Chapter 12

Classroom Component of an Online Learning Community: Case Study of an MBA Program at the University of St. Gallen

Julia Gerhard, Peter Mayr and Sabine Seufert
University of St. Gallen, Switzerland

GOALS AND MOTIVATION

The Internet not only affects various fields of business but also the educational sector increasingly. The impact of Internet technologies on the way of learning are immense. New learning scenarios arise; learning processes shift; learning methods are technologically better supported (Reeves, 1992). On a content side, it is possible to present knowledge in a network in the form of hypertexts. In addition, the participants of an educational program can benefit from a personal network developed in online supported learning communities (Paloff and Pratt, 1999).

This development challenges educational institutions to find successful ways of integrating the emerging learning scenarios and learning processes. To overcome disadvantages like isolation of students, slower learning progress because of missing team spirit, or low involvement of students in the learning material, educational institutions should not just use the Internet as a new distribution channel of old learning methods, but employ the Internet’s chances to provide students with the knowledge required for a successful professional life as well as to prepare them for lifelong learning and a continuing education.
This contribution wants to:
• show a way of designing an online learning environment, and
• design a possible classroom component of a specific online learning community.

We will first introduce the concept of online learning communities. We will then briefly describe the reference model for learning communities, which allows us to model a medium for the learning community. The reference model is applied to a concrete MBA program, and the design of the classroom component of this MBA learning community is introduced. Finally, we will give a brief outlook.

CONCEPT OF AN ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY

An online learning community can offer the basis for lifelong learning and intensify students’ learning experiences immensely. Mutual, thus mostly deeper, examination of learning materials and the exchange between the group members deliver more aspects and different points of view on a topic and help to assess and enlarge the members’ knowledge. On an interpersonal level, mutual studying creates a feeling of affiliation, which is maximal when considering formal learning goals as well as common social interests.

After defining the term “online learning community,” we will give an overview of our proposed design for an online learning community.

Definition of an Online Learning Community

An online learning community unites the concepts of the (online) community and of the new learning paradigm:

A community is a group of actors (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996) who are connected by a common interest, common goals, or common actions in a commonly used channel system (Schmid, 1997). The channel system is part of the medium through which the exchange between the group members is maintained. According to Schmid, a medium is a system consisting of these components: logical space (semantics and syntax of a common language), channels, and organization (the structure with definitions of roles and their rights and obligations, and the process with protocols and processes) (Schmid, 1997; Schmid, 1998). A community can be called an Internet-based community (online community), if it uses the Internet as its “channel system” for exchange between the members (Lechner and Schmid, 1999; Mynatt, Adler, Ito, and O’Day, 1997; Rheingold, 1993).

A learning community (Harasim, 1995; Paloff and Pratt, 1999) has learning as its common interest. Actors involved can take on certain roles and the resulting rights and obligations in the community such as the role of a student or teacher or, less restricted, of alumni or project partners. The membership in the community
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