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LESLLA aims to support adults who are learning to read and write for the first time in their lives in a new language. We promote, on a worldwide, multidisciplinary basis, the sharing of research findings, effective pedagogical practices, and information on policy.

## LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

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# **Digital learning opportunities for second language learning and basic education. Key criteria and experiences for development, operation and use**

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The adult education centres in Germany and their umbrella organisation have been gathering experience for several years in the development, operation and didactic use of digital learning opportunities in the field of German as a second language and basic education. The aim of this contribution is to share these and thus to put them up for critical discussion.

**Keywords:** digital learning, blended learning, mobile learning.

## **1. German Adult Education Association as a developer and operator of digital learning services**

For more than 15 years, the German Adult Education Association (*Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband*, DVV) has been developing and operating digital learning offers with courses in the areas of literacy and basic education, for learning German as a second language and for preparing students for the catching-up of school-leaving qualifications in adulthood. In 2002, the association first began developing a learning portal for basic literacy education (*ich-will-schreiben-lernen.de*), followed by various projects that were further extending the digital learning offers. The projects provided digital learning solutions for different target groups (adult illiterates, early school leavers, immigrants with residential status, recently arrived refugees, etc.), different content and learning goals (basic literacy, numeracy and budget management, vocational integration, first steps in language acquisition, etc.) and various technical formats and solutions (online portal, smartphone app) (Hanemann 2018: 39, 2015; Sokolowsky 2019, 2017, 2015)

DVV is the Federal Association of Adult Education Centres, of which there are around 900 institutions (with more than 3,000

branches) throughout Germany. The association represents the interests of adult education and adult education centres at the federal level, acquires projects which - implemented at the national level – provide solutions for adult education centres and adult education institutions in general. With its projects in the field of digital learning, DVV creates an infrastructure in which even small adult education centres with low resources can offer digitally enriched courses and blended learning, i.e. a combination of online learning with traditional place-based classroom methods. With its digital learning offers, which are generally free of charge for learners, DVV also reaches people who are unable to attend a course in an adult education institution due to their personal, family, professional and/or economic situation. Digital services thus play an important role in implementing an “education for all” model that is a guiding principle of the association.



Figure 1. Screenshot of the landing page vhs-Lernportal.

The digital learning offers are very well accepted, hundreds of thousands have attended and completed courses on the learning portals of DVV for German as a Second Language and Literacy Education. Just one highlight: in 2017 alone, the German as a second

language portal iwdl.de counted one million learning sessions with an average duration of 18 minutes per learner. In 2016, the DVV started a comprehensive relaunch project for its learning portals: The offers for basic skills and literacy education, German as a second language and the catching-up of school-leaving certificates are brought together in a new learning portal, vhs-Lernportal (<https://vhs-Lernportal.de>), optimized for learning on the smartphone and with all digital offers and courses available by a single login. Conclusions were drawn from many years of experience in the development and operation of digital learning offers and incorporated into the new portal. The new development was also influenced by new framework curricula and – of course – technical innovations. The aim of this paper is to present, share and discuss these insights and decisions.

## **2. Requirements for digital learning in literacy education and linguistic integration**

Only a few years ago, many teachers were convinced that even with the best will in the world, they could hardly work with digital media in class, because the technical equipment of many adult education centres did not allow this at all or only with severe restrictions. But today, teachers and educational planners can rightly assume that every learner has a smartphone that exceeds the performance of the computers in the PC cabinets of the average language schools or education centre. On the one hand it is thus possible to work with the mobile devices of participants in class, on the other hand these personal devices enhance learning far beyond the classroom – they and the various learning offers on the internet and in app stores (and other contents that can be the basis for learning) are also available outside the classroom, accessible already before the course starts and still there when the course is finished. Making use of the learner's smartphone is therefore not only a 'makeshift solution' for the often poorly equipped adult education centres, which are chronically underfunded. We rather see a great potential of the smartphone to become a *learning companion* that has a lasting and particularly close relationship with its owner.

The smartphone also plays an important role in the migration process, becoming an outstanding problem-solving instance and guardian of information that reaches into the past as well as the present and future. “As important to me as water”, refugees describe the vital help the smartphone provided them on their way to and in Europe (St George 2017). UNESCO (2018) and others rightly describe the great potential for learning on smartphones for refugees. We would like to add and emphasize that this also applies for other marginalized groups: With the spread of the smartphone, large population groups that previously had little access to (digital) education have a “lifeline to learning” (UNESCO 2018). The smartphone is an instrument for independent, self-directed learning – this not a far-fetched idea but rather an already established practice. In order to promote and support an effective learning process via smartphones, attractive and high-quality offers are needed.

Notwithstanding the potential and availability, learning with a smartphone is subjected to restrictions, e.g. due to screen size or input options. Content and design therefore have to meet high standards, because every exercise and its individual components should be meaningful and relevant, at the same time be attractive and feel good to use.

The constant availability and wide range of applications in the everyday use of the smartphone as a digital companion offers great opportunities for flexible and individual learning. This advantage can, however, stand in the way of a constant, above all undisturbed learning, since each incoming notification can lead to the interruption or even termination of the learning program and process. A challenge, therefore, is to design learning opportunities in such a way that they remain interesting in the longer term and feel so comfortable in practical use that they are less ‘susceptible to interruption’. While Stockwell (2014: 202) on the question of how mobile learning succeeds strongly emphasises the appropriateness of the technical solution, that “learners must feel comfortable with the technology such that they do not have reservations about using it without supervision or assistance”, we consider the didactic concept to be just as crucial. All in all, a useful and successful mobile learning application does not only require the right technology and design, but

also a satisfactory solution to questions of didactic structure and content.

For us, a key to the design of our courses lies in the creation of a context for the practical use of language and a reference to everyday life. Thus, learning units in vhs-Lernportal are always introduced by a scenario, which embeds the learning goal and content of the following sequence of exercises into a certain situation. Protagonists with identification potential accompany the learners through the portal, mastering everyday challenges and thereby illustrating the learning goals and introducing into theme, context and content of the learning unit. In the following exercises, we frequently refer to the introductory scenario: the source material of the scenario (situation, pictures, texts as well as the linguistic structures and vocabulary preserved therein) serves as the basis for the exercises, which successively extend the learning content and lead beyond the introductory scenario.



Figure 2. Group of protagonists in vhs-Lernportal.

One of the strengths of digital learning programs undoubtedly is that they provide immediate feedback in closed exercises, enabling

learners to follow their own pace, quickly confirming or correcting their learning performance. Thus it supports autonomy in learning as it helps learners to control, reflect and evaluate their own efforts.

Interaction with the digital program must offer variety, and monotony in exercises must be avoided. At the same time, too much diversity in exercise types can be counterproductive, as learning should not be distracted and the learner's focus not shifted from content to functionality in the exercises. From our experience we deduce that in general a basis of a dozen exercise types offers sufficient diversity for the presentation, reproduction and automation of learning content and at the same time is quickly functionally mastered by the learner, therefore concentration is not strained and the learning flow is not disturbed.

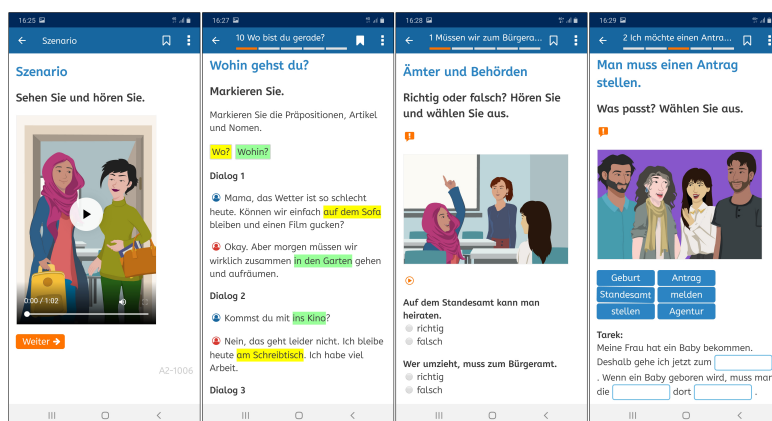


Figure 3. Series of exercise types.

At the end of a learning sequence designed to introduce, reproduce and automate learning content, we offer a limited transfer into productive language use in the form of a semi-open writing task. For example, after having worked on the learning goal “introducing yourself” over three learning units using Nasrin Fani and Rafael Ortega as examples, learners are asked to introduce themselves in a short text. Such free text productions are sent to a tutor for feedback.

Every learner has a tutor at his/her side in the learning portal. Tutors can be teachers who have registered as such on the platform. Tutor-teachers can set up learning groups on the portal to which

learners can subscribe (by entering a code communicated to them). Learners who are not part of a group learn with a DVV tutor. Tutors receive the free text productions of their learners for correction and feedback, can assign exercises to the learners individually or as a group and check learning status and learning activities. Learners and tutors can also communicate on the platform via an internal messaging system. Our experience shows that the tutoring of learners on the platform is a significant quality feature and strongly influences the success of digital courses.

Learners quickly seek a relationship with the tutor. Often, in the case of DVV tutors, to whom learners are assigned via the system and who they have not encountered in a classroom situation, it seems necessary for many learners to ask at first whether one is actually dealing with a person (“Are you real?”), later learners apologize if they have not learnt for a while or have been less active than they expect from themselves. Gratitude is also expressed, successes outside the learning platform are shared, e.g. a passed exam, a new job, etc. Some learners also report intimate stories to the tutor – sign of a special and trustful relationship that can arise during the learning activity on the platform.

Learners receive rewards for their learning performance through badges that are awarded for completed lessons as well as for “special events” such as the tenth writing task sent to the tutor, being an ‘early bird’ and learning before 7 a.m., etc. The badges are also awarded for completed chapters and courses. Badges are displayed on the learner’s dashboard, as are the individual results of tests and lessons. In addition, tutors praise learners for their activities to maintain motivation, thereby supporting continuous and committed learning in the portal.

In summary, we consider the question of feedback to be crucial in the learning process and therefore attach great importance to well-programmed feedback, well-trained tutors and badges that additionally support the learning activity by distinguishing continuous work.

High-quality feedback is also the prerequisite for self-directed learning, since learner autonomy is not necessarily given and must be developed in parallel. Reinders and Hubbard (2014: 361-362) conclude that “technology can play a role in the development of



learner autonomy by supporting learners in a number of ways”, but also that “specific training” is needed, “not only on how to use the software, but also on the skills necessary for self-directed learning”. Tutors do support learners in understanding how their own digital learning is most effective. This also happens against the background that many learners do not (cannot) attend traditional courses.

vhs-Lernportal offers the possibility of systematically improving linguistic skills in the second language German without attending a traditional classroom-based course at a Volkshochschule. This is important because not all migrants in Germany have access to (state-subsidised) German and literacy courses. There are currently no federal education programmes for refugees to whom the state ascribes no “good prospects of staying”, although some courses are financed at the level of the states or municipalities, since refugees often spend many years in Germany without an official “good prospects of staying” (Bruhn et al 2018).

The adult education centres are committed to ensuring that everyone has free access to education, regardless of their social or residence status or the prospects of remaining in Germany. The free access to the learning portal is one way of implementing the right to education for all. We understand well that for many people, the attendance of a course in the classical classroom is very important because it is motivating to have a learning group and peers and because the communicative use of oral language can be best trained and practiced in a direct encounter. We therefore advocate the use of the learning portal in blended learning concepts that combine online/mobile learning with classroom-based learning activities.

### **3. Blended learning as a successful model**

Courses in blended learning are successful when teachers thoroughly select the learning content for classroom and online phases and when the setting offers the learners a recognizable advantage. There is no ‘right’ form of blended learning, but in general we find that phases for consolidating, repeating and automating language structures and vocabulary can be very successfully outsourced from classroom teaching and shifted to a digital environment. In such phases the

support of a digital learning program offers real benefits through automated correction in closed exercises: learners receive immediate feedback from the program as to whether a solution is right or wrong and can correct themselves immediately. This does not only speed up learning processes in the acquisition of the second language, but also fosters learner autonomy by providing the learner with more control over the learning process.

If phases of individual practice, like repetition and automatization, are outsourced from the classroom, then the learning group in its meeting phases has more room for communicative and group-related activities such as role plays, projects, exchange of experiences in partner and group work as well as plenary discussions. The classroom or meeting phases have the important task of constituting the course as a social group, so that there is a trusting atmosphere between learners and their teacher or tutor in the online phases. In addition, communicative action in the second language can be tested, experienced and trained in the protected classroom setting, something that is only to a limited extent possible in digital space. In final analysis, social and cultural aspects also play a role, such as the accepted distance and proximity of interlocutors, speech volume, etc., which are learned rather tacitly in face-to-face interaction. Advantages of blended learning, such as increased motivation and problem solving skills, have recently been tested and documented for higher education (Lu et al. 2018; Luna and Winters 2017; Shu and Gu 2018; Kintu and Zhu 2017) but to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies on blended learning in the context of literacy education, migrant integration and LESLLA learners. Existing studies show that face-to-face meetings are important for the interaction among learners and their motivation, blended scenarios therefore have an advantage over pure e-learning solutions. They also point to the critical role of a technically appropriate and user-friendly learning platform.

As a general rule for blended courses in Volkshochschulen, the meeting phases in blended learning are more frequent and demand more space in beginner courses, which usually address newly arrived immigrants. At an advanced language level, courses that combine short face-to-face meetings with extended online phases are also well accepted and successful. Advanced learners in B1-B2 German courses have already attained a good oral ability, but must improve in

particular their written language skills and – while meeting the criterion of comprehensibility – must work hard on grammatical correctness and linguistic expression for professional development.

Blended learning courses are therefore particularly popular among those migrants that are part of the labour force who, because of their professional activities, have little time to attend face-to-face courses and who at the same time find out in working life that they have concrete language learning needs when, for example, deficits stand in the way of advancing from unskilled to skilled work. Due to the reduced attendance time, blended courses can also reach shift workers and are specifically designed by adult education centres so that they reach a certain group of workers – for example, workers in logistics centres who attend a two hours of face-to-face class on non-working Saturdays combined with a weekly learning activity of five hours in vhs-Lernportal. Evaluating these programmes and correlating data on the learning process with individual statements by learners and teachers is not only an important task for educational research, but also with regard to the concrete programme planning of adult education centres and the training and further education of teachers.

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