

The Effects of a Blended Course Including Person Centered Encounter Groups on Students' Learning, Relationships, and Teamwork

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ABSTRACT

Recent educational strategies in the European Union encourage the development of attitudes and skills as a basis for knowledge development. In this paper we illustrate in which ways Person Centered education, developed by the American psychologist Carl Rogers to promote experiential, whole person learning, can be extended by employing new media. We describe the integration of new media into an academic course on Person-Centered Communication that includes encounter groups and virtual spaces for online communication and cooperation. Both the qualitative and the quantitative study confirmed that the vast majority of students learned significantly on the level of personal attitudes, social skills, and intellect and that online communication and support played a considerable, although not prominent role in their learning.

Keywords

Blended learning, Person Centered encounter groups, Person Centered Approach, key competencies

INTRODUCTION

Several authors from constructivist, learner-centered, and person-centered traditions have argued that learning is most effective, if it includes the whole person. This means that for meaningful, deep and persistent learning not only the intellect but also feelings, meanings, ideas, skills, dispositions, etc. need to be included. Recently, this has also been voiced in the EU strategic statement of core competencies in our society. According to the European Association for the Education of Adults (2004):

“There is a need for new curriculum. Traditionally the curriculum consisted of three elements: knowledge, skills, attitudes, which tends to value knowledge above skills, and skills above attitudes. Experience of life suggests different priorities: positive attitudes are key to a rewarding life and job, skills are also more important than knowledge. These priorities should be asserted in the development of new curriculum, which would raise the value of social capital, civil society and the role of non-formal learning.”

But how can these principles and strategies be put into practice? Extensive research (Aspy, 1972; Rogers, 1983; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994; Tausch & Tausch, 1998) has proved that the instructor's or better facilitator's attitudes such as realness, respect, understanding, are a key factor for learning at the cognitive, social, as well as attitudinal level. More recent research indicates that blended learning settings, i.e. settings that mix face-to-face and online learning, offer the required flexibility in which resourceful persons can foster experiential, whole person learning that addresses the learner at the level of intellect, social skills, and attitudes including feelings (Holzinger & Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005). In this paper I aim to share with you the whole cycle of experience involved in designing, conducting and evaluating a course on “Communication and New Media” that is aimed at addressing students at all three levels in improving communication and cooperation involved in the course.

The paper aims to provide inspiration and insight on a blended course setting aiming to promote significant, whole person learning. Furthermore, the paper raises some methodological questions regarding research design. It illustrates the inadequacy of any single research paradigm to answer the research questions and suggests a research procedure that integrates and adapts various paradigms such as action research, participatory evaluation and qualitative and quantitative analyses (Figl, Derntl, & Motschnig, 2005). As a kind of proof of concept we present and discuss initial research results as on the effects of various factors of the intervention on social relationships, group processes and teamwork. In the spirit of participatory action research I share some personal thoughts on the course experience and its meaning for continued action and research. Rather than fixing and closing up concepts, the paper aims to confirm or inspire readers in facilitating and researching deep, meaningful learning in technology enhanced environments and thereby provide a basis for effective personal and knowledge development. The next section provides a concise introduction into the didactical and

technological baselines underlying our approach to blended learning. Section four presents the basic research questions and methodological considerations and design decisions. The fifth Section is central in so far as it sketches an action research cycle. The final section summarizes the paper and identifies questions for further research.

DIDACTIC BASELINE AND TECHNOLOGICAL BASELINE

Our approach to blended learning, i.e. combined face-to-face and online learning, builds upon humanistic educational principles as realized in the Person-Centered Approach (PCA) by Carl Rogers (Rogers, 1961, 1983). Person-Centered learning is a personally significant kind of learning that integrates new elements, knowledge, or insights to the current repertoire of the learner's own resources such that he or she moves to an advanced constellation of meaning and resourcefulness. It can be characterized by active participation of students, a climate of trust provided by the facilitator, building upon authentic problems, and raising the awareness of meaningful ways of inquiry (Rogers, 1983). Research in the PCA has proved (Aspy, 1972; Cornelius-White et al., 2004; Rogers, 1961) that students achieve superior results along with higher self-confidence, creativity, openness to experience, and respect, if they learn in a climate in which the facilitator (instructor, teacher, etc.) holds three core attitudinal conditions and if the learners perceive them, at least to some degree. The core conditions are realness or congruence of the facilitator, acceptance or respect towards the student, and empathic understanding of the students and their feelings. The way in which these core conditions can be expressed in blended learning situations in general is discussed in more detail in (Motschnig-Pitrik & Mallich, 2004).

In Rogers's own words (Rogers, 1983, p. 20): "*Significant learning combines the logical and the intuitive, the intellect and the feelings, the concept and the experience, the idea and the meaning. When we learn in that way, we are whole.*" For didactic reasons, in particular for the sake of transparently specifying learning goals, we decompose significant, whole-person learning into three layers (Nykl & Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005): The level of intellect or intellectual knowledge, (social) skills, and personality, attitudes, dispositions, feelings, and intuitions. These levels play an important role in the evaluation of the course, since students in different courses are asked, how much, relatively, they benefited on each of the levels. This then can be compared with the learning goals resulting in conclusions as to what degree the course goals have been met. The three levels are also important in the context of assigning learning activities to online versus face-to-face phases.

On the technical side, Web services have attracted the attention of learning technology researchers and practitioners (e.g., Apelt, 2004; Torres, Doderó, & Padrón, 2004). Web services are employed in order to increase the extensibility and flexibility of existing solutions and to promote standards-based development, dissemination, and exploitation of desired functionality. We consider the issues of open development, flexibility, and sharing as central to employing Web services for blended learning purposes. We view a major advantage in the potential of adopting technology to meet, in a straightforward and simple way, pedagogical needs. In order to reflect the focal role of cooperation between persons, our approach is referred to as CEWebS (Cooperative Environment Web Services) (Mangler & Derntl, 2004). Each web service realizes some blended learning activity support such as online team building, reaction sheets, team workspaces, forum, chat, peer evaluation, questionnaire, etc.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

EU Strategies foster the development of skills and attitudes aside of knowledge. A key question is whether academic, blended learning courses are proper settings to achieve this goal and if so, what are the most important factors that enable whole person learning. A closely related question is how developments at the skills and attitudes level can be assessed.

In the context of the course on person centered communication (PCC) I decided to proceed in the following way to approach a response to the above question in my particular context. Firstly, I formulated learning goals (see next Section) at each level of learning and designed the course such as to address each level. Furthermore, in the preceding years I participated in workshops and group meetings targeted at the development of person centered attitudes. During the course, students were exposed to the concept of learning at three levels such that in the end of the course they could respond to questions regarding their personal perception of learning at each of the levels. Also, the students' reaction sheets and self evaluations appear to qualify as a source from which one can deduce potential learning at any of the levels. Individual statements can be categorized as to apply (mostly) to one of the levels and the collective result can be seen as to indicate the allocation of learning experiences with regard to the levels.

Given blended academic courses are adequate settings to address all three levels, a follow up question is whether students perceive the planned focus on the individual levels and in which ways they actually benefit at

each of the levels. These questions can be approached by the same procedure as described above. Note, in particular, that qualitative methods are required to find out about the students' learning at the individual levels.

If the course goal is to address the whole person, another question that arises is whether taking part in the course causes changes in the basic personality dimensions of students. In order to respond to this question we selected three relevant dimensions of the NEO-FFI (Neo, Five Factor Inventory) and tested the students before and after the course. As hypothesized, no significant changes were found. We believe that the time span of the intervention is too short and sample sizes are too little to indicate changes.

Another class of questions addresses the blended course design. We are interested in finding out to what degree the course elements: workshops, online activities, and person centered encounter groups are perceived as important to support the students' learning. Also, I am interested in finding out in which ways, whether at all, the online interactions influence the group and community building processes. Furthermore, since the course aims to develop transparent communication by the way of addressing interpersonal attitudes, we are interested in the course's influence in interpersonal relationships and teamwork. The online questionnaire was designed to address these issues by structured questions and free text fields in which students were asked to supply further comments on their structured and quantitative responses.

Last but not least I am highly interested in which ways students perceive each workshop and encounter group meeting in order to be able to take up any constructive comments to improve the course and my communication and action. Open reaction sheets, in which students reflect on their experience, have proved highly valuable.

In general, we have observed that in order to argue on the benefits of blended learning courses, classical control group design is hard to achieve due to difficulties in finding control groups, the large amount of variables of interest, and the small sample sizes. Yet, pure action research from the practicing researcher appears to fail to cover the whole range of specific questions posed in researching students' learning at three levels. From experience we arrived at the conclusion that no single research paradigm suffices to deliver responses to the questions we pose. Consequently, a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods appears to be indicated. Our approach has been to use participatory evaluations and qualitative and quantitative methods to complement action research as the overall, driving paradigm. As should become clear soon, the latter process appears to be best suited to meet the needs of a practicing, facilitating researcher who wants to improve her interventions.

EXTENDED ACTION RESEARCH AS APPLIED TO THE COURSE ON PERSON CENTERED COMMUNICATION

Action Research is gaining recognition in accompanying the introduction of new media into innovative teaching styles (Baskerville, 1999). This can be understood from the fact that pioneering teachers/facilitators aim to enrich their courses by introducing new media and are likely to combine research with practice in acting as reflective practitioners in their own courses. In this paper we take up Susman and Evered's (1978) proposal that suggests that action research typically proceeds in cycles (here each course instance forms one cycle) that consist of five phases: Diagnosing, action planning, action taking, evaluation, and specifying learning. In the following we discuss selected issues of one action research cycle, more precisely the third, of the course on Person centered Communication.

Diagnosing

Currently, most academic courses tend to emphasize the level of knowledge or intellect. However, several sources such as management surveys (Bull, 1998; Motschnig-Pitrik, 2002) and EU strategic documents (European Association for the Education of Adults, 2004) indicate that this focus is questionable and that deep, persistent learning needs to include attitudes and skills. Keeping these insights and statements in mind, we felt the need to design a blended learning course that explicitly integrates all three levels of learning in the context of communication and new media.

Action Planning

Based on experiences from preceding terms, we started with explicitly formulating course goals and assigning them to the three levels of learning. The next step was to design the course scenario, specify individual activities and to allocate activities to face-to-face and online phases. In the beginning of the term the course information and lecture notes were published in an interactive course space, realized by means of CEWebS. During a brief initial meeting students are selected to participate in the course following pre-specified criteria. The students are asked to fill out an online questionnaire and to read the initial part of the lecture notes along with an article on active listening. This is to ensure that the first workshop can be spent with getting to know one another and

elaborating and discussing issues rather than lecturing. After the first workshop, students are asked to form teams of about three persons on the platform and to choose one out of about 10 small projects proposals listed on the platform to be elaborated by the team in self-organized fashion. Also, students should form pairs and select, co-read, summarize and discuss an article included in the course's lecture notes. Summary and discussion were to be published in the course space.

In general, the four half-day workshops were spent with elaboration of topics in teams and subsequent presentations, small and large group discussions, brief presentations of the students' concept of working on their team projects, an exercise in active listening and its reflection, role play, discussions of students' reactions sheets, and watching a video on Carl Rogers, the founder of the Person Centered Approach and Person Centered Encounter Groups. In the fourth workshop students were acquainted with the free and open style of encounter groups and their inherent potential for personal development. The subsequent Person Centered Encounter Groups are scheduled to last 1.5 days each and provide wide space for experiencing one's own and the group's communication behavior. Each encounter group and workshop is followed by writing personal reaction sheets that are uploaded on the platform and can be read by all participants to allow for continuous development of the course. After the deadline for uploading the team projects, students are asked to evaluate themselves and each student is supposed to read and comment upon the project work of two teams that can freely be chosen. The final workshop is devoted to reflecting the students' personal experience in the course process as well as to collectively reflect on the Person Centered Encounter Group process. In the end, students are asked to fill out the final online questionnaire including questions on teamwork, interpersonal relationships, course elements, learning on each of the levels, etc.

Since academic courses require grading, we looked for a grading procedure that would allow us to include as many facets of learning as possible into the final grade. Currently, the latter takes into account students' self evaluation, the evaluations of the students' project work by peers and the facilitator, and the facilitator's assessment of each student's participation in face-to-face and online activities.

Action Taking

About 30 students participated in the initial meeting out of which 20 were selected with respect to their advancement in the study of business informatics. From these, 16 students came to the initial workshop and all 16 completed the course successfully.

In the initial meeting we learned to know one another and students formed small teams in order to share and present issues that further or hinder constructive communication.

A student writes in his reaction sheet: "I liked the first workshop and appreciate a course in which students get the chance to openly talk to one another, discuss, and share their views. Sitting in a circle was a well planned setting that has facilitated face-to-face communication. I consider it very appropriate to work in teams and subsequently present the ideas. This allows us to learn how to present our views effectively. The feedback after each presentation helps to see the strengths and weaknesses and to work on overcoming the weaknesses later."

A female student comments: "I found this workshop very interesting. It made me realize how important communication is in our private lives and jobs. I found the climate in the group very pleasant. As I had heard that we are going to sit in a circle I could not imagine it. But it was not inconvenient for me and I even preferred it because in this arrangement one can talk more honestly with one another. I hope the course will remain as thrilling and interesting as it started."

In a subsequent workshop we practiced active listening and elaborated on factors that contribute to effective speaking and good listening. In order to provide a glimpse on the character of the workshop consider an excerpt of a student's reaction sheet: "I consider talking about the reaction sheets in the beginning of the workshops as very meaningful. This way we can discuss and put into practice comments and suggestions. [...] The moderation cards regarding the themes "What is important for me as a speaker/listener" enabled one to identify issues of common concern as well as versatile issues that one had not considered on one's own. During the discussion we scratched the terms "I message" and "you message". I would be eager to learn more about why "you messages" are negative." Another student values the group effort in noting: "I was surprised about how well we cooperated as a large group and how many creative ideas we produced. As a single person I would most probably have needed 10 times more time for producing 10% of the ideas and would not have had that much fun in doing so."

Summarizing, the workshops were targeted at building knowledge about communication by means of elaborating material to be further studied and applied in the team's projects. Furthermore, the workshops served

to practice concrete communication situations and thereby to heighten the sensitivity of students regarding relationship issues and issues lying at the level of feelings. The consequences of online media on reducing many essential assets of communication, possible workarounds and their potentials and limitation were thoroughly addressed, such that students could continue observing the different modes while meeting online and/or face-to-face to work on their projects. Thus, the workshops, team projects and literature work contributed primarily, although not exclusively, to learning at the levels of knowledge and skills.

The consequent Person Centered encounter groups (Rogers, 1970) were foreseen to develop, in the first place, the level of feelings, attitudes, and dispositions. The lack of structure in such groups requires participants to co-construct meaning by relying solely on their personal resources. In encounter groups, my primary task as a facilitator is to provide an open, respectful and understanding atmosphere in which participants and the whole group can move forward in a constructive process to build community and at the same time develop as individuals. In the course's groups, we went through periods of silence and intense sharing as well as discussion. Interestingly, those who talked much in the beginning and complained about more quiet persons learned to give space to the more silent ones, many of whom took the opportunity to share personal issues in the group. This and the open sharing among, say all participants, contributed to deep personal learning. Personally, I believe that the transparency and openness expressed in the reaction sheets significantly contributed to building a safe and trustful climate in the group that allowed for deep learning at all levels. Participants who talked less during group session often wrote insightful reactions and thereby became "known" to the group. This, in my view, built trust in the group and accelerated the group process, such that the initial, often tense phases, almost disappeared and the group moved quickly to the later, constructive phases, in which the expression of positive feelings, respect, and change towards more openness and transparency dominated. The following excerpts from students' reactions after the first and second group meeting is intended to serve as an illustration of the encounter group process. Note also the more personal style in writing when compared with the reaction sheets after the initial workshops.

After the initial 1.5 day encounter a female student wrote: "I really liked the first encounter group. I did not expect that there will be no schedule at all, but that worked really well. I was surprised by the way in which themes appeared. ... Also, it was cool how the exchanges became more personal and meaningful and I could "see" the increase in trust among us. What I really appreciated was that persons, who tended to remain silent, finally contributed a lot more. Jean really (name was changed here) impressed me in this respect. [...] All in all I hope that it stays as interesting as it is."

A male student noted: "Today's group was very thrilling, in particular, since we experienced a real conflict, or more precisely, misunderstanding. The discussion developed smoothly and I was enthusiast about the quiet and caring atmosphere in which a solution to the misunderstanding was sought for. What I appreciated in particular was the way my friend Steve tried to explain what he thought that Austin wanted to get across and this shows how well we understand each other in the group. Also, I felt the communication and relationships among individual group members improved gradually due to our open sharing of our personal experiences. I believe that openness and trust truly facilitate communication. ..."

After the second encounter group, the same student wrote: "The breaks were a further element that was essential to support our communication. [...] During the last meeting I found out that our group is open for all themes and views. We talked without any fear or reservations. This acceptance increased openness and mutual trust."

A female student remarked amongst others: "Personally, the encounter groups caused me to confront myself with themes about which I never thought about before. Moreover, they helped me to think about certain aspects of my life and gain new insight. I got impressions from other cultures and learned to consciously listen to others attentively and to accept and respect their meanings."

The project works were completed in time by all teams. All of them used a blended way of cooperation in that they interleaved face-to-face meetings with online communication. The topics that were selected and adopted dealt with: Communication situations online, conflict situations and potential resolutions, case studies of personal communication situations, Person-Centered communication with non-native speaking partners, communication in partner-, job-, and parent child relationships. The peer evaluation allowed the recipients to gain various perspectives from their colleagues. Frankly, this variety of viewpoints could not be achieved by me as a single person. Except for two cases, students rated themselves quite consistent with the evaluation I proposed. In two cases of higher deviation, the peer evaluation of the project work lay precisely in the middle such that the final mark became the average of the differing views. In general, assembling the grade from multiple facets proved to be a work intensive but smooth process aiming at a maximum of fairness.

Evaluating

In the initial online questionnaire we asked students to indicate the degree to which they feel they learn at the three levels of learning in a typical course in their study of business informatics. We then asked the same question but with respect to the course on person centered communication in the final questionnaire. Figure 1 shows that students benefited more on the level of skills and personal dispositions (including attitudes) in the blended course on person centered communication, while the perceived degree of intellectual learning was just slightly beneath that of conventional courses. Despite the small sample size – just 7 students returned the online questionnaire before and after the course – this tendency indicates that all three levels of learning can be accessed in blended academic courses. Furthermore, the different emphasis given to individual levels, as expressed in the course goals, was reflected in the students' perception. From this we conjecture that, aside of preparing the content, a conscious and thoughtful consideration of course goals and scenarios has the potential to significantly influence the students' whole person learning. Since the lower levels rely on interpersonal contact there is no doubt the skills and in particular the personality of the facilitator play a major role in learning (Motschnig-Pitrik & Mallich, 2004).

Another question of interest concerned the students' perception of the importance of individual course elements, in particular the online-phases, the structured workshops and the unstructured encounter group session. Approximately the same amount of course time was scheduled to these three course segments, whereby online tasks ran in parallel to the face-to-face processes. As expected from the students' feedback in face-to-face meetings and online reaction sheets, the encounter groups were perceived as the most meaningful in both of the course instances we investigated. Interestingly, as depicted in Figure 2, they were perceived as slightly more meaningful in the course instance PCC group 2 that allocated about 9 hours more to workshops than to encounter groups. This indicates that, despite the highest potential attributed to the encounter groups by students, structured workshops are essential for preparing students for the experience and allowing them to collaboratively reflect on it in final face-to-face workshop.

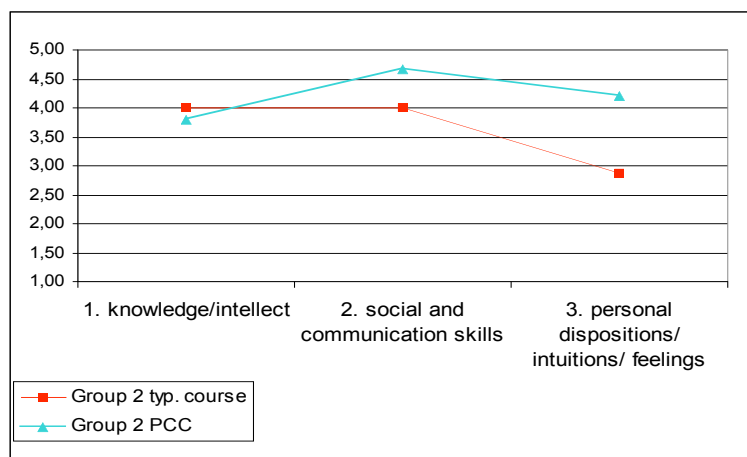


Figure 1: Learning at three levels in a conventional course and the course on PCC (n = 14).

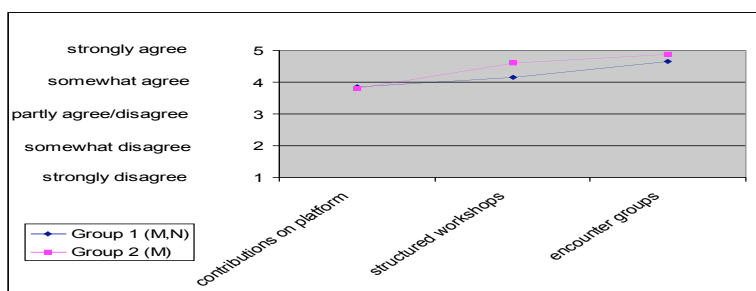


Figure 2: Perceived importance of course elements in two groups (n1 = 15, n2 = 14) of the course on PCC. The Figure illustrates to which degree students agreed when asked: The contributions on the platform, the encounter groups, the structured workshops, respectively, were important.

Figure 3 shows that the course's influence on interpersonal relationships tended to be primarily positive or rather positive, in some cases neutral. This holds true except for one case in which a student indicated that the course had a 'rather negative effect' on his or her relationship with a superior. Regarding teamwork, students found it easier to establish positive interactions (the mean value being 4.2 in group 1 and 4.5 in group 2 on a 5 point scale where 3 meant neutral) and to work in teams (the mean value being 3.6 in group 1 and 4.1 in group 2 on a 5 point scale where 3 meant neutral) than in other courses.

| | negative effect | | Rather negative effect | | | no effect | | | rather positive effect | | | positive effect | | | I don't have any | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|----|------------------------|----|-----|-----------|----|-----|------------------------|----|-----|-----------------|----|-----|------------------|----|-----|
| | G1 | G2 | G1 | G2 | all | G1 | G2 | all | G1 | G2 | all | G1 | G2 | all | G1 | G2 | all |
| study colleagues | | | | | | | 1 | 1 | 11 | 7 | 18 | 3 | 7 | 10 | | | |
| working colleagues | | | | | | 1 | 1 | 2 | 8 | 3 | 11 | 5 | 6 | 11 | | 5 | 5 |
| superiors | | | 1 | | 1 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 7 | 2 | 9 | 1 | 5 | 6 | 2 | 5 | 7 |
| friends | | | | | | | 1 | 1 | 6 | 5 | 11 | 8 | 9 | 17 | | | |
| companion | | | | | | | 1 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 9 | 10 | 7 | 17 | | 2 | 2 |
| parents | | | | | | 2 | 3 | 5 | 9 | 3 | 12 | 3 | 9 | 12 | | | |
| contact with others in general | | | | | | | | | 11 | 6 | 17 | 3 | 9 | 12 | | | |
| all | | | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 10 | 16 | 56 | 31 | 87 | 33 | 52 | 85 | 2 | 12 | 14 |

Figure 3: Effects of the course on Person Centered Communication on interpersonal relationships. (G1 ... group 1, n1 = 15; G2 ... group 2; n2 = 14)

In her final reaction sheet a student wrote: "The final workshop was a nice ending. We talked about the reaction sheets and their meaning and importance, and reflected upon the encounter group phases as we lived through them. Before and during the break we shared which conflict-type we belong to and subsequently we elaborated important steps in conflict resolution. It was interesting to see how many persons would be willing to participate in an encounter group again – there were quite some! However, I also found the last hour sad, because it will never reoccur in that way. Since the end approached rapidly, I had no chance to say good bye to you and therefore will do it here... It was very exciting for me to learn to know you, to work with you, and to spend time with you! I'd like to say thank you for the pleasant atmosphere that I had hoped for in the beginning. [...]"

Specifying Learning

Firstly, as a facilitator I learned that, with careful preparation and design, a blended course that enables students to learn at all three levels is feasible and is truly appreciated by students. Interestingly, the typical phases of resistance where participants realize there is no structure were very short and filled with students' search on how to provide structure, such as to suggest to do exercises. I conjecture that the preparatory cooperation and motivation of students during the workshops as well as the reading of materials provided online played a significant role in accelerating the group process. I felt that the initial phases were significantly shortened, however, without being left out completely. Another factor that may have accelerated the group process were the online reaction sheets written by all participants and published in our interactive space such that each participant could read the reactions of his or her colleagues. In this way even the more quiet students expressed themselves such that they became better known to the group which tended to increase trust among us.

In one instant of the process the group started discussing and I was on the edge of interrupting as I observed that the students seemed to have real interest in the topic and political considerations. Retrospectively, I see that they needed some kind of warming up on a hot topic and that nothing could have been more harmful than cutting them off. I learned to trust the group process, yet also to listen to my own feelings and find expression for them, when appropriate. As a facilitator I confirmed my style to participate actively and visibly, however without taking charge whenever possible. The decision to conduct a structured workshop in the end of the course that had not been part of the course in the preceding year proved successful. The structured workshop was definitely different from those held before the encounter sessions. Students cooperated even more intensively. In particular, the collaborative reflection on the 15 phases of the group process (Rogers, 1970) in terms of experiences that we assigned to individual phases that we lived through together gave us a feeling of unity that is hard to characterize in words.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER WORK

Academic practice and initial research show that Person Centered Encounter Groups have their place in higher education, if interpersonal attitudes and skills are to be developed along with subject knowledge. More than that, students view Person Centered Encounter Groups as the most important element in a course targeted at improving communication. This appears to confirm Rogers's view on Encounter Groups as highly potent social inventions of the 20th century. Interestingly, in the blended learning setting web-based learning support has still been perceived as rather important and helpful. In particular, there is initial evidence that online reaction sheets, submitted and shared after each session, have the potential to accelerate the group process. As a consequence, early phases are passed through more quickly and later phases with more trust, deeper expression and more understanding start earlier. Summarizing, Person Centered Encounter Groups enriched by online sharing and projects and preceded by structured workshops have proved to highly effective settings for significant learning at the intellectual, social skill, and personal attitude level.

Further work will proceed with the empirical and action research on complementing Person Centered Encounter Groups with online elements in order to confirm or modify the initial findings and hypotheses reported in this paper. We are also going to transfer the concept to organizations (profit and non-profit) and other institutions for higher- and adult education. A complementary research track will investigate the influence of online communication on group processes and teamwork in professional- and learning communities, as reported in the first and third article of this symposium. With this research we aim to contribute to a thoughtful blending of face-to-face and online settings for facilitating effective significant learning for individuals, teams, and groups.

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