

Survey
on
how to learn and how to teach
Search Engine Optimization

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Warning: the results published in this document are for research purposes only. Quotes are only allowed with the authorization of the author.

1 Objectives

The research objective was to gather information from a large sample of participants on important forums specialised in search engine optimisation (SEO), on how search engine optimising specialists and/or amateurs learn SEO and how this discipline is or should be taught.

2 Summary of observations and conclusions

The participants in the survey mostly have a professional use of SEO. For over 39 % SEO represents from 50 to 100 % of their job, whereas for 27 % their situation regarding the practice of SEO is variable. The group of participants can therefore be qualified as mainly professional and expert in this field.

32 % declares teaching SEO, which seems quite an important number, this result has to be completed by the precision that was made in 3 % of the cases that participation in forums by answering questions and guiding other participants was considered as teaching. This phenomenon is confirmed by the fact that most participants learnt SEO on forums and websites.

SEO can be regarded as quite a recent discipline, since only 1 % of participants know of it for more than 10 years, and most (55%) know it since 2 to 5 years.

An important point of the survey is that it shows that SEO was almost exclusively (97 %) learnt by self-learning. When looking at the means that were used to learn SEO, web based means such as forums and websites with their newsletters, as well as discussion groups are predominant. These means are mostly used in combinations, in total 67 % used from 2 to 5 different means. Other means were mentioned like trial and error, the direct contact with professional SEOs, on the job training and conferences. Participants who learned SEO with a training course mostly learned it online and very few of them followed a dedicated course or learnt SEO as part of their studies.

For 92 % of participants the knowledge of SEO should be updated frequently, of whom 43 % mentioned SEO needs a permanent survey, and 30 % considers necessary a monthly update.

When participants were asked which means in their opinion would be best to learn SEO, they mainly advise Internet forums and discussion groups or websites, whereas books, cd-roms as well as courses at university, technical or graduate schools are considered little adapted to learn SEO. It is stressed that these means are too quickly outdated and that therefore experiencing with trial and error are suggested as more efficient means to learn SEO.

E-learning as a successful means to learn SEO is perceived for 53 % as possible, but only if it is updated frequently and associated with practice, case studies and continuing self-learning. These conditions, among others, are also mentioned as being the reasons why SEO cannot not be learned through an e-learning course.

When looking at participant's perception on how SEO is taught only 8% seems to know of a course at University or in technical schools. 47 % of participants find that SEO should more often be taught in such institutions. A large percentage finds that SEO basics can be taught at such a course, and that it could be part of marketing or web design, but that a successful course needs too frequent updates associated with practice and experience which cannot be taught in this way.

The particularities of teaching SEO are seen predominantly as an ever changing, variable, uncertain and dynamic subject, needing practice and real world experience to be learned. SEO is often considered as a subject or art that cannot be formerly taught. It is very often mentioned that an SEO teacher can only be good if he really practices SEO himself. 61 % of participants find that SEO should be taught by experts focussing on the fact that they ought to practice it themselves and also that SEO needs self-learning.

When asking for the participants' opinion about the future of SEO and its training, results showed 3 major themes. A first one concerns the integration of SEO with

related disciplines and knowledge, mostly web design and marketing or multi-disciplinary. The second general theme is related to the way SEO will be taught or learnt, where the need for good understanding of basics, on the job training, conferences and seminars was often stressed, as well as the possibility of SEO training at university or college. As for the third theme that is more specifically related to SEO itself as a discipline, some participants feel the situation will remain like today, others hope for change towards more ethics and more relevant web sites, others still are quite uncertain about its future.

We note that some themes appeared throughout all the open answers. By far the most popular theme that occurred was the dynamics of the field of SEO dictating learning and re-learning to keep up with the constant changes. The next most popular theme we identified is the importance of practice and experience. Another important subject that the results of the survey showed is the awareness that the future of SEO depends on the search engines. Besides these general trends the important number of single expressions that did not fit into the general themes we identified, shows that search engine optimisation also is an individual action, mostly shared, but also marked by some kind of a secret for some and a game for others.

3 Methodology

Objective: Gain better understanding of the processes of learning and teaching SEO.

Targeted group: professionals or amateurs, experts or beginners in search engine optimisation. The link to the survey (available from 11/02/2004 till 05/03/2004 at <http://cladage.online.fr>) was sent out on a selection of search engine related forums as well as a discussion list¹. It was accompanied by a letter explaining the survey should serve as methodology for a research in education sciences. In total, 168 people responded.

Method: Ask participants on forums and discussion lists to participate in an online survey taking about 10 minutes to complete.

In the survey we asked a set of closed questions as well as several open questions which were aimed to allow respondents to express themselves in their personal language.

Results were gathered in an SQL database and were exported to Excel. Overall results were tabulated for each of the questions. We have published the results from each of these in this paper.

At any point in the survey, participants were able to decline to answer a question, meaning that not all respondents answered all questions.

¹ Forums : <http://www.highrankings.com/forum/> ; <http://www.seoforum.com/> ;
<http://www.jimworld.com/forums/> ; <http://forums.seochat.com/index.php> ;
<http://www.searchguild.com/forum17.html> ; <http://www.webworkshop.net/> ; <http://www.web-mastery.net/> ; <http://www.internet-marketing-research.net/forums/forum3.html>.
Discussion list : <http://www.led-digest.com/>

4 Presentation of the results

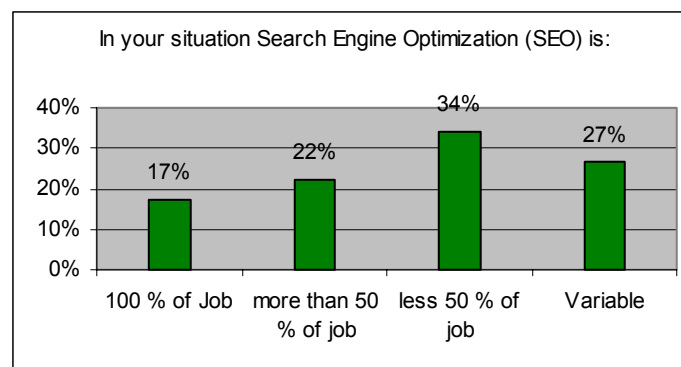
The present document only shows a summary of the results using graphics and tables. A more detailed analysis will be available in my dissertation.

4.1 *Participants situation regarding SEO*

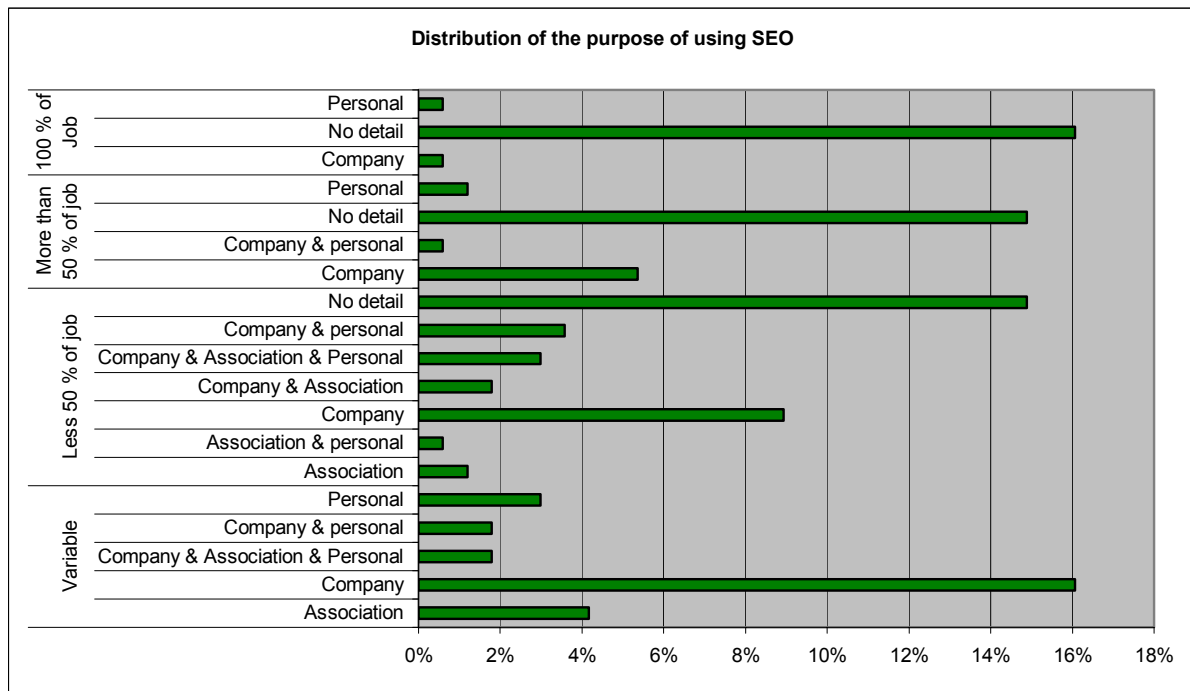
The first set of three questions tries to determine the participant's situation regarding the practice of SEO.

4.1.1 Purpose and frequency of the practice of SEO

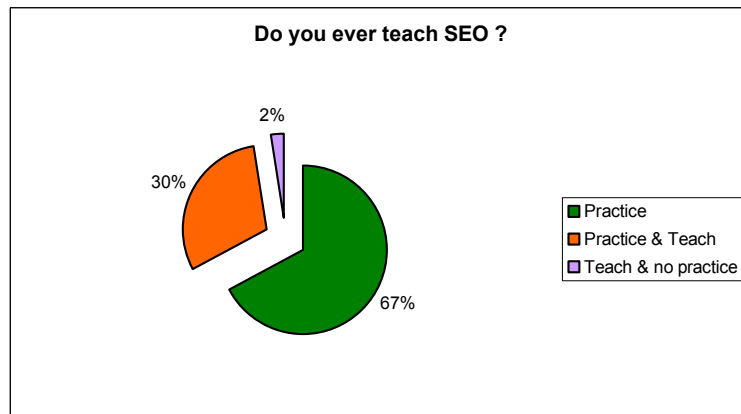
Question 1: " In your situation Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is:"



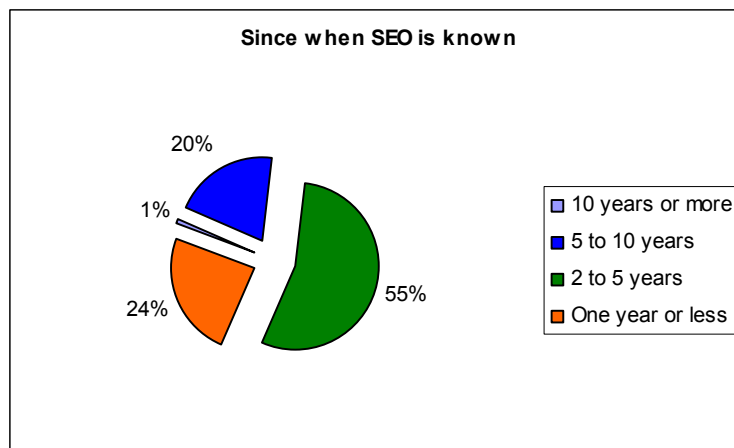
The graphic below shows the distribution of the different purposes of SEO. Although 27 % did not give any detail on the purpose of their practice of SEO (I named this situation "no detail" in the graphic below), you can notice that SEO is more often used for professional purposes. I also suggest that the "no detail" situation in the case of participants for whom SEO represents 100 % of their job can be interpreted as being a professional purpose.



4.1.2 Do you ever teach SEO?

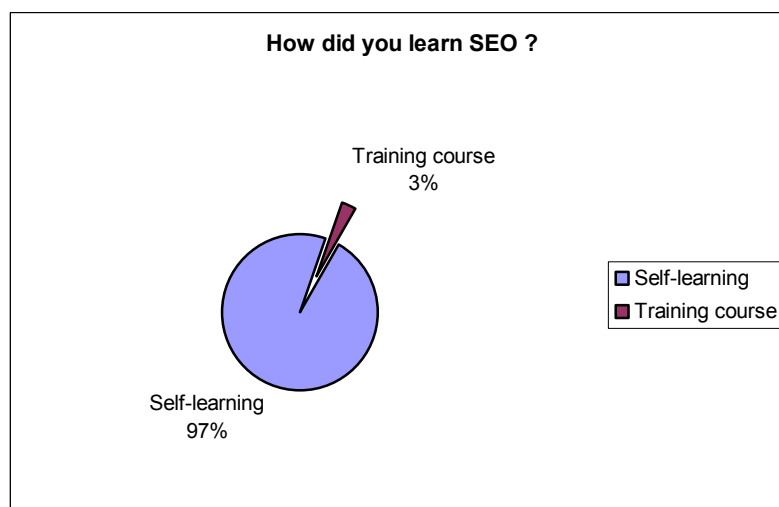


4.1.3 Since when do you know SEO?

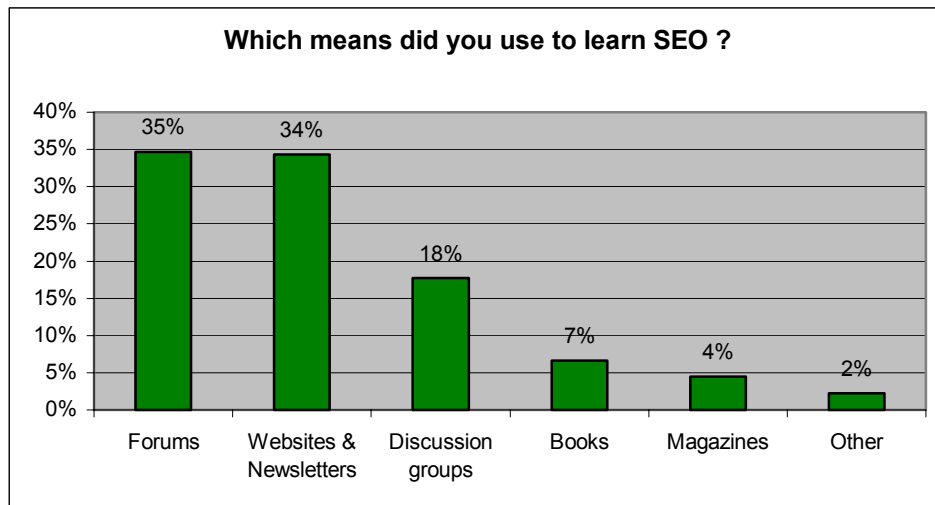


4.2 How was SEO learned?

4.2.1 By self-learning or by following a training course?

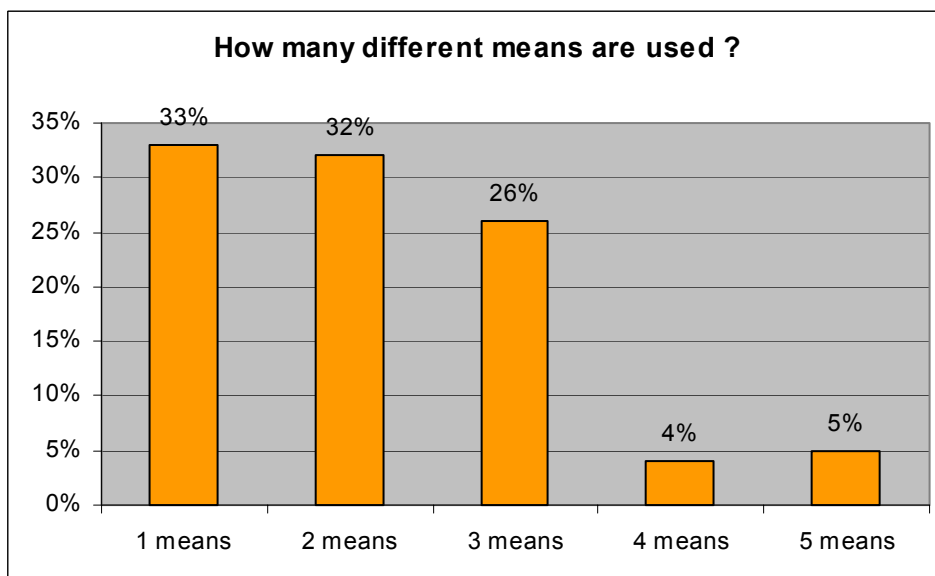


4.2.2 Which means did you use to learn SEO?



Multiple answers were authorized, which means that the percentages shown in the graphic above are to be read as being the percentage of participants having used the particular means.

4.2.3 How many different means were used?



4.2.4 Different combinations of means

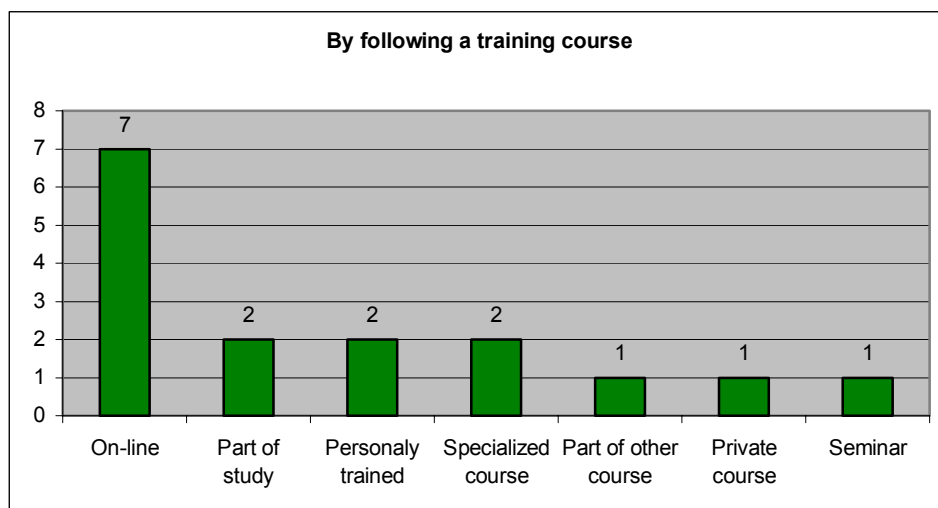
Means and combinations	Number of occurrences	Percentage of total
<i>One single means</i>		
Forums	24	14%
Websites & Newsletters	18	11%
Other	8	5%
Books	3	2%
Discussion groups	1	1%
Magazines	1	1%
<i>Two means</i>		
Forums / Websites	39	23%
Websites / Discussion group	7	4%
Forums / Discussion group	4	2%
Forums / Magazines	1	1%
Forums / Books	2	1%
Websites / Magazines	1	1%
Websites / Books	2	1%
<i>Three means</i>		
Discussion groups / Forums / Websites	35	21%
Websites / Books / Forums	3	2%
Discussion groups / Books / Websites	1	1%
Discussion groups / Magazines / Websites	1	1%
Websites / Magazines / Forums	2	1%
<i>Four means</i>		
Books / Discussion groups / Forums / Websites	5	3%
Discussion groups / Forums / Websites / Magazines	2	1%
<i>Five means</i>		
Books / Magazines / Discussion groups / Forums / Websites	8	5%
<i>Total number of individuals / Self-learning</i>	168	100%

4.2.5 Precisions about the learning process and means

Question 3 of the survey offered the possibility to indicate other means of self-learning of SEO. The following table shows different classes of precisions or other learning methods. We grouped the different answers into larger classes of similar means and preferred not to mention any company name.

Other indicated means to learn SEO :
- Using Web position software ;
- Trial and error (6 persons) ; - practise and experiments ; - research, testing ; - application and testing of various techniques, plus experimental methods ; - researching and experimenting from first principles
- Talking to SEO's ; - Mentored by a professional SEO ; - Learn from Co-Workers and Industry Pros ; - A good friend of mine first showed me how SEO can get a website to the top of the ranks ; - Tutor by my boss ; - Hired 2 specialists and observed their work
- Running a number of web sites, and making certain that they performed well in Search engines ; - On the job training
- Now, the more powerful SEO techniques are discussed in private forums
- Blogs
- Also by becoming an editor at search engines
- Mixed tutorials from practitioners
- Search Engine Strategies Conference

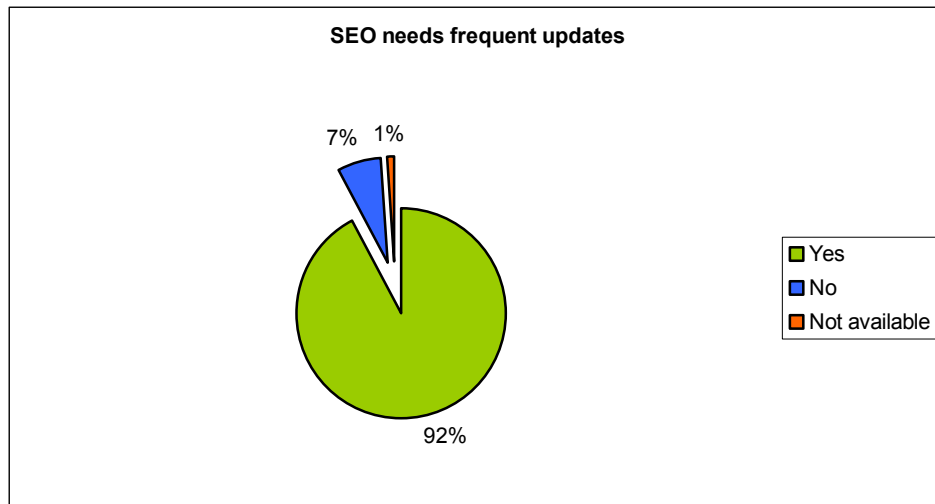
4.2.6 Learning SEO by following a training course



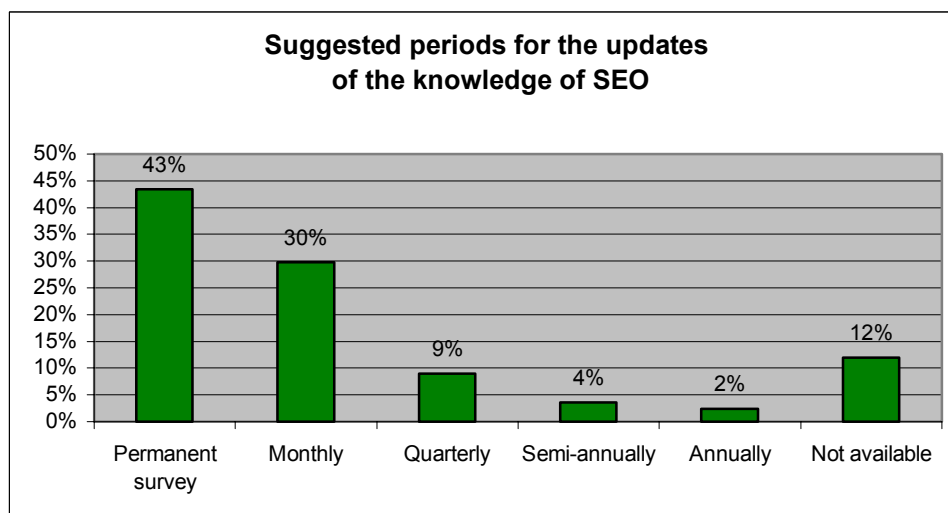
Note: since only 16 persons on a total of 168 declared that they learned SEO by following a training course I chose to indicate de number of persons in each category rather than the percentage to show more realistic figures.

4.3 Participants perception regarding the knowledge of SEO

4.3.1 The knowledge of SEO has to be updated frequently



4.3.2 Suggested periods for updates:



4.3.3 Comments on suggested periods for updates

29 % of participants gave indications concerning the high frequency of the suggested periods. The table below shows the main categories of given reasons.

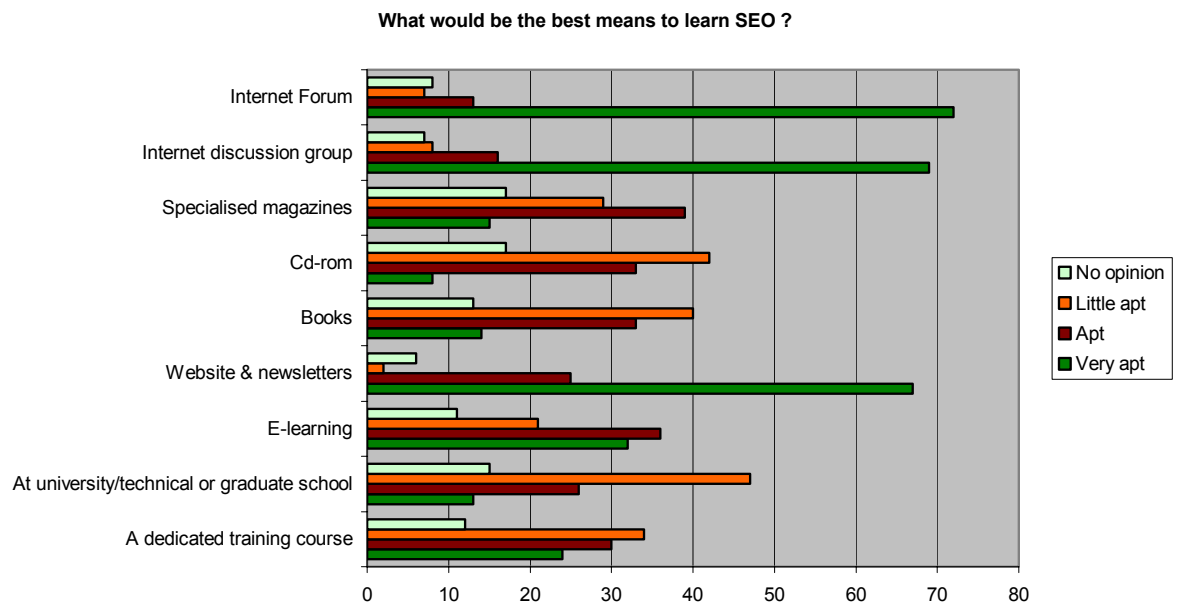
Suggested general themes / keywords	Total of Occurrences
constant change	8
daily change	7
daily check / research	7
daily learning experience	6
depends on Search Engines	4
keeping up with the news	2
Other single expressions	
application is a continuous refinement process	1
continuously	1
education should always be ongoing	1
keep abreast of changes	1
keep up with new events	1
monthly check	1
need for constant evaluation	1
read and write the news daily	1
SEO is a living product	1
stay current on updates	1
still a new and evolving field with many changes	1
weekly check	1
Total of expressions	46

We notice the predominance of expressions related to constant or daily change and learning.

4.4 Participants perception on how to learn SEO

4.4.1 Looking for the best means to learn SEO

Means	Very apt	Apt	Little apt	No opinion	Total
A dedicated training course	24	30	34	12	100%
At university/technical or graduate school	13	26	47	15	100%
E-learning	32	36	21	11	100%
Website & newsletters	67	25	2	6	100%
Books	14	33	40	13	100%
Cd-rom	8	33	42	17	100%
Specialised magazines	15	39	29	17	100%
Internet discussion group	69	16	8	7	100%
Internet Forum	72	13	7	8	100%



Precisions concerning the different means

The table below shows the precisions and/ or comments on the suggested means to learn SEO:

Theme 1 : Necessity of frequent updates
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The above choices all assume that the information provided is updated and kept "fresh". - Most printed books will be outdated when they hit the bookstores - It's all good, so long as the info is up to the minute. What worked last week will sometimes kill a site the next - I think books would be out of date by the time they came into print. SEO is constantly changing, albeit subtly - Anything that is flexible and able to change as the search engines change - Since seo is continuously changing it would have to be something that is capable of doing that as well - One needs to keep in mind that by the time you have taken a course, the engines have changed some of their algorithms and the knowledge is outdated. One needs to have a learning program that keeps the student updated on changes after the course is completed
Theme 2 : Variety of sources and aptness according to individual particularities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I think all sources are great to consider, but you need a variety to be successful - Aptness would be highly variable, contingent upon both content and congruence with student interest
Theme 3 : Stress on experience, practise, testing, experimenting, trial and error

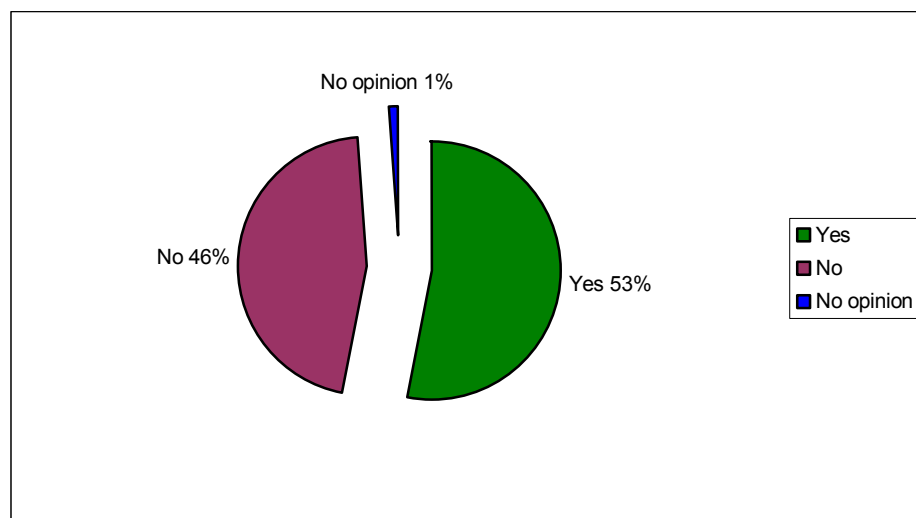
- Personal experience in discovering what works and what does not work
- Practise. Study, but theory by itself is not enough, it's extremely important to have a job where you can put in practise what you are learning (or at least a website)
- Just do it. Optimize and test, optimize and test.
- Through practicing or even an internship
- Find out how search engines work and apply that knowledge
- Read all you can, then put up your own site to test what you learnt
- Users experiences with their sites
- Experiment and analyse results
- Trial and error

Theme 4 : Apprenticeship / consulting experts

- Apprenticeship under experienced SEO
- Serve an apprenticeship with someone who has mastered the art
- Ask experts
- Computer clubs
- Visit the Search Engine Strategies conference

4.4.2 Perception of e-learning as a means of learning SEO

The graphic below shows the answer to the question: In your opinion could SEO be learned exclusively through an e-learning course?



Conditions of success of an e-learning course:

We reflect in the table below the general themes that appeared as being the conditions for a successful e-learning course.

Conditions of the success of E-learning for SEO :	Total number of Occurrences
Updated	14
Practice	10
Quality	6
Adapted	4
Basics can be taught	4
Case studies	4
Learner motivation	4
Continuing learning	2
Interactivity	2
Researched	2
Understanding of related issues : HTML	2
With feedback	2
Other single expressions	
Understanding of related issues : search concepts	1
Understanding of related issues : technical background and web technologies	1
Advanced principles change too much	1
As long as SEO can be defined and all the areas are taught	1
Collaborative environment	1
Daily involvement to update	1
Learner autonomy	1
Learner self discipline	1
Not exclusively	1
Practical examples	1
Regularity	1
Small groups	1
Student credentials upon completion	1
Teaching yourself proactively	1
Total of expressions	70

N.B.: One participant can have given more than one expression

Reasons why an e-learning course would not be adapted to SEO:

Proposed general themes :	Total number of occurrences
Changes too quickly	39
Only for basics	15
Experience needed	11
Not exclusively	8
Practice needed	6
Multiple viewpoints needed	2
Exchanges needed	2

Ongoing learning needed	2
Other single expressions	
Researching needed	1
Multiple resources needed	1
Updates needed	1
Testing needed	1
Incomplete	1
Lacks quality	1
More art than science	1
No real experience / exchange	1
Too many variables	1
Too structured	1
A teacher would himself become a student of current events.	1
Total of expressions	96

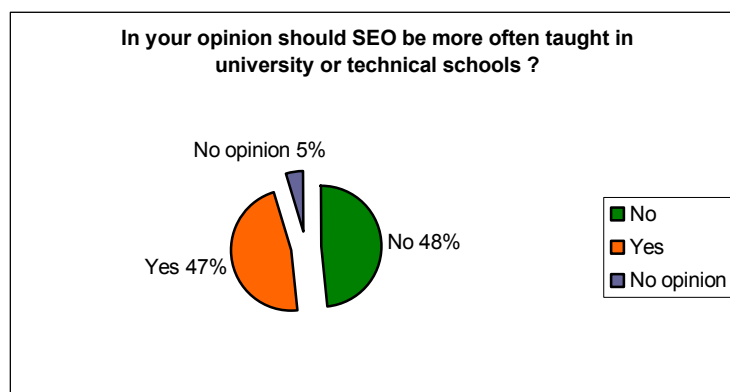
N.B.: One participant can have given more than one expression

4.5 Participants perception on how to teach SEO

4.5.1 Training courses on SEO at University or technical schools

89% of the participants does not know of any such training course, 3% has no opinion and only 8% declares knowing of training courses on SEO organised by Universities, and business or technical colleges. These courses are part of a Web Design / e-Commerce course, and can also be online or in seminars.

4.5.2 Should SEO be more often taught in university or technical schools?



We note that there is hardly any difference between the group favourable to the teaching of SEO in University or technical schools, and the group unfavourable to such a course. Looking at the detail of the motivations given to these positions one notices that the conditions to check to the success of such a course also appear to be the reasons of the impossibility of an effective SEO course. In the tables below we have grouped the general themes we met in the answers to this question.

Yes: SEO should be more often taught in University or technical schools

Proposed general themes	Total % of occurrences
Part of marketing	26%
Teach the basics	14%
Part of web design	16%
Real time experience needed	6%
Part of web design to assure its visibility	8%
Importance of the basics	5%
Part of Internet courses	3%
Other single expressions :	
Part of e-business	1%
Part of information technology	1%
Part of Internet course	1%
Part of related courses	1%
Part of technical skills	1%
Because internet is a huge part of business	1%
Because it is a profession	1%
Because of the complexity of search engines	1%
Has a good future	1%
Importance of SEO	1%
In technical schools	1%
No real specifics as University/School syllabuses are far to rigid to keep up with changes.	1%
Technical schools are more likely to be "current"	1%
The focused training of a technical school would be more appropriate	1%
The web is strangled by a lack of usability for the novice user searching through all the information	1%
There is limited knowledge and an air of mystery on the subject matter	1%
Updates needed	1%
Total of themes and expressions	100%

Note: The question was open to allow a free expression of opinion on the subject. Since answers often contained more than one theme, we chose to identify each type of expression to be able to measure the importance of each theme. The results therefore do not indicate the number of answers given, but the percentage of occurrence of each theme or expression.

Some expressions did not fit into any theme, we therefore chose to reproduce the core part of them in the table as a single expression.

No: SEO should not be taught in University or technical schools

Proposed general themes :	Total % of occurrences
Too many changes	40%
Only for basics	6%
Too specialized	5%
Practice needed	4%
It is not a subject that can be taught	4%
Could be part of Web site design courses	4%
Doubts on the credentials of the instructor	3%
It is a constant learning process	3%
Not important enough	3%
It is not a static field like medicine or law	3%
Other single expressions :	
It is not strictly a technical field	1%
It's not a discipline, it's an application of other disciplines	1%
Not complex enough for University	1%
Too much of a niche job	1%
Because then more people will know how to do it	1%
It would create too much competition	1%
Better web design education must precede this	1%
Cannot be taught in a learning establishment	1%
Computer science background needed	1%
Could be part of general Internet training	1%
Could be part of Web site design courses	1%
Experience needed	1%
Only if teacher is involved in real life SEO	1%
Should be part of marketing	1%
Should not be learned to fool the search engines	1%
Should only be mentioned	1%
Too much emphasis is put on SEO	1%
Too simple techniques	1%
SEO is a game	1%
Total of themes and expressions	100%

4.5.3 The particularities of teaching SEO

Question 10 : “*In your opinion what are the particularities of teaching SEO?*” was an open question to which 45 % of participants answered.

The following themes could be identified:

- ***Related to the changing character of SEO***

Besides a largely shared feeling of constant changes of SEO, we note the stress on the variability, the uncertainty and the dynamic character of this subject. These characteristics explain why emphasis is put on the need to update information, to keep knowledge current, to lead ongoing research, education and learning, with a necessary learning ability and adaptability on changes.

- ***Related to practice and experience***

The need for real world projects, case studies, practice, experience, experimentation and testing (trial and error) is stressed because it is often felt that these aspects of teaching SEO are hard to set up in a course.

- ***Related to the posture of the teacher***

This theme reflects the thought that a good search engine optimizer will practice and not teach. Therefore the condition to be a SEO teacher is to practice SEO. A good course would also have more than one teacher, to be able to have different points of view. This again points to the unstable, even elusive nature of SEO.

- ***SEO as a subject, science, art: can it be taught?***

It is stressed by a small percentage of participants that SEO is not a science and not a subject that can be formally taught. SEO in this case is more considered as a subject or even an art that needs self-learning or on the job situations with apprenticeships.

- ***The overall knowledge that is needed***

SEO is for an important part of participants regarded as a subject that should go with a larger range of knowledge of the full process of the life of a website,

including mostly web development and marketing but also the ability for individuals to communicate the importance of SEO to the overall project. It is also pointed out that a personal knowledgebase is needed that is not taught.

- ***Indications for the contents of an SEO course***

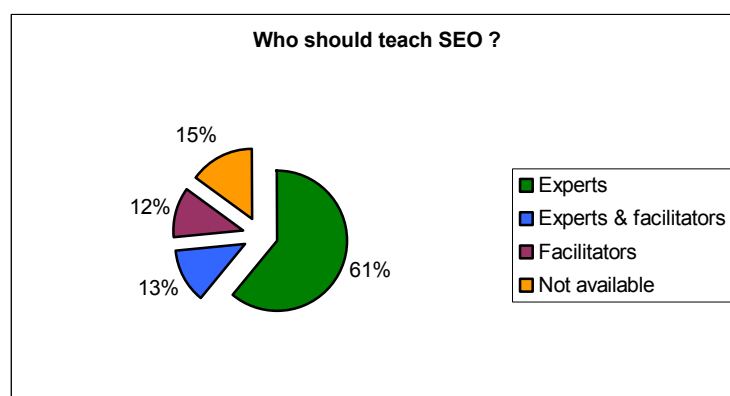
Besides the many suggestions that are given for the contents of a course on SEO, with an understanding of terminology and jargon, it is also mentioned that knowledge of illegitimate practices should be taught.

- ***Other visions***

For a less important part of participants SEO is regarded as a tricky subject, like a game (also thought off as a game of chess), who's definition is not well defined and marked by different schools of thought.

4.5.4 Who should teach SEO ?

The graphic below shows a large majority of experts to be considered as best teachers for an SEO course. This result reflects the feeling that only a professional search engine optimizer can be regarded as a competent teacher.



The precisions that were made concerning who should teach SEO stressed the following aspects:

- SEO should be taught by people who do it daily and not by professors and institutions;
- Self-learning and practice : you can only learn SEO on your own by implementing the tricks you learn;
- It should be taught by a hands-on classroom environment;
- It should be taught by ethical people;
- Qualified/professional advice is needed, however, self teaching is also good.

4.6 The future of SEO and its training

Question 12 *“In your opinion what will the future of SEO and its training look like ?”* was an open question to which 54 % of participants answered. Considering the fact it was mentioned to be an “optional question if participants still had time”, this important rate of participation may reflect the interest in the question which often does not leave professional search engine optimizers indifferent.

The following 3 themes could be identified, each including several categories:

Theme 1 - Evolution: integration of SEO with related disciplines and knowledges (22% of expressions)

- Webdesign
- Web site process
- Layout & design process
- Copywriting & marketing
- Multi-disciplinary

Theme 2 - Evolution: an idea of the way SEO will be taught or learnt (28% of expressions)

- Emphasis on the importance of a good understanding of the basics
- On the job training
- Conferences & seminars
- Online
- Training at university or college
- Apprentice
- Dynamic learning and re-learning
- Formal training cannot work
- Self taught
- Think Tanks
- SEO as a new field of education
- The difficulty of dealing with knowledge kept secret

- Science & art with practice

Theme 3 – Evolution: the existence and the nature of SEO (51% of expressions)

- Like today
- Remain a niche job
- Evolution depends on evolution of search engines
- Quickly outdated and ever changing
- Increasingly either technical, esoteric or complicated
- Hope for change or stress on what should change
- Uncertainty : no idea or hard to say
- No future, or not much of a future

Conclusion

My feeling is that SEO should not only be regarded as a professional self-learned practice but should at least for the basics become a shared knowledge useful not only for business marketing but also for anyone who wants to share information on the internet. I'm also convinced that as end users of search engines, the more people will know about the rules and practices of SEO the more they will understand the pertinence of search results. Being aware of the different techniques used to improve the position of a web site, one should realise the nature of such a result, which will not always be the right answer to what is looked for.

I therefore personally find that SEO should be more generally taught in universities and technical schools. Since the subject of SEO changes very quickly the question is how to teach such an unstable discipline. It seems quite obvious that the traditional means of elaboration of a course are not feasible in this case. Can we therefore put anyone at the head of any classroom to teach any kind of SEO? The subject of my thesis is to verify if a didactical transposition and a didactical approach could be useful in the development and the life of such a course.

As for the details of this reflection and the theoretical approach in educational sciences my research only begins. I would therefore very much appreciate any comment, suggestion, feedback, exchange of experience or reflection on this subject.