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A case study

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1. Introduction

Although it may sound contradictory at first, this paper holds that active team processing is one of the key parts (if not the one essential element) in optimising individual learning in the context of e-learning.

As is widely known, student support in e-learning is a key factor in establishing a sustainable learning process. But it has also become a buzzword being used in almost every discussion concerning didactical processes.

To achieve active participation, a tutor should - at least for the most part - be able to monitor the progression of his/her students' work over the course of an e-learning class.

Students, on the other hand, have been primed throughout their studies to present perfect results and to hide the laborious process achieving them. Therefore, they tend not to ask questions during the process and have also been found reluctant to actively test all the communication tools that the learning platform presents them with.

The e-learning course this case study is based on is part of a whole range of classes designed for professionals with a first university degree plus some working experience. The course serves as the basic module of the whole concept, introducing the learning platform as well as initiating virtual teamwork. Indeed, initiating virtual teamwork should be considered its actual main focus.

Being obliged to work in teams, at least in part, shifts the focus from the tutor to the fellow students, making it easier for the tutor to follow up learning and working processes.

Thus, students become more active which, in turn, also changes the tutor's role.
This is an achievable goal only when the learning-process itself is made transparent – and remains so throughout the course.

Teamwork in e-learning presents opportunities to achieve a support that initiates students' activity and openness. On the whole, the idea is to shift the student's focus from the tutor to the fellow students so that there is a lesser incentive to impress, but rather get appreciated by learning, planning and working together with the other students – meaning by learning from and with them. Consequently, they can open up to the process instead of only trying to appear as perfect as possible.

The single aspects of an exemplary e-learning class need to be given a closer look here in order to identify possible hindrances and ways of getting around them.

Students who had never had to reflect on what their learning strategies actually are may find themselves at the beginning of the course in a situation similar to the one of someone who enters the wrong classroom and gets examined, in front of the whole class, on a subject he has no knowledge whatsoever about, say, the flags of South American countries. No wonder, then, that the student will feel uncomfortable and is likely to behave as inconspicuously as possible. It is precisely the fear of being tried and found wanting that we try to dispel by making people work in teams. Not in order to shirk responsibility and to pass the blame, of course, but in order to pool the participants' knowledge and make them come out stronger as a group – stronger, in fact, than the students would have been had they been left to fend for their own.

Similarly, it would test the students' willingness to admit to knowledge gaps if the tutor were to give them the homework to prepare a presentation on South American flags overnight, but without recourse to secondary sources, i. e. only using participants' previous knowledge, however shaky it may be. Wouldn't most people at least feel somewhat tempted to have a quick peek into Wikipedia, ask a close friend, search for the old encyclopaedia? Indeed, most would probably rather just show the final result and play down any difficulties, even more so, if the way to get there had been painful because it was difficult to achieve and included a lot of hard work.

This problem commonly appears in all sorts of learning situations including e-learning. In e-learning in particular, it might produce special problems, because of the peculiar e-learning situation in which the online communication situation sometimes hides communication gaps more easily and also the problems underlying them.

One possible key to this problem is the way how tutors go about stimulating the online communication process. They should try to make the students structure and build their own individual learning progress more actively by working in an active, self-organized team.

This also is the reason for tutors in the OLIM Project, to prepare for the course in a certain way. Although all the tutors are familiar with teaching subject-matter they might not be quite as familiar with e-learning – they might therefore not know the special challenges it poses as regards communication.

On top of that, they can't know what it feels like to be on the other side of the system: on the student's side. The tutors qualify for teaching e-learning classes by taking part in a mandatory course called "Train the e-trainer". There, they are confronted with feeling insecure, waiting for the others to answer, and so on... Actually, having had that experience later on helps a lot teaching, as one can really put oneself into the student's shoes.

2. Approaching learning goals:

Shifting the Focus from Tutor to Fellow-students

Let's have a closer look now on how to make students approach their learning goals more positively. Various points need to be made here in order to see where and how this active process can be initiated, most important of which are the following:

a. platform

b. class structure

c. tutor's role

a. The platform – how is it build up, what sort of learning does it initiate, which are the channels of communication it offers to the students?

b. What is the class structure like? Are there different phases, how are they organized, and what sort of different tasks have to be performed?

c. The tutor's role: How actively does he take part? Does he rather watch from the sidelines, or is he more or less the hub of the learning and communication process?

A few words need to be said as to how these classes fit into the university's structure as a whole. The class "Virtual teamwork" is organized by Hamburg University's „Arbeitsstelle für Wissenschaftliche Weiterbildung". It is part of a modular course system (the OLIM project) aiming at students with a first degree plus some work experience. Those people are often looking for a different position or a different line of work entirely and require some management knowledge in order to achieve that. They can now choose from and combine some modules of the „OLIM"-programme, (some are also in the English Language) which work mostly online but have at least one (most classes two) face-to-face-meetings.

There is a broad range of subjects from Law to Psychological aspects of management. One can choose several of these modules and combine them in different ways. For all of these classes, one gets credit points in accordance with the Bologna credit point system.

The starting point for all this range of classes is always the introductory class: Virtual Teamwork. This four-week course aims both at introducing the learning platform and at making the students familiar with the idea of working in a virtual team, or, to be a little bit more specific: initiating virtual teamwork.

On the one hand, the class plainly and simply introduces the platform, so that later on in the following modules participants will be able to handle it smoothly. This way the students can focus on the subject-matter. On the other hand - and this is to be considered the classes' main aim - it wants to initiate virtual teamwork.

How the second target can be achieved, and what sort of problems might occur, will be seen when one knows how the class actually works and evaluates the processes afterwards. The four working weeks are organized in three main parts.

1. **Preparatory week**

2. **Face-to-face meeting**

3. **Three online weeks including two tasks for virtual teams**

   3a. case study

   3b. self-reflexive task

The first week (part 1) before the actual start is a preparatory week to get to know the platform on one's own. It gives students an overview of the extent of the course's workload, and offers them also an opportunity to get to know the fellow students online, since they are meant to introduce themselves before the actual face-to-face-meeting after this first online week. All these little tasks are organized on the basis of a „roadmap" in a way that all different functions of the platform get at least tried out once by the students. The full-day face-to-face-meeting which follows (part 2) usually takes place one Saturday. During the remaining three weeks, the students (part 3) have to complete two tasks in a team which ideally consists of 4 or 5 students.

The first task is a case study on a fictional virtual project. The project that students are presented with has run into various problems. The students are now meant to identify the problems – and find adequate ways to deal with them so that the project will eventually have a satisfactory result. The project's difficulties lie in all sorts of fields, namely communication, technical problems, a lack of procedural knowledge, allocation of tasks, and so on.

The second task is to name five key factors of success and the main "stumbling blocks" in e-learning and to evaluate them in the group.

Both tasks, obviously, are related to the situation that students find themselves in. The first task makes one aware of the typical problems that might occur, while the second is a reflecting task, in which everybody's experiences during class are brought to bear, so that students are now able to see what can be improved.

In order to solve these given problems the students have to organize themselves as groups and use the communication tools offered on the platform. So the whole system is based on the idea of „learning by doing": and this principle is applied to both aspects: using the platform and the virtual teamwork. The tutor's job is to monitor their work and only interfere when it can't be helped.

Students deal with the three different periods of the course in different ways. With regard to that, the question has to be asked whether certain characteristics in how the class is structured make students more likely to try out more tools the platform offers them – or, conversely, if the class's organisation mode actually prevents this active trial-and-error learning from happening.

2.1 The Preparatory Week

In the first phase of the class, students work from home, and haven't yet gotten to know their fellow students face to face. In this preparatory stage, i. e. one week before the face-to-face meeting, students get to know the platform. They can familiarize themselves with the structure of the platform, the workload and also the communication tools. The students receive a roadmap, which tells them where to go virtually and to leave traces. They are asked to introduce themselves. Discussions in the forums usually get kickstarted by an initiating question from the tutor's part.

So, the basic requirements are all there for the students to use. With the roadmap they have something to hold on to and something that leads them through the platform, and in the background there is always us, the tutors offering assistance – be it either on the platform or via e-mail contact.

The question that now arises is if the students actively make use of all these possibilities? Fortunately, in most classes they do, but in some they keep rather silent. What actually prevents them from communicating freely in those few classes may be, first and foremost, the group structure. When they take this class, students bring with them all the personal learning experiences that have accumulated during school, university and on the job and that have shaped their individual learning styles.

Due to the fact that "virtual teamwork" is a broad-ranged introductory class, all different sorts of students from quite diverse backgrounds are required to take it before they can afterwards choose from the modules. Some students are trained in the humanities; others have a background in tech or engineering. And these diverse backgrounds they have achieved over different periods in their lives:

At first they have made, up to now, their own individual experiences in there work-life, and secondly, behind those differences lies a variety of study-systems through which they have passed and which no doubt leaves traces on the way how these students learn and go about finding solutions to given tasks and problems. Here again, we have students with a technical study- background, humanities and also medical background.

An experience from a "virtual teamwork" run may serve as an example for the challenges that arise out of the great variety of students' backgrounds. One class on offer is usually taken up by chemists - people who have a degree in pharmacy and, for the most part, work at a chemist's when taking the class. After finishing the class, they intend to take up work at a dispensary. As students, they had mostly been used to working alone. They prepared for their tests alone and thus are not used to a lot of discussion in their studies.

During the class in question that consisted almost exclusively of pharmacy students, hardly anything happened in the first phase. They fulfilled their tasks in phase two, but didn't really work as teams. One of them prepared something, then the next person prepared the next tasks. "Serial" pieces of individual work were produced this way, but no open discussion ever happened. During their studies and working-life-experience those people had so internalised their work style, they could not easily and on short notice adjust to a different system.

Having had such a homogenous group only strengthened the realisation how important it is to compile groups that are as heterogeneous as possible concerning students' work and learning habits. It proofed right the decision made before, namely that it is best to have groups that comprise participants from a wide range of educational and professional backgrounds so that their different learning styles can complement one another.

Also, the mentioned OLIM -project aims at people who often work in management, meaning their profession at least partly forces them to hide their own insecurities and instead to present solutions in a self-assured way.

Trying to make better use of that variety of learning styles also found its way into the class on another level: a self-test on what sort of learning-type one is, and a theoretical discussion based on that test and on students' life experiences. In preparation for the first face-to-face-meeting, students are asked to do a self-test, questioning them about their learning habits. Having answered all the questions, they get to a diagram showing them what sort of learner they are. The test works with four different groups, and in the diagram it is shown to what extent one belongs to each of these groups, so that the students are not being pressed in one category but can see what different aspects their learning and study behaviour comprises.

Then, the topic is put up for discussion in the forum. Thus, the students are urged to monitor their learning habits not only during their studies but also during their working life. How do they go about problems? Do they confront them head-on or do they rather hold off until action can no longer be avoided? When they discuss this sort of problem, they also apply their theoretical ideas to their learning process right there in the course, and combine those more general questions with the special requirements of e-learning, especially considering online communication and virtual teamwork.

As has already been shown, the group structure may be one reason why the communication tools are not as freely used as tutors would like them to be. The tutor's team can influence the group structure beforehand to a certain extent – in that they try to organize groups with different backgrounds, and therefore different communication habits and styles. Still, that way, you can only foresee the group structure to a certain extent - some students may turn out to be very talkative, while others will be of a more reserved nature. The silent ones might even feel more uncomfortable communicating, so that they withdraw even more, while the active ones thinks they are the only ones alive on "planet platform".

That constellation might result in both groups not communicating any longer, especially since sitting at home and communicating online - perhaps without much experience in that sort of communication - with none of the facial expressions available that carry a fair amount of meaning in intrapersonal communication. Even intervention from the tutor's side can only lessen the problem without being able to solve it in a completely satisfactory way. Sometimes it might even make things worse, since the students then feel the direct teacher's eye on them, which may make them afraid to make mistakes, feel embarrassed and gradually become even more inhibited.

Since students don't know each other yet, the focus in that phase is at the beginning of it rather on the tutor – since no one actually wants to give the impression of being a beginner, who doesn't know how the platform works. The unknown quantity of fellow students even worsens the feeling of insecurity and so might lower the self-esteem of some. Nevertheless it is the students' first chance to get into contact – and mostly they use it.

2.2 The Face-to-Face Meeting

The face-to-face meeting is a very easygoing and rewarding occasion, especially when active communication has taken place in the first period. If it hasn't, there is now the opportunity to build up a firm functional relation, which helps during the two online tasks in which the students have to work quite closely together.

Certainly, the face-to-face-meeting may just as well have the reverse effect: personal antipathy leading students to build up prejudices. But in general, the atmosphere in the classes is that of mutual respect and understanding; thus, in many cases students have given the most positive feedback on this part of the course, appraising it as a big help for them to get to know the fellow students and especially those they are meant to work with afterwards as a team. In order to initiate the team building process and the team work itself in the second part of class, the students are made to work as teams right from the beginning, thus laying the groundwork for the tasks to come.

2.3 Two Tasks for Virtual Teams

After the preparatory online period and the face-to-face meeting, the main part starts. To no small amount, the workload is structured according to the design of the platform. There, three different forms of learning are represented:

Those are:

a. individual study
b. general discussion/interaction
c. two team exercises

The platform represents these three different types of work all at the same time. Since team work processes are supposed to help initiate individual learning processes hereby, the focus is on the group discussions and the team exercises that are, by necessity. They equip students with communication tools. Those tools are the same for the whole group and the smaller teams, who have a "team room" the design of which is similar to the interface for the whole group. On top it offers them a file deposition (i. e. an archive) to collect their material.

In order to communicate, the students have the possibility to use a forum, a wiki, to chat or to use the virtual classroom (so that they don't lose all the aspects of the face-to face-communication). With the help of these communication tools the students are then asked to work on the two aforementioned

tasks: the case study of a team project which does not work out well and the self-reflexive task concerning the factors of success and the stumbling blocks in e-learning

Students are required to hand in their work after 10 days. Since the tutors ask them to get organized with as little outside help as possible, they try to take as little part in their discussion as possible, but rather watch the students and offer advice when they see problems arising. On the whole, the experiences with these two tasks have been mainly positive. In most cases the students learn to be pretty well organized on their own. They are much more active then in the initial part of class. The focus clearly shifts from the tutor to the fellow students, which offers us as tutors the possibility to monitor their work a lot better. They also feel free to ask their team members for help in the handling of some of the tools they are not familiar with, e. g. the wiki. In one class, it went so far that a student wrote an easily comprehensible step-by-step manual for the fellow-students that has actually been turned into part of the official teaching material in the classes to follow.

The more students work together, the more open they are to new experiences, at least if the group building process worked as initiated in the face-to-face-meeting. And the more the students actively use the communication tools, the more familiar they get with the platform, and the more familiar they get with the platform, the more they try out. Also, the contributions to the discussion become livelier and also more sophisticated, since students are no longer queasy about posting something to be read by someone quite anonymous, as it might have appeared to them earlier on. That way, by working in a group they also tackle their own problems and improve their learning structures and widen their knowledge.

Gradually, reflections on problem-solving strategies take precedence over trying to present perfect results. The students obtain a heightened awareness of that process, as is reflected in the discussions of the whole group where they are also asked to monitor their progress (including the difficulties they encountered). The group discussions becomes more and more important, while the tutors need to give new impulses less and less frequently, that are then discussed among the students, and not in a one to one discussion with the tutors as is the case in the initial phase.

It is interesting to observe that it is the small “team room” where most participants tend to open up first. In that kind of forum, they become active themselves and freely discuss with each other. In the forum for the main group, they tend to prefer one-to-one contact with the tutor for much longer, but the more they work in their small teams, the better and more open the whole group discussion becomes. That might be due to the fact that they regard themselves more as part of the smaller team, in which they work together on one task, while they tend to feel more as individuals in the whole group discussion.

Both are important ways to learn and discuss; nevertheless, in order to monitor work and help the students to organize themselves, the team creates an open atmosphere that helps them clearly to achieve an easier matter-of-course handling of the tools and also helps them to become aware of – and used to - the specifics of online communication.

The tutors see far more this way, since the students are not centred on them in the discussion, and they become less aware being observed, and thus feeling more free to experiment with new ways of learning, which they otherwise might have shied away from in order to keep up appearances of being someone not making (at least not too many) mistakes. Instead of leading discussions, the tutors can choose whether to take part and otherwise just watch.

The theoretical input is warranted via the self-reflexive discussions, partly based on the self-study tasks that each student also has to work on. And at the end of class, after all the teams have handed in their solutions to both tasks, there is one final self-reflexive question: They are asked to evaluate their own teamwork – what they think worked out well and what they think they should improve next time. Since each student answers this final question, they don’t only get their own view, but they have the possibility to compare their own impression with those of the fellow students. Again, here the attention shifts from the tutor to their fellow students. Although the students are aware of the fact that the tutors initiate and monitor this evaluation, they present it primarily to their peers with whom they now have been working together for three weeks now.

So, by having been in the same boat together for three weeks, each single one learns to row more freely and effectively, because he or she uses the possibility to try something out more freely than each of them would have done on their own. They concentrate on their fellow students and themselves while rowing, instead of focusing on the instructor. Still, further adjustments will be made as the system of improving individual learning through team-processing evolves – in order to make it even more effective.

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