Combining Student-Centred Teaching with the Use of the Internet - Case Study and Experience Report

TITLE OF THE PAPER: Combining Student-Centred Teaching with the Use of the Internet - Case Study and Experience Report

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- case studies of networked learning: models and approaches (primary sub-theme)
- design and pedagogy of networked learning
- staff development issues (to some degree)
- student and tutor experiences of networked learning (to some degree)

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Abstract: This contribution aims to share the author's experience in the use of new media as means to support the quality and effectiveness of learning and teaching in cognitive as well as social terms. The approach is targeted, in the first place, at achieving deeper learning processes by enriching and reorganizing ordinary presence courses for advanced students. Experience in this area is intended to guide the adaptation of the approach to other kinds of courses including ones with a stronger orientation towards distance learning.

In this respect, a case study involving advanced courses in requirements engineering and web design was performed to assess the relevance of combining Student-Centred Teaching, as developed by the well-known American psychologist Carl Rogers, with the use of the Internet.

In brief, the Student-Centred Approach is based on the hypothesis that students who are given the freedom to explore areas based on their personal interests, and who are accompanied in their striving for solutions by a supportive, understanding facilitator not only achieve higher academic results but also grow with respect to their personal values, such as flexibility, self-confidence and social skills. This approach, also known as experiential learning, requires specific personal attitudes on the side of the instructor who takes over the role of a facilitator. These attitudes are highly transparent, open communication, positive regard towards students and the striving for deep understanding of students.

While the positive effects of the "pure" Student-Centred Approach have been proved in a number of case-studies and are well-documented in the literature, its combination with using the Internet as a resource for acquiring knowledge as well as a repository to store and maintain documents is a novel asset. The case study has shown that due to the fact that the Internet opens up vast knowledge sources and is available around the clock, it optimally supports learning processes that are directed by the students and just initiated and channelled by the instructors. A networked environment also turned out to very well support the ongoing communication of students who work in small, self-managed teams and cooperate on a project. In fact, all course participants unanimously appreciated the convenient access to their shared documents, allowing them to coordinate their cooperative project work between the presence phases.

From the instructor's (also the author's) point of view it became apparent that Internet-Assisted, Student-Centred Teaching (SCIAT) requires communicative and social skills that are very different from the qualifications needed for conducting conventional courses. Generally speaking, the case study led to the hypothesis that the Student-Centred Approach grows in effectiveness with respect to deepening learning- and teaching processes, if sufficient amounts of material are electronically available (eContent) and the instructors have advanced social- and communicative skills.

The paper describes the general method, its adaptation to conventional curricula, a particular setting for the method's application, and the results as well as students' reactions. Further, we draw some general conclusions regarding time-effectiveness, quality and amount of eContent, the instructor's social skills, and the transition process.

Issues the author would like to discuss:

- How can staff who want to become facilitators in Student-Centred courses with eLearning best be supported? What kind of training/reading/counselling/support should be provided and how could this be organized?
- Provision of a proper environment and support for non-computer specialists.
- Exchange of experiences on approaches similar to the case study in analogous as well as different settings.