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Abstract

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Abstract

Social Aspects of Collaborative Learning in Virtual Learning Environments

New information and communication technologies (ICT) get an increasing influence in learning. The e-learning market is growing rapidly with yearly growth rates of more than 50%. This growth is based on economic needs of more flexibility, the need for live long learning and the intend to use the advantages of new ICT in educational contexts. Research and development of new, more communicative and collaborative ways of e-learning are supported not only for economical but also political reason (i.g. EC programs).

We presently identify the first steps for a paradigm change in e-learning. In the past the development of e-learning systems was nearly only technology-centred but currently we are on the way to more human-centred concepts of using new technologies for business, learning and communication.

Past and present e-learning technologies are mainly resource based with the mayor focus on the interaction between human and computers. The approach is on the one hand to provide media rich resources on the other hand to bring "traditional documents" in the Web. Thus mainly individual learning is supported. This has several advantages such as flexibility (in time and place), the possibility to give feedback through interactive media and development of structured evaluation processes and it is very cheap to distribute traditional learning material (scanned documents, texts, ...) electronically. But also disadvantages have been identified such as a lack of peer contact and interaction, high initial costs for preparing multimedia content and for maintaining and updating this content as well as the need for flexible tutorial support. In general present e-learning solutions are lacking social interaction and cohesion.

Some recent approaches on the e-learning market are taking into account these open questions and disadvantages of today's learning platforms, concentrating on the need for collaborative learning and its advantages in traditional sessions and try to focus on social and individual aspects of learning as well as on providing learning content in a way that makes sense. We call platforms supporting these ambitions "3rd generation learning platforms". Special requirements to these platforms come from pedagogical and social research as well as from the technical side. One starting point are virtual learning communities supported by community platforms which enable the learner to communicate on a horizontal level.

The analysis of social interactions between learners has a long history in pedagogical theory. It has been proved, that collaborative work is very successful in traditional "classroom" learning. Collaborative learning in general is defined as any kind of group learning in which there are some meaningful learning interactions between learners. We speak of virtual collaborative e-learning if these interactions take place in virtual environments.

The paper and presentation will give an overview on such new approaches focussing especially on the social components of learning and how they can be

implemented in virtual learning environments. Examples from our projects and research in this area are showing how collaborative virtual learning environments can be implemented and which main social factors of e-learning we have identified in our theoretical work and practical trials with our end user partners in the projects.