

ENGAGING WITH ONLINE LEARNING

A CASE STUDY



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on e-learning at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Engage your participants emotionally, stimulate peer learning by making your course interactive, add group work, use a variety of media, allow for personalised learning ... these were just a few of the tips and tricks applied when online learning was introduced at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Despite

this good advice, it was quite a learning curve to achieve impact.

Our case: online interactive learning

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands has 1,800 employees in the Hague and 2,800 abroad, working mainly in embassies and consulates. The Academy for International

Relations is responsible for facilitating learning and development. In 2011 this would typically consist of face-to-face training sessions; a day or two in a hotel in the Hague, and several expert talks with 15 participants. Besides these training sessions, a few e-learning modules had been developed. These were unpopular, expensive and did

not allow for discussion. Besides that, the content of the modules could not easily be updated, whereas the situation within the Ministry is in constant flux.

The Academy was convinced that online learning would reduce the cost of travel and would save time for the participants. In 2012 the decision was made to pilot a new approach – a four-week online event open for everyone working for the Ministry, including those at the embassies.

The aim was a more inclusive programme, with more flexibility for participants to plan their learning within often hectic schedules. The first pilot was a course about macro-economic developments in Africa, using Moodle and live online meetings.

Immediately, 50 people subscribed to the course. The course was highly interactive, with webinars featuring guest speakers, online statements and group work. It was also highly appreciated by the participants, evaluated with an average of 8 out of 10:

“It was the first time I participated in an online course; I would say that it was more than I expected. It was interesting, interactive and very informative. I liked it very much.”

“A stimulating way of looking into developments in the most fascinating continent in the world. New developments put in perspective, which invites further reading.”

This enthusiasm created greater interest to organise more online programmes around the various new policy areas of the Ministry. Over the next three years, in 30 group courses, we reached 1,740 participants with an average of 58 participants per intervention, compared to an average of 15 participants per intervention in face-to-face courses. During these years, the design was expanded to include, for instance, social media and gamification. A few elements have proved really successful and hence have been replicated in many of the online courses:

- ▶ A weekly theme.
- ▶ Weekly webinars with experts, field practitioners or highlighting experiences from colleagues.
- ▶ Videos by colleagues,

combined with a question.

- ▶ Group or individual assignments.
- ▶ Statements to develop participants’ own opinions.
- ▶ Live streaming.
- ▶ Gaming elements, such as leadership boards.
- ▶ Certificates.
- ▶ Sometimes a rest week or weekend for participants to catch up.

Impact on performance

Nowadays, for employees at the Ministry it is normal to participate in a webinar or to subscribe to an online course. This is also the case for (local) professionals working at the embassies, previously excluded from learning programmes. From our evaluations we gathered that participants especially appreciate the ‘social’ element of our approach; learning together greatly enhances the network within their policy area. It helps to discuss how to advance your case with others, rather than struggling on your own.

“I feel I have a good basis to begin my work on the water theme. I now know who the players are and where I can get more information.”

“From the videos to the course content and reading materials to the assignments, the course kept me on my toes and gave me the necessary push to learn more.”

“I have enrolled in a Coursera course which is just sending information. Ministry courses were interactive, had questions and with ‘Africa Nearby’ we had to work in teams which was really fun.”

After three years, an impact evaluation was organised by means of individual and group interviews. Many participants noted an increase in their general knowledge level and a more profound understanding of the policy issues and players involved.

The broadening of their ‘frame’ leads to a different way of thinking and working as a civil servant, more in line with new policies. A local staff member from an embassy, for example, mentions how enlightening it was for her to realise that governance is vastly different in different countries.

Centrally based staff (in the Hague) make more profound connections

with (local) staff from embassies. And vice versa; (local) staff at embassies value the insight in the central policy agenda as a basis for their work. All this contact and discussion greatly enhances the network of participants. Their enhanced understanding of the subject matter and current affairs raises their self-confidence in discussing issues with third parties.

“I have been able to establish contacts with colleagues in Bangladesh and various countries in Europe.”

There were some critical remarks in the evaluation, too. They all relate



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to an even higher ambition to learn collectively in the policy areas of the Ministry. The courses helped to make sure the policy was known and broaden the networks but did not achieve a collective learning process in which the implementation of the policy was under scrutiny, conclusions were drawn and feeding back into the policymaking process.

“Work on follow-up; facilitate sustainable networks learning together after the online courses.”

“Offer the courses to smaller groups who are working on similar issues. Expand informal networks, support them and link with specialists.”

It’s a change process

Online learning demands a substantial change in mindset and culture of learning. Professionals within the Ministry needed different skills and routines to engage in online learning. This change process was more refractory than we anticipated in a large international organisation with a strong culture. There were three main →

areas regarding this change process and these provide focus in guiding change.

Technology matters

The technological learning infrastructure within the Ministry was not optimal and improving this has proven a huge challenge. For instance there was no internal webinar software. Using external webinar software made it susceptible to firewall issues. We had trouble finding a reliable location for live streaming with embassies during face-to-face meetings. A move from one to another LMS (Moodle to Classmoodle) showed a temporary rise in technical problems which caused complaints and lowered the appreciation, especially in the Hague (embassy staff appeared more tolerant of these obstacles).

The lessons:

- ▶ The need for an internal person dedicated to learning technology. It is important that there is sufficient interest in and support for technology to make sure it functions properly. This asks for a dedicated internal person who builds a good relationship with the ICT department.
- ▶ The importance of an infrastructure for social learning. The main infrastructure was Classmoodle. A social platform was lacking within the Ministry which led to the start of Facebook and LinkedIn groups with downsides regarding privacy, data ownership and visibility.
- ▶ Access to technology is critical. The available video conferencing software worked well and was well-established within the Ministry. However, external facilitators did not have access; neither did participating agencies.

The culture

Collective beliefs about online learning proved hard to change. Managers often do not appreciate online learning in the same way as face-to-face learning. Also, a widespread belief existed that networking is only possible in a face-to-face setting. Many are convinced that knowledge transfer may be possible online, but not transfer of skills. Hence an attempt to facilitate a community after the Africa course has not worked out. Currently, more people

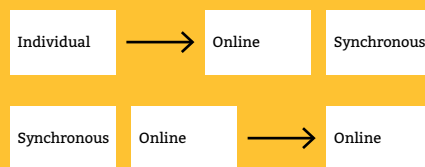


Online learning demands a substantial change in mindset and culture of learning and working



are seeing the need for communities arise after finishing the course.

Figure 1
From individual e-learning to online communities



The lessons:

- ▶ The best way to convince is to encourage people to participate. Many people who participated changed their ideas about online learning.
- ▶ Take small steps: first, participants discussed content they studied. Then they discussed a case in advance. Eventually, the staff brought their own cases and went on to talk more about their own work. Thus, we moved from e-learning to online interactive learning, to learning within communities.
- ▶ Link to overarching organisational changes. For instance in our case to the 'modern diplomacy' mission of the Ministry. Discuss what contri-

bution online should bring – what is the change you are supporting?

Learning vs achieving (as HRD team)

After the impact evaluation, looking at the data, the HRD team realised how busy they had been to organise the 30 courses. They did not take time for sufficient reflection and learning during the three-year project. Organising online courses demands new skills of the Academy, hence reflecting on experiences. For instance, the need to support communities arose early, as well as the need to be responsive to new needs like working with the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals).

The content experts felt they were 'inventing their own wheels' and would have benefited from learning from each other. We were, however, busy living up to the Ministry's high demand for producing new learning materials and were not responsive enough.

The lessons:

- ▶ Take time to step back, reflect and change your course of action.



- ▶ Involve managers and leadership. The team did not manage to create a soundboard group. Learning online and participating in communities should be seen as part of daily work; stimulated and recognised by leaders. This is still a challenge for the Ministry.
- ▶ Organise sessions with people engaged in the online programme to reflect and learn together.

Conclusions

Starting with online learning isn't just another project, but a major change process. It is more than implementing tips and tricks for online learning. Online learning demands a substantial change in mindset and culture of learning and working. Professionals who start with interactive online learning need different skills and routines; so do their managers. The HRD department needs new roles and technological/didactic skills they often are unfamiliar with.

Last but not least, technological infrastructure and conditions need a lot of attention. In hindsight,

the team would have devoted more attention to this change.

How would the programme have been different? They would have worked with a group of people on a common vision on different types of learning, from instructional and social learning. There would have been clear decisions on types of learning activities, not only group courses. Rather than supporting civil servants to get up to speed with new policy areas, it would have meant flexibility in planning and curriculum to support upcoming topics like the SDGs, migration and Brexit. It would also mean trying harder to make a difference in the work of professionals implementing the policy.

Rather than offering the same course about the policy, there would be a move towards discussion of implementation to evaluation. It would also mean moving from a course format to supporting a network of professionals working in the same policy area.

But in hindsight everything is easy. Online learning was so new that it is hard to have a common vision without

experimenting. You need the experimentation phase to find out what works, what people appreciate in order to develop a collective vision; and a group of engaged internal stakeholders, exchanging continuously and inspiring each other to arrive at such a collective vision.

The team are proud of the number of people they have reached, the way they engaged and connected professionals in different countries.

HRD people should invest their time wisely among technical infrastructure, changing mindsets, reflection and learning and implementing the actual online activities.

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