

Learning by peeking- distance learning, projects, and integrated learning activities for VOLL

Dr. Franz Gramlinger, Wipäd Linz

Dr. Eric M. Brewster, IF Linz

1. The paradigm of change is the new paradigm of learning

- Lifelong learning and learning to learn are more than buzzwords.
- Integration is the future of learning institutions.

The challenging job market and job profiles for all employees are dictated by two complimentary demands from business-internationalization and the quality imperative. This is clearly shown in the drive to lean management and the constant call for up-grading workers' skills. Traditional training institutes and traditional education at schools and universities cannot meet this demand. Business alone cannot afford to close the skills gap. Therefore, all concerned parties-schools, universities, businesses, management and employees-must seek a synergy to close this gap and to provide sound education, skills training, and communication beyond borders. That is the central aim of the VOLL Network in the Project Studies II seminar in the Department of LSP and in the LUI, University Practice Firm, located in the Department of Education at Linz University.

Learners in this vocationally oriented language learning network are practicing vital skills, language, and content expertise in integrated tasks and in self-directed project groups Learning-by-doing is central to the successful acquisition of knowledge and language here. Learning-by-peeking is the idea linking these two seminars across different curricula. The bond is provided by the belief in enabling learners to carry on successful skills and subject content learning in simulations, projects, both in the classroom and independent of space and time. Technology plays a key role in both seminars as a means to gain new knowledge and skills and as a linking tool between instructors, participants, and outside partners. The links between the multiskilling seminar in English and the practice firm project reflect these principles.

”The basic idea in the context of a practice firm is reflecting acting. Theory should not be absent, but practical and theoretical learning should take place in order to allow an integrated curriculum

(Tramm, 1996: 66).” Focal issues of both seminars are CBT (computer-based training), knowledge and language acquisition theories, and self-access learning (SAL). The demand for SAL will only be successful, however, provided ”that individuals are willing and able to take charge of their own affairs in a responsible and effective way (Trim, 1997, 15)”.

2. The concept of the course "A Practice Firm at the university"

Since 1995 the Department of Vocational and Business Education at the University of Linz has conducted a very special kind of course: 20 students are working and learning for one semester (15 weeks, 3 hours a week) in their own enterprise. 20 *real* people (together with 6 members of the "management") work in a *real* office with *fictitious* products and services and *fictitious* flows of money-that is the practice firm LUI, the Linzer Uni Informa. The LUI is not only active in a national market but in a real international one. With about 3000 PFs all over the world our PF has a lot of different customers and clients.

This course is offered because in the Austrian commercial colleges (Handelsakademien and Handelsschulen) there already exist about 500 to 600 of these practice firms (PF) and the graduates of Business Education are those who should be able to "teach" in a PF in the new role of the teacher as facilitator instead of instructor in complex teaching and learning environments.

There are three main principles in this learning place although this simulated enterprise tries to behave as close to reality as possible it is not reality. It is a model, and the purpose of the model is to learn. Several key principles govern the course:

1. **Students are responsible for their own learning.** Our students have to apply for a job in the LUI "as usual". We give them a description of our enterprise, of the design of this course, and some articles they have to read to get some basic information about the theory. With these papers they should be able to start and to apply. If they are chosen for a department by the management team (consisting of five older students and Dr. Gramlinger), they have a very short time to settle in. Within this time they also have to think about their learning objectives in this course. There are so many different possibilities of what to learn and what to emphasize. They have to decide this for themselves, write it down and also evaluate it at the

end. Being responsible not only for their work, but also for the contents and the success of their learning is difficult for them as they are not used to this. It provides, however, significant positive motivation for our work together.

2. **They have to use all the new technologies.** It must become a matter of course for all the students not only to use the PC with all the usual software, but to use all possibilities of communication and presentation we are offered by the new technologies: All the students must have their own email account (each department, too); they have to make their own homepage as a department of the LUI. They should be able to have business contacts not only via phone or fax, but also via email, listserv lists, Internet-homepages, net meetings, and they should get an idea of what is or will be possible by using these technologies. Especially in the virtual world of the PFs, the virtual world of the Internet makes double sense. All the learners (students in different kinds of learning environments) learn how to use these tools; and the business contacts between the PFs become faster, cheaper and much more interesting.
3. **English becomes an absolute necessity.** Markets are becoming more and more international, and the common language of the PFs from the USA, Canada, Australia, Brazil, Eastern European, and the Scandinavian countries is English. The LUI tries to have a lot of international contacts, and, as a service for the international market, it is running an English listserv list. Our homepage has increasingly more English pages.

One can see many similarities to Project Studies II. That's the reason why we started a trial with students of this course. In March 1998 we started with a new group and with three students from Project Studies II as members of our new "international marketing" department-an independent department (with a strong connection to the "regular" marketing team) with its own tasks and responsibilities, and with a great outcome!

Looking back we can say that this trial was a great success (and we are continuing to work with the international department). The three students brought information back to Project Studies II about this special learning environment, the theory and their practical experiences, and they brought into the LUI their expert's knowledge as students of international business with a stress on foreign languages.

They also had to find their orientation, to solve problems, to integrate themselves into the staff, to define their learning objectives-just the same as the students of Business Education. And they did a really good job, helped the LUI, kept contact with another very special group within the

LUI (the students of the third class of a commercial college in Steyr are "working" in their English courses as the "translation department" of the LUI) and also made their portfolio like all the others. In my personal opinion, they learned a lot, and we as the practice firm LUI learned a lot from them, too.

3. Student evaluation of the cross curricular project LUI and Project Studies II

The three international business students participating in this project have summed up the depth of their learning experience most eloquently. In the following, all of the key concepts behind both courses are reflected. The impact of task and project based course design, self-directed learning, and CBT merge in the simulated reality of the practice firm. The synergy between course design, learning theories of content, language, and skills in the two courses is effectively demonstrated in the following excerpts of insights and feedback from these three students' project report:

It was a great experience to observe the ongoing process of experiential learning deliberately (as we were of course sensitized because of our course Project Studies II) and to go through it for ourselves. At the beginning, you have to accustom yourself to this strategy because it is rather unusual and you miss the leadership (that the most of us are after all used to !). But when you got over the first difficulties, it is in our opinion a major opportunity to develop your creativity and improve the teamwork within your department as well as to improve the communication among all as a whole. In addition, you remember much better what you have done/learned.

- ☺ Dr. Gramlinger and the other members of the LUI really treated us as normal employees and not just as assistants – this gave us a quite good feeling and motivated us to actually try to give our best and to help wherever help was needed.
- ☺ We experienced our ability to deal with situations where no leader is available. Everybody can develop his/her creativity – you must only trust yourself!
- ☺ We got to know an alternative way of learning, namely experiential learning, that was quite interesting. If we had not attended the Project Studies II course, we would not have had the chance to make this experience.

☺ The teamwork within our small group was developed further, and we are proud of the fact that nobody tried to dominate the others. The same can be said of our whole team, which includes the normal marketing department of the LUI. It was very pleasant to work with them because they always tried to help each other.

No matter how – we are convinced that we gathered much experience and we would like to thank Dr. Brewster that he enabled us to leave the ”conventional paths of learning” to test another one !

In our opinion, the concepts behind the practice firm LUI (mainly **D**istance **L**earning, but of course also **V**ocationally **O**rientated **L**anguage **L**earning as well as **I**nformation **T**echnology) and the LUI itself are valuable ”institutions” where from learners can profit enormously. However, the prerequisites for effectiveness are that the concepts mentioned above are seen in the right way - as some important parts of learning, but not the only ones – and that the learners who are involved in such learning processes are highly motivated.

Since we have become acquainted with the LUI, we think that this form of learning offers the biggest possible nearness to reality and practice. The learner is able to act in an almost real enterprise, to get to know the joys and sorrows in everyday vocational life (communication problems, time pressure, new orders etc.) and to learn to take on responsibility as well as to work in teams. Therefore, the LUI is despite its reference to reality a learning environment where mistakes happen and – going one step further – should happen.

In brief, the practice firm requires much time and work, but it is worth running through a semester because you can really learn a lot in the sectors of social competence (teamwork, responsibility, internal communication etc.), professional competence (processes of accounting, organization, personnel, marketing and EDP department) and technical competence (handling of computers and electronic communication tools etc.) for your professional life later on.

(Flankl, Kuchinka & Hackl 1998: 21 & 28)

More information about the projects, course designs, the staff, and the "history" may be found at <http://www.lui.uni-linz.ac.at/> and at <http://www.lang.uni-linz.ac.at/BREWSTER.html>. Inquiries and comments are welcome and should be directed to e.brewster@lang.uni-linz.ac.at and franz.gramlinger@jk.uni-linz.ac.at

4. Food for thought

- CBT is an agent of change.
- Developments in technology and learning theory redefine the role of learner and teacher.
- The future belongs to those who cross traditional boundaries, peek over the fence, and actively seek a synergy of ideas, persons, and resources.

The challenge which must be taken up by other departments and institutions is to achieve the same level of integration and successful development across curricula, languages, and boundaries as has been achieved in these two courses. The process to successful learning by doing is the goal; the path begins, however, by first peeking over the fence.

References

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