

THE HMT-, WORK“-NETWORK: LEARNING THROUGH COMMON PROJECTS

Abstract

Within three years it was possible to develop and implement independent teaching and studying concepts according to the principles of Blended Learning. In several courses this is, however, the regular teaching method and builds on the guidelines of process monitoring. Content:

- Various modularly designed testing methods.
- Peer-Assessmentstrategies and ePortfolios for process monitoring.
- Team-Teaching approaches to establish group oriented studying habits on the one hand and to rate individual performances on the other hand.

1 Starting Situation

A survey¹ on communication patterns of students from a degree program of an university of applied sciences, in January 2006 shows the following facts:

- 38% of all courses are supported actively with elearning methods
- 100% of all students work with those methods, a lot of them several times a day
- within three days, the response rate was (almost) comparable with a complete survey
 - cohorts with response rates of 95-100%
 - 69% of students in their internship
 - 49% of the graduates
- students who are trained in project- and information-management:
 - use E-Mail, Messenger, forums and WIKIs several times a day or at least several times a week (90% use those devices as regular as their cell phone)
 - use the devices also in their free time and even on vacation
 - use the devices not only for study purposes but also for private concerns
 - want to increase their usage of virtual communication – a proof for international application of the methods
- 60% of all students considered their ability to work with virtual communication devices as “poor” or “very poor” before entering the degree program. After three months, this rate dropped to only 4%

These are the highest known communication rates at universities. Since the degree program is not focused on technology and is located 50 km away from a big city, what could be the reasons for this rate?

2 The area we are interacting in

All prerequisites would proof us wrong:

- Most of the students live close to the university, only few shuttle between their hometown and the university town.
- Attendance at courses is mandatory.
- The degree program is not focused on technology, and it is not a major concern of the students.

Looking behind the scenes shows the communication dilemma in which such an idyllic learningbiotope could get stuck. Most of the contents are not built on frontal lecture, but on projects to

¹ Contribution to the diploma thesis: „advancement of quality and innovation management through an improvement of the ediscussionculture as a management task“

generate and consolidate knowledge and are dependent on interaction. For those reasons, communication is the key to success. Companies know the importance of ongoing communication. They invest a lot of time in meetings, report systems and telecommunication devices to not only ensure the quality of their performance but also to consequently improve it. Educational systems still rely on the pictures of an individual “to be educated” and ignore the fact that a university resembles more to a “systemic organism” than to a “mechanical clockwork”.

3 How everything started

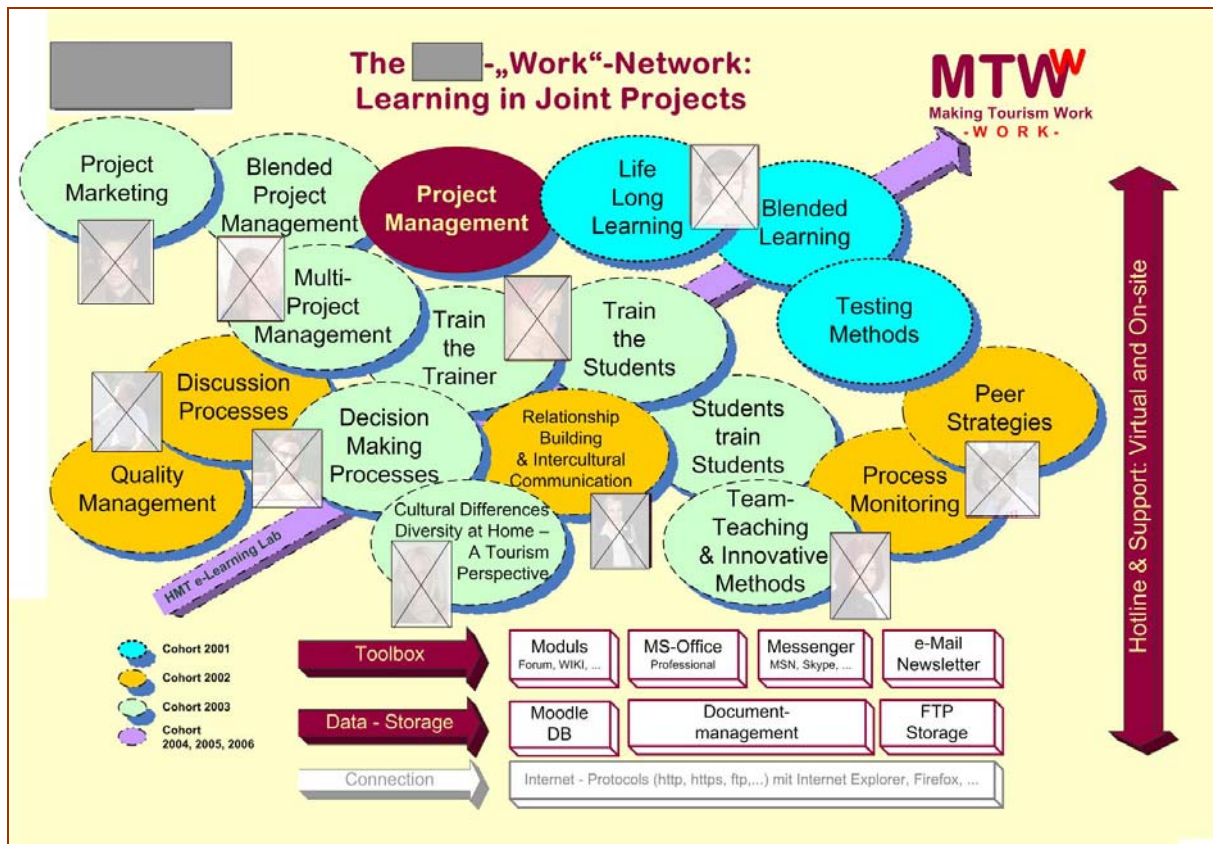
The degree program is very young and had the chance to strike new paths, free from old burdens.

In 2003 abManagement Consultant and external lecturer, changed the interaction and communication patterns of the students in their living and working environment through the courses “Project-Management”, “Information-Management” and “Research and Project Works”. In this regional learningbiotope, where „flight“ is rarely possible, it would only be reasonable to interact personally. However, working methods, personal timetables and, linked to that, phases of activity and creativity, are individually different.

- Daily business hinders students to have creativity phases.
- Students who shuttle to the university town would be excluded from discussions in the evenings.
- Lecturers would not have influence on the studying process.
- External project partners would be the last in the information chain and could only take part in the activities with a great effort.

In this stadium “moodle”, an e-platform, was evaluated and integrated in certain courses. The classical first approach is the usage of moodle for online exams. This grants a standardized and comparable situation for the students and takes the lecturer’s effort into consideration. This way, the learning process is reduced to only studying for the short term memory and not for sustainable knowledge. However, only intensive learning processes grant sustainable knowledge. So, back then a combination between lecture, training and virtual bonus participation, a permanent training process, was initiated to apply and to firm the knowledge. Like in the Socratic Method, not an individual’s performance was demanded, but a discourse and reflection over the works of others. Students had the chance to get feedback from different levels and reflect their newly gained knowledge by Peer-Assessments. Within the scope of project-management, forums and WIKIs were used for documentation reasons. Out of the intention of documenting the project, a future-oriented discussion process arose. Through the usage of asynchronous communication devices, time and space were no longer substantial for the involved parties. Students from overseas had the chance to take part in the same way as students on site and other involved project partners, such as companies. Of course, these processes take time to get used to and can not replace interpersonal communication which led to the inclusion of additional digital synchronous methods (Messenger, Chat, Video...). From this point, communication hyped. At the beginning, ideas for the usage of the tools came from top down, but at some point the students started to ask for new possibilities to use the methods themselves. However, one problem was still left to solve: how can interpersonal acquaintances take place in a virtual environment?! Interpersonal communication is of high importance especially for the field we are interacting in. All the experiences and also necessity led to a new theme complex: “Intercultural Communication – becoming acquainted in virtual environments”. First steps were made with the Kigali Institute of Science, Technology and Management (KIST) in Kigali, Ruanda. This success led to the work on an upcoming cross-continental approach (Europe, Asia, America...).

4 The GMT-„Work“-Network: Learning through common Projects



This network was developed out of the described cornerstones.

Illustration 1: The HMT-„Work“-Network: Learning through common Projects

This illustration shows the recent network of competencies that is and will be developed by students in the scope of their diploma thesis. It is important to note, that none of those projects is only a theoretical concept. The projects are and will be implemented as “work in progress”. All in all, 20 members act as tutors for the students as well as for the lecturers and represent the backbone for a successful implementation of the methods in class. We are proud to have made this development.

Subject areas comprise:

- Blended Learning
- (Virtual) Project-management
- Process Monitoring
- Intercultural Communication
- Train the Trainer, Train the Students, Students train Students

4.1 Subject Area: Blended Learning

Within three years it was possible to develop and implement independent teaching and studying concepts according to the principles of Blended Learning. In several courses this is, however, the regular teaching method and builds on the guidelines of process monitoring. Content:

- Various modularly designed testing methods.
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4.2 Subject Area: (Virtual) Project-Management

The level of performances of students and lectures is especially high in this area, since the quality of projects was elevated through virtual multi-project-management approaches. This led to the improved

satisfaction of the clients. Project teams, consisting of students, lecturers and companies, are already a skilled team that operates across borders. Cornerstones of this model are the phases of process-development, that will be described below.

4.3 Subject Area: Process-Development

A prerequisite to communication are discussions and decisions that take into consideration all people involved. The usage and acceptance for electronic communication devices² went up rapidly through the usage of asynchronous (forums, WIKIs and E-Mail) and synchronous (Messenger, Chat, Video, Audio...) virtual methods. The satisfaction of the involved persons is shown by the fact, that they use those methods also for private concerns or by companies that adopted those methods. It is not about cutting off on all personal and real life contacts. It is about neutralizing time and space for establishing new qualities for working life in stressful times. It is a fact that with those methods money and the environment can be saved, as the gasoline costs are rising and the communication costs are declining. Virtual communication can be practiced very effectively. Therefore the students of the degree program are already applying methods of communication that will need a view more years to find their way into business.

4.4 Subject Area: Intercultural Communication

Working and studying together requires a lot of trust. Only teams who know and trust each other can reach their limits while trying to reach a common goal. Getting to know each other is a process that needs time. Additionally to the individual factors, cultural difference and language differences need to be considered. A diploma thesis will try to connect continents virtually. "Talking with each other" brings peace, because people who know each other have other ways than violence for solving problems. Knowing other cultures and mutual appreciation is an important step towards a more understanding and global world.

4.5 Subject Area: Train the Trainer, Train the Students, Students train Students

The best methods and techniques will not make a difference if the users don't know how to work with them. The high rating of usage at the degree program is a result of the good preparation and monitoring of the users. For the middle- and longterm, self-help will be desirable, but for the short term, problems need to be solved instantly. Support needs to be provided content wise for question of methodology but for organizational and technical concerns. Acceptance and appreciation for the provided methods can only be established, if the actors feel save using them. Special Blended Learning training sets are provided to establish security in the usage and adaptation of methods for individual application. It might sound unbelievable, but there is a 24/7 mutual hotline³ to ensure quick help that doesn't rely on office hours. This "self-regulation problem-solving-circle" leads to an intensive and sustainable consolidation of the methods and techniques and contributes remarkably to self-help competencies.

5 Conclusion and Perspectives

The methods and approaches described in this paper are regularly updated and advanced in an international network. At this point we are working on a seamless integration of the different cornerstones into a comprehensive training concept. It will be built on the cornerstones of the successfully implemented teaching- and studying-concepts.

The project is carried by the will of students and lecturers to establish an ideal eTeaching- and eLearning-Environment without having needed resources and to prove that not only grants lead to a successful project. It was possible to shape a degree program and embrace its students and lecturers within a short matter of time and establish long-term success and international reputation.

² It is important, that communication is not based on the expensive mobile phone with an individual tariff, but on tailored communication packages combining internet and mobile phone as effective and cheap as possible.

³ 24-hours-hotline: each student is allowed to contact the lecturer if there is an unsolvable problem, even if it is midnight. BUT first he or she has to try to solve the problem by him or herself or together with colleagues, BUT on the next day there is no excuse that the problem is not solved. Question: What all would you do for not being forced to contact your lecturer, having in mind, that there is no excuse on the next day? Notice: There are NO phone calls virtually, and problems are solved of its own volition...

The Approach: *"The main value of an online course is not the content, but the human interaction and activities that take place around it."*
The Motto: *This ePlatform is not a "thing", its a "place".*

We already took those challenges in several projects that are well integrated in the daily business of the degree program. The sustainability can already be proved by the feedback of the first class that already entered business life!

Note: Four theses have been used for this paper which we don't refer to now, for anonymity reasons.