Participative Faculty Development with an Online Course in e-Collaboration

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Abstract
How could you design an online course in e-Collaboration for the faculty and staff of your university? This paper – a report about research in progress - will first explain how it came that we faced this question early in 2010 at our university, then present the approach that our team of the research management unit developed for answering it in line with our concept of an "e-Collaboration culture". After that we will present the case of the online course that we designed, organized and facilitated between May and September 2010 and where we used tools like wikis and forums (Moodle), document and desktop sharing (Google-Docs, Titanpad, Mikogo), chat and web conferencing (Skype, Adobe Connect), meetings in virtual worlds (Second Life), etc. Finally we will summarize in terms of general design guidelines and lessons learned our approach to a participative faculty development enabled by social media.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of 2010 our board of directors recognized that e-Collaboration – a web-based group process of working, learning and sharing knowledge over distance in space and time – must be considered together with e-Learning as one of the pillars of our distance university, in teaching, in research, in management and in the administration. As a consequence the *fostering of e-Collaboration* became an urgent goal and our team of the Research Management Unit – for which e-Collaboration is the main research topic – was appointed with the task of developing an online e-Collaboration course for faculty and staff members.

2. Approach

Two main concepts constitute the conceptual foundation of our approach: "Didactic tetrahedron" and "e-Collaboration culture". The "Didactic tetrahedron" is a constructivist model of teaching and learning that constitutes the conceptual basis of education at our distance university. This model is based on the assumption that learning is in its essence a fundamentally social phenomenon. For this reason in addition to the three conventional elements "content", "learner" and "teacher", the didactic tetrahedron model considers "community" as the fourth main constitutive element of teaching and learning scenarios. The new concept of an "e-Collaboration culture" was derived from our previous experiments with an online community of researchers supported by a Web 2.0 platform (Bettoni & Bernhard 2007). This e-Collaboration culture is a combination of three fundamental elements: networked learning, participative working and facilitative leading:

- Networked learning is *"learning in which C&IT is used to promote connections"* (Goodyear & NLinHE Team, 2001 p.9; C&IT = communication & information technology) and students construct knowledge based on social interactions supported by technology (Drexler 2010).
- Participative working means that we assume a community of practice perspective (Wenger 1998, Smith & Trayner 2006) and view learning as a social experience which is tightly connected to work practice by means of a process called Knowledge Cooperation (Bettoni et al. 2007); we also view participants as a key learning resource and assign to the faculty more the role of a team of facilitators than that of teachers in a traditional sense.
- Facilitative leading: for leading the conversational type of collaboration that characterizes Knowledge Cooperation we need a new kind of competence, which is a kind of "facilitative leadership" (Libert 2008): anyone who – in the community of practice – acts as a leader, must necessarily be able to facilitate (lead) negotiations of meaning, a new kind of group interaction that produces consensus in knowledge and consensus in ways of dealing with knowledge.

If they function well together, these three elements support the development of negotiated, shared meaning thus making the learning experience in the online course meaningful and enriching for the individual and the group. On the other side, if they are neglected or do not function well, then participants become more isolated in their own individual world, distance education becomes less collaborative and work practice less able to manage knowledge effectively.

3. Online course 2010

In line with the conceptual foundation presented above, our online course was designed with a primary focus on experiential learning: there was not a preset body of codified knowledge to be absorbed; rather learners were invited to participate in activities running in a web-based learning space. This space was a Moodle course, specifically designed for supporting interaction and collaboration; Moodle had been selected for several reasons; some of these are: it is the platform that our students and lecturer use since 2005, it is open source, hence consistent with open content and it is worldwide the most used LMS. The space we designed used only the standard Moodle functions which were good enough for implementing the series of modules and activity areas that offered opportunities to learn by engaging in conversations, tasks, projects, reflection and social interactions according to the professional needs of the participants.

The course faculty was composed by the 4 authors of this paper and the course participants were about 40 persons, all employees of our university representing a variety of educational and working backgrounds and all the different functions of our institution like administration, technical support, teaching, course management, research, research management and the board of directors. Therefore we also had to consider that it was a heterogeneous group of participants, both as regards experience and as regards their media skills level which varied widely, from experienced on-line savvy to absolute beginner with basic computer skills only. Interaction took place each week over a period of 17 weeks, each with a specific focus which in some cases could fade away in the following weeks and overlap with the rising of a new topic. The overall course structure was organized into three main parts: "Basics", "Projects" and "Perspectives".

3.1 Basics - Weeks 1 to 9

We started with a face-to-face kick-off meeting where the University's director made an introductory, motivational speech. Then the facilitators gave a short explanation about what e-Collaboration means, demonstrating some practical examples and connecting them with issues of organisational culture and with technical aspects of e-Collaboration. Immediately after the kick-off we began the first part of the course, "Basics of e-Collaboration" (week 1 to 9), consisting of several activities like an introduction to asynchronous conversation in forums, collaborative writing in wikis, organizing of contents with various tools, up- and downloads of files and documents (folders, databases, etc.), professional online meetings with Skype and collaborative problem solving.

The main objective during this first part was to learn the skills needed for participating in the second part of the course, "Collaborative projects". In order to make the start easy and attractive for everyone, we designed a collaborative serious game called "the boat riddle". Within the game, they learnt how to use forums and wikis and at the end the winner got a real price. Since the beginning we also facilitated a virtual coffee-corner (a forum) as an area where you cannot do something wrong ("everything is allowed"); here participants had the opportunity to bring in and share with other their own themes according to their wishes.

In the collaborative problem solving section participants had to design, implement and test a Moodle-based multiple-choice test and the last step in this first part of the course was to install, test and work with a tool for synchronous meetings (we used Skype). Finally different groups were built based on their own interests in the later usage of e-Collaboration at work. This conclusion was also the beginning of the collaborative projects, defined by the groups themselves.

3.2 Projects - Weeks 6 to 17

The main objective of the second part of the course, "Collaborative projects" (week 6 to 17) was to create a strong link between doing one's job in daily work practice and participating in learning activities during the course. At the beginning of the 10 project weeks, participants were invited to suggest project ideas taken from their daily work and to join one project of interest to them. Each project team received its own space on the learning platform, an area with three tools (forum, wiki, file folder) which were visible to everyone (see Fig. 1).

Thema 4 - E-Collaboration Tools

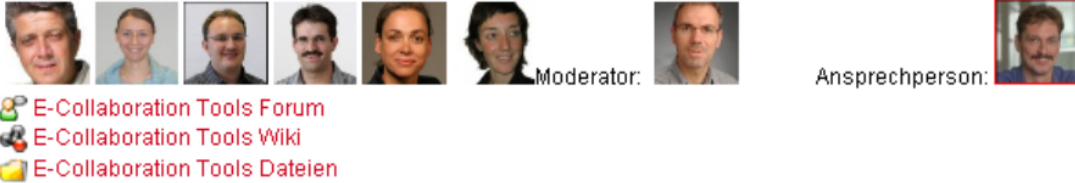Andy, Christian (Moderator), Jetmire, Ronny, Silvio, Willi, Ute, Aurelia

Moderator: Ansprechperson:

- E-Collaboration Tools Forum
- E-Collaboration Tools Wiki
- E-Collaboration Tools Dateien

Fig. 1 Project team "E-Collaboration Tools":
view of their space on the Moodle platform with members' portraits and their 3 tools.

There were two ways to join a project team: either by starting a project as project leader and then recruiting team members, or by joining an existing project as a team member. Some of the groups which finally emerged worked on technological subjects like e-Collaboration tools (Zotero, Open Desktop) or the design of virtual team platforms and management reporting spaces. Other groups emphasised organisational issues like university marketing or implementation of daily work needs (like to-do lists) with Moodle.

Activities in the projects where self-organized by the team members but for each project one of the 4 course faculty members was assigned as coach and was allowed to participate in the project management activities, like planning project work, facilitating online meetings, writing meeting notes, providing support in the organization of virtual work and helping with ideas on how to best accomplish project tasks with the help of the available technology.

3.3 Perspecitves – Weeks 10 to 17

The third part "Perspectives in e-Collaboration" (week 10 to 16) consisted in practical demonstrations of tools offered to more advanced participants as opportunities to try some new functions. Participation in this part was free, depending on individual needs and interests. Every week, a specific tool was used and demonstrated in online webinars, like Titanpad for collaborative writing, Mikogo for Desktop sharing and presentation, Adobe Connect for Web-Conferencing and Second-Life for virtual reality meetings.

At the end, in order to share the outcomes of the projects, demonstrate learning achievements and officially recognize the importance of the course we did a final f2f event with all participants, including the director. Results of the project groups were presented in a 'knowledge café' meeting format and outstanding participants got rewarded with a special nice little present handed over by a member of the board of directors.

4. Conclusion

Our suggestions (design guidelines and lessons learned) for an online course that helps implementing participative faculty development are:

- Foster learning as a social experience with a focus on the building of social relationships and on collaborative, experiential learning
- View participants as a key learning resource
- Appreciate participant's contributions by offering enough opportunities for them to share their ideas and learn by work on them collaboratively
- Assign to the course faculty the role of a team of facilitators
- Rather than presenting codified knowledge invite people to participate in collaborative activities running in a web-based learning space
- Even if the course is online be sure to invest enough time in face-to-face meetings: at least one at the beginning and one at the end.
- Keep the technology as simple as possible (standard functionality, easy tools)
- Consider collaborative serious games at the beginning of the course as a means of informal learning and creation of a "we" experience.
- Provide opportunities where people can interact and share in a safe way (a dedicated forum), without the risk of "doing something wrong" (everything is allowed).

- Distribute the course over many weeks but do not change topics in a 1-week rhythm; allow for 1 week of pause before starting the next topic
- Changing from an e-mail to an e-Collaboration work-style is not easy; provide enough opportunities to experience this change, share the experiences and reflect on them
- Some participants need individual support: be ready to provide it or to organize and facilitate mutual help between experienced and novice participants
- Make management support visible: people from top management should participate in the course or at least speak at the kick-off and closing meetings some motivational words
- Integrate your course into the more comprehensive context of an initiative devoted to the development of a "University-Wide Media Culture" (Bergamin, Bettoni et al. 2011).

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