91
1.4 The room and arrangements were suitable (size, equipment, light etc.)	1,8	1,56	1,36	1,55
2.1 The training programme was clearly structured.	1,4	1,56	1,36	1,45
2.2 The topics of the course were well selected.	1,6	1,22	1,5	1,41
2.3 The methods used supported the learning.	1,8	1,44	1,36	1,5
2.4 The materials handed out during the training were useful.	1	1,78	1,36	1,45
2.5 I was able to follow the learning subjects very well.	1,4	1,33	1,36	1,36
2.6 The trainer(s) responded well to my needs.	1,25	1,78	1,75	1,67
3.1 I gained new knowledge about age-friendly environments	2	1,44	1,57	1,62
3.2 The course improved my ability to identify ways to improve my neighbourhood.	1	1,44	1	1,18
3.3 The course improved my ability to identify digital tool that support my interests.	1,2	1,67	1,25	1,41
3.4 I am more confident in using digital tools.	1	1,67	1	1,27
3.5 The course increased my motivation to engage for other people.	0,8	1,25	1,25	1,14

Overall, the participants gave a positive evaluation (Yes and Rather yes = 87%). They were less satisfied with the duration of the course (too short) and the group composition (different skills levels).

The three groups scored more or less similar in the evaluation. Sometimes one group had explicitly a higher score than the other groups, such as on question 3.1 (Gouda was more positive than The Hague), or on question 3.3 (Leyweg had a higher score).

What the most important things are that the older adults learned from the training was filled in by some participants. More skills and learning to look for information were most given answers. See table 2.

Table 2: What are the most important things that you learned from this training?

Category	Answers
Practical skills in usage of the different digital tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Some practical applications. The experiences of my fellow students. The importance of the subjects of the future, given my age. ❖ More skills on my mobile ❖ More features on my mobile that I didn't know about

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ My skills on the phone have increased ❖ Learn how to download apps, i.e. Coronacheck ❖ To install My Government (the sites), DigiD anyway and also to use the app of Energy company
Practical skills in Internet (e.g. Searching)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ More information on how it works with google search ❖ Looking up information ❖ Look up websites and get information from them ❖ More information, becoming more familiar with certain terms and phrases such as "cookies". ❖ Where I can find everything ❖ Finding ICT solutions quickly ❖ Got familiar with several websites
General answers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ There is a lot available. Finding your way requires digital - logical thinking. Ask the right questions. ❖ Don't know something! Look it up! ❖ That it is important not to be too hesitant and to try things, it will then work out more often. ❖ Of all things ❖ Making use of digital opportunities ❖ Several possibilities not known until now ❖ No question (digital) too crazy or you get an answer ❖ Not afraid of the digital

Another question was about the application of the learning in practice (table 3). Some participants filled in this question. From the answers we learn that the older adults will try to do themselves more on their digital devices, and support others and connect them-selves.

Table 3: From what you learned, what do you plan to apply in your individual life and community?

Category	Answers
Practical usage in private life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ More practice ❖ Wanting to try to do it myself, asking my grandchildren ❖ Use the websites more often and my DigiD more often ❖ Google maps ❖ Use them myself (...)
Practical usage in community life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ I already use many digital possibilities for my voluntary work. I know quite a few people who would benefit from this course and I strongly recommend it to them. ❖ Learning more from each other ❖ By telling/helping ❖ Pass on skills, help people digitally ❖ Certainly I go to the SeniorenWeb ❖ (...)and if possible pass them on to people in my circle
General answers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ To gain better digital-social knowledge ❖ People become digital ❖ To use digitalizing more ❖ Especially keeping up with the increasingly challenging digital world ❖ Become more involved in the digital world ❖ Make use of digital opportunities ❖ Trying to look up more ❖ Almost all of what is learned ❖ Be alert! ❖ Reread topics and then choose topics to address more often

Which support the participants may need to be able to apply what they have learned, was the final question. Given answers were mainly on doing more exercises, monthly meetings and finding the support themselves, for example with children or in libraries.

Another result of the training was that one of the participants decided to become an ambassador of the iZi smart home, to learn other people how to use digital technologies.

4. Conclusions

Social and digital participation is a highly relevant theme among older adults and there is much demand after pragmatic digital skills trainings. Digital accessibility is seen as utmost important. Many older adults were interested to follow the training and the importance of social participation and digital literacy was also reported by older adults themselves during the workshops. Social and digital participation supports the dignity, personal development and self-esteem of the participants. The approach of learning digital skills has been applied in other older adults' groups in The Hague and received a similar enthusiasm. Especially the application of using the speak functionality on the device and reading-out-loud function supports people who are analphabetic or have issues with their hands or motoric skills, and is therefore very well received. Trainings that are pragmatic and close to the world of experience of older adults themselves are a good response on the digital skills learning need of older adults.

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