Chapter VIII
The Use of Communities in a Virtual Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

This case study describes how a project-based approach offers valuable new opportunities for graduate students to equip them with the necessary competencies and skills for bridging the gap from university to company performance in English. The project focused on the development of a Web 2.0 learning community in a virtual learning environment (VLE) using Google. Throughout the project, a group of business and economics students reported to each other and to external experts about their progress. Google was compared to Blackboard, the official university VLE. Google does not score as well as on privacy and structure, but a qualitative results questionnaire revealed that it performs better as a learner-pulled VLE. Our Google community led to (i) intensive interaction in discussion forums in the target language, (ii) confidence building as to spoken and written performance in an international business setting, (iii) meaningful content learning, and (iv) successful project management skills. The strengths of a Google community lie in user-friendliness, interaction, and the application of new technological tools and means.
INTRODUCTION

At the latest Ascent meeting of Siemens, Berlin 2007, the new CEO was introduced as a leader who commands six languages and who had obtained his MBA in Hong Kong. To grow in the company, Siemens’ managers have to take up several three-year assignments in a country abroad. Executives of different origins are sent abroad as well as Germany. At present, on the board of eleven, two members are not German. All board members are male. At the meeting, it was declared this situation had to change, as a core goal of management policy is leadership in an intercultural environment. At the same conference, a leadership guru, Dr. Jim A. Crupi, argued that the nature of planning lies in being visionary at “playing the new game” in the footsteps of companies like Google. These innovators seize new opportunities. For example, they “reward” their staff when a mistake is made. Their goal is to create fundamental change instead of optimizing performance. How they play is determined by “what could be” and not “by the rules.”

Google, the site of the year 2007 in Flanders, is an appealing platform, not only challenging other companies but also students. They “Google” the Internet for information. But is this innovative learning within the “new game,” or is this rather “the same game” as traditional learning?

In traditional learning, students are considered empty vessels who need to be filled with as much information as possible, which they are then able to reproduce at the right time, at the right place and social context, set by the teacher. Hence, the students plagiarize and “empty” their vessel to replenish it with new information. Companies, however, need people who do not reproduce what they are taught, but who are fast learners in a changing environment of diversity, also across cultures. Communication is a key competence in enabling them to sense what is at stake, relate it to the core goal and act accordingly. How can students get access to this kind of leadership competence in a communicative perspective?

In a learning environment of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), non-linguistic graduates need to enhance their opportunities not only to enter the labor market but also to acquire lifelong learning skills in their professional lives. It is a concern shared by the Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages III, a Socrates-Erasmus Program in 2006-7. The results of the project clearly show “growing awareness among all stakeholders — university management, students, graduates and employers — of the vital importance for graduate employability of language and intercultural competences and the ability to perform professional tasks and functions in foreign languages” (TNP, 2007, p. 10). Study programs that unite languages and a professional area may provide the necessary linguistic proficiency enabling professionals to function in their specialist area in target language workplaces as well as in the country concerned. The project report continues by stating that:

today it is considered essential for graduates to have generic or transferable skills to enable that they operate effectively in the European and global environments in which they will move, in other words, they need general skills for undertaking professional tasks and interacting in the workplace that are not subject dependent. Communicative spoken and written skills are of major importance and include interaction with and among teams, project management, presentation, negotiation, analysis, synthesis and focused writing as well as the ability to undertake activities via distance technology. (TNP3 Dissemination Document, 2007, p. 11)

In its recommendations, the TNP-3 project for higher education promotes the collaboration of education providers and companies to take up and consider the experiences, needs, and possibilities of both partners. The challenge for a