Virtual Conference: a Telecooperative Learning Environment

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INTRODUCTION

Virtual conferences are used as a special form of complex learning environment. Students, experts and interested people coming in a virtual environment together to work in cooperative decentralized structures. This concept gives students the opportunity to look beyond ‚the walls‘ of a traditional seminar in a university.
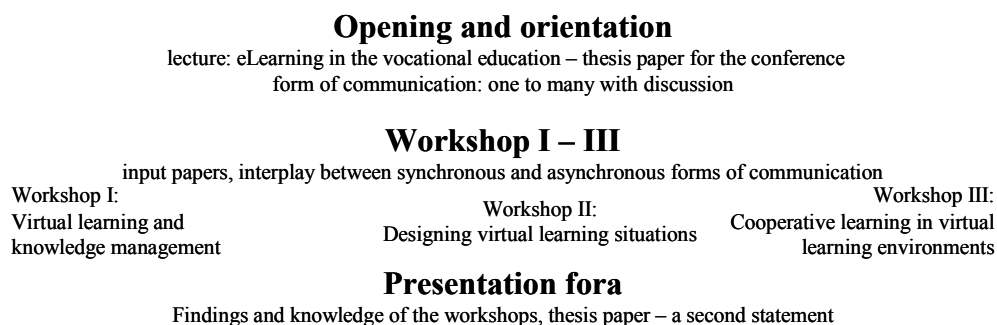
With virtual conference we have a shift from guided learning to a kind of independent and experiential learning (see Simons 2001, p. 176). This concept gives students the opportunity to look in an active way beyond the 'walls' of a traditional seminar in a university. In an initial experiment, we tried out a virtual conference with the topic 'e-Learning in vocational education'.

LEARNING IN VIRTUAL CONFERENCES

We can differentiate between the creation of a virtual conference and the participation in a conference. The students of two universities (the University of Paderborn and the University of Hamburg) had the task of preparing the conference (building the online rooms, developing a concept for the workshops etc.). After this part the conference 'e-learning in vocational education' was opened for students of a third university (the University of Linz) and some teachers and other experts also participated in the conference. The students of the third university had to prepare statements about the topics of the three workshops: cooperation virtual learning environments; designing virtual situations and knowledge management. The developers moderated the conference.

The students had the opportunity to work with an e-Learning environment and not only to talk about e-Learning. (Tele-)Cooperation and (tele-)collaboration was necessary in both sequences of the conference. The students could collect experience the difference between several forms of cooperation and collaboration. For example: In the preparation of the conference the students had the task to work in local groups and in groups with students of an other university. So they had to handle different forms of communication and cooperation.

Figure 1: Conference program

Opening and orientation
lecture: eLearning in the vocational education – thesis paper for the conference
form of communication: one to many with discussion

Workshop I – III
input papers, interplay between synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication

Workshop I: Virtual learning and knowledge management	Workshop II: Designing virtual learning situations	Workshop III: Cooperative learning in virtual learning environments

Presentation fora
Findings and knowledge of the workshops, thesis paper – a second statement

The conference itself had a duration of ten days and switched between asynchronous and synchronous forms of communication. One advantage for the students was the flexible form of learning and the possibility to learn in a more self-paced way.

Maybe in future it will be possible to create open virtual conferences for teacher education and further education. The learners get another view of learning and so have the possibility to reflect upon their positions.

On the other hand, there is the problem that the conferences are competing with the daily commitments of the participants and it might be necessary to fit the conference in with the curricula of various universities.

In my poster, first I present the concept of a virtual conference with students of several universities, secondly, I will give an overview of advantages and disadvantages of these forms of learning and, thirdly, I will indicate some factors in the implementation of a virtual conference.

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