

Learning by blogging

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Many students learn best working together on structured, self-directed projects. European researchers have created software that links student blogs and other social software tools into a virtual collaborative learning environment.

The researchers of iCAMP (Intercultural learning campus), a three-year project funded by the European Union, wanted to create software tools that would let university students and teachers work together on structured, self-directed learning projects no matter where they were or what kind of social networking systems they were using.

They believe that the tools and learning approaches iCAMP has pioneered have the potential to transform how institutions of higher education work.

“It could change higher education completely,” says Barbara Kieslinger of the Centre for Social Innovation, Vienna, Austria, and iCAMP project coordinator. “If it would really take off, it would lead to a democratisation of these institutions.”

Closing the learning-leisure gap

Kieslinger and her colleagues at more than a dozen universities across Europe set out to close the gap between existing educational software tools - usually rigidly structured and teacher-controlled - and the free-wheeling, self-directed social software students use in their spare time, such as blogs, messaging, feeds and other social networking services.

“We found a mismatch between what younger people were using in their leisure time, software that is easy to use and control by themselves, compared to centralised systems that are controlled by the organisation,” Kieslinger says.

The iCAMP researchers were guided by an educational theory called constructivism. They believe that students gain new knowledge and skills most readily by working together with others on projects that they themselves define and manage, facilitated rather than controlled by teachers.

In addition to the specifics of what students learn, Kieslinger points out that iCAMP’s approach prepares them to be more self directed, teamwork oriented, and technologically adept later in life.

“It’s part of our responsibility to invite students to take control,” says Kieslinger. “In the workplace, people need to be competent in self direction, social networking and collaboration in technologically mediated environments.”

Better blogging and iLOGUE-ing

From early on, the researchers knew that weblogs would be one of their basic building blocks.

“Blogs are the most important single tool,” says Kieslinger. “They are really easy to use, people like them, and they can be used in lots of different activities and learning environments.”

The problem blogs presented was interoperability. Blogs generated on different systems were often not compatible, so students could not conveniently manage joint blogs or track and contribute to each other’s blogs.

The iCAMP software developers found that support for interactions between blogs was essentially unavailable, creating a major roadblock to the kind of active networking students needed.

To solve this problem they developed FeedBack, a system that essentially lets blogs and bloggers communicate with each other easily and manage automatic feeds and updates smoothly.

Once they had resolved the interoperability problem, the researchers went on to create additional communication and collaboration tools. One of these tools is an open-source software package called iLOGUE.

The iLOGUE tool “scaffolds” self-directed learning by guiding learners through the steps of specifying a learning contract, setting goals and sub-goals, identifying resources, and maintaining a learning diary.

People start by entering their objectives and resources, Kieslinger says. They then maintain a conversational, reflective diary, and discuss their learning progress and problems with the facilitator and their peers.

“It’s also a good instrument for self-assessment of what they’ve accomplished,” she adds.

Positive feedback

The iCAMP researchers were eager to test their system in the real world. So far, they have carried out three trials with a total of 136 students and 19 facilitators in 10 countries, including many of Europe’s new Member States. They are still analysing the results of their third and largest trial.

As one example, social science and computer science students studying quantitative research methods took on the task of designing an online questionnaire. The social science students shaped the content while the

IT students developed the software.

“We got some really positive feedback from the students,” says Kieslinger. “Even though it was more work for them, they liked the new techniques and getting to work with students from other countries.”

The researchers now know that the tools they have developed work well, but also that the software alone does not guarantee success. Project facilitators need to be highly motivated and experienced in this novel approach to learning. In addition, resolving national and institutional differences in requirements, curricula, and even course scheduling turned out to be prerequisites for success.

Still, the iCAMP team are excited about the potential of their approach and software tools to create a rich, empowering and easy-to-use environment for interactive, student-driven learning.

Several universities in the east of Europe are already offering iCAMP-based courses.

“It’s a more democratic way of using technology for teaching, where each learner can build his or her own learning environment and pick the tools needed for a specific learning task,” says Kieslinger.

To promote further take-up, iCamp will publish a handbook this December presenting what the team has developed and discovered in the course of the project.

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Provided by [ICT Results](#)

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