

Chapter XII

Can Person-Centered Technology Enhanced Learning Contribute to Develop Project Management Soft Skills in an Academic Context?¹

Renate Motschnig-Pitrik, University of Vienna, Austria

Michael Derntl, University of Vienna, Austria

Inside Chapter

In the preceding years we employed active technology enhanced learning in a course on project management soft skills that was particularly well received by students. This chapter presents the underlying philosophy, the current course design, students' reactions, and our experiences and lessons learned. Concurrently, we confirm the applicability of participatory action research as a methodological framework suited for improving course design, specific interventions, and theory building. We propose to complement that framework by qualitative and quantitative methods in order to

deal with specific research questions. Results indicate that students consider their active involvement in the course, both face-to-face and online, the top factor from which they benefit. Furthermore, the majority of students felt that it was easier for them to work in teams and to establish social relationships. The primary goal of the chapter is to provide a pool of inspiration for other educators in practice and research.

Introduction

Authors from constructivist, learner-centered, and person-centered traditions have argued that learning is most effective if it includes the whole person. This means that for meaningful, deep and persistent learning, not only the intellect but also feelings, meanings, ideas, skills, attitudes, and so forth, need to be included. Recently, this has also been voiced in the European Association for the Education of Adults' (2004) strategic statement of core competencies in our society. But how can these principles and strategies be put into practice?

Recent research indicates that technology enhanced learning settings, that is, settings that mix face-to-face and online learning, offer the required flexibility (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Reichelmayr, 2005) in which resourceful persons can foster experiential, whole person learning that addresses the learner at the level of intellect, social skills, and attitudes/dispositions (Holzinger & Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005). In this chapter, we aim to share the whole cycle of experience involved in designing, conduction, and evaluating a course that is aimed at addressing students at all three levels with an emphasis on soft skills. In other words, what can we do to allow students to become better communicators, negotiators, and constructive teammates in cooperative tasks?

Within the design, we focus on the process, that is, the nature and sequence of activities and the aspect of blending face-to-face and online elements within the course design. Furthermore, the chapter raises some methodological questions regarding research design. It illustrates the inadequacy of any single research paradigm to answer the multitude of research questions the investigators are interested in. Examples of such questions are: Have the learning targets been met? Which aspects of the course design, learning platform, interventions, and so forth, could be improved? In which respects, in particular, do students benefit? Is the blending optimal for the intended learning outcome? From these considerations we suggest a research procedure that integrates qualitative and quantitative methods under a participatory action research framework (Figl, Derntl, & Motschnig, 2005). As a kind of proof of concept, we present and discuss initial research results on the effects of the course on social relationships, teamwork, the degree of students' engagement,

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