Chapter 7.6

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

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ABSTRACT

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, and aspects from which students tend to benefit. In the spirit of participatory action research, we share some personal thoughts on the course experience and its meaning for continued action and research.

Rather than fixing and closing up concepts, the chapter aims to inspire further research as well as practice along the paths initiated by our endeavors in the research lab for educational technologies at the University of Vienna. This is intended to confirm or inspire readers in facilitating deep, meaningful learning in technology-enhanced environments and thereby provide a basis for effective personal and knowledge development.

The key background concepts, and the contributions made by the chapter, are given in Figure 1.

The chapter is structured as follows. The next section provides a concise introduction into the didactical baseline underlying our approach to blended learning. The following section is central in so far as it introduces the research methods chosen and applies it to the course on project management soft skills (PM-SS). We trace a whole action research cycle encompassing the analysis of the situation, the planning, action taking, evaluation, and specification of learning including personal experiences that other educators may find useful. The final section summarizes the chapter and identifies challenges and questions for further research.

UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY AND DIDACTIC APPROACH

Our approach to blended learning, that is, combined face-to-face and online learning, builds upon humanistic educational principles as realized in the person-centered approach (PCA) by Carl Rogers (Rogers, 1961, 1983). Person-Centered learning is a personally significant kind of learning that integrates new elements, knowledge, or insights to the current repertoire of the learner's own resources such that he or she moves to an advanced constellation of meaning and resourcefulness (Barrett-Lennard, 1998). It can be characterized

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