Supporting Collaboration in Professional Soft-Skill Training Courses

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Abstract:

More and more employers qualify their employees in soft skills or make soft-skill knowledge a decision criterion when assigning new jobs. Soft-skills courses are typically highly interactive as soft skills are no factual knowledge and cannot be acquired by simple drilling. The course instructors, who very often are external experts, have to face the challenge to adapt to new media and course styles since new technologies not only shape everyday working life of the course attendees, but also demand for new soft skills due to changed communication practices. This paper proposes a community-oriented approach for professional soft-skill courses using a room-based collaboration platform.

Key words: CSCL, CSCW, soft-skills, academic education

1 Introduction

When it comes to job applications and vacancies respective journals report that times are changing. Personnel managers no longer only prefer the applicants that are the best in their area of expertise. The appeal of future colleagues should also lie in so-called "soft skills". That is why such professional trainings are continuously rising, that are focused on further education in these soft skills. On the other hand, new media based courses face the bias of being anonymous, non-intuitive and purely theoretical and therefore inappropriate to impart soft skills. This article describes the special characteristics of soft-skill courses performed as blended learning courses and how these characteristics can be supported by using a room-based cooperative knowledge space.

2 Types of Soft-Skill Trainings

As the awareness of the importance of soft skills has risen in the last 15-20 years [8], many companies, but also university facilities have started providing professional training to their employees (cf. [1,7] for two of many examples). In some soft-skill courses in a professional context it is preferred to train the participants within their familiar surroundings. But in most cases the courses are guided by external coaches and the participants come together from different companies, institutes and backgrounds that enforce the use of an abstract common environment. This article and the concepts resulting from it are aimed at the second type of
soft-skill courses, namely those with new media support. These trainings often consist of multiple modules with focus on thematic constellations, such as:

- self and time management
- work-life balance
- communication and leadership skills
- conflict management
- cross-cultural communication
- professional networking

3 Special Characteristics in Soft-Skill Courses

The soft-skill courses in question are attended by persons with diverse personality structures who all are detached from their familiar professional environment and who have come together to update their soft skills and improve their own work and the performance of their teams.

Some of the participants only need some theoretical instruments to improve their soft skills and achieve their ambitious aims. But others actually have conflicts with colleagues, supervisors or themselves and are very shy and need support and advice to solve their problems. A main goal of soft-skill courses is to unite these personalities and strengthen them all in the different needed achievement.

Soft-skill courses are usually held in groups of 10 to 15 people and most of the time the group members work together and discuss the topics. A typical scenario for such a course is to have each participant introduce their respective neighbour. First they introduce themselves to each other in groups of two, and then they are introduced to the rest of the whole group by one another.

Typically such classes are taught in one or two day courses. Theoretical lessons given by the course lecturer alternate with group work in which the participants mostly deal with “real-life” problems to apply and internalize the theoretical concepts. Sometimes these group constellations remain the same throughout the whole course. In other cases the lecturer encourages the participants to change partners in the group in order to get to know each other, because most of the times the participants are not acquainted to each other. Such soft-skill courses demand a certain level of trust among the participants, because most participants attend these courses to solve certain currently existent problems and conflicts with themselves or colleagues and they need to “open up” to the group of participants to tell their story.

A further characteristic of soft-skill courses is the complexity and poor structure of the provided content. A conflict management course will also cover topics from self management and presentation or communication skills. That means a variety of information will be provided to course participants because the different topics of soft skills are not clearly definable.

Figure 1 shows some content from a typical soft skill course performed as a blended learning course, i.e. partly as presence course and partly as an online course provided using the Moodle platform [3]. In addition to information documents and references to external work regarding the topic, the course consists of a variety of tasks (with deadlines), different forums about the different topics and tasks, chat appointments and other events in the calendar. Most of the tasks are “virtual group work” tasks. This implies that almost every task has its own
from forum and information sites. Obviously this is a lot of poorly structured information where cooperative work aspects and content elements are mixed up in an extensively incomprehensible way.

Figure 1. Screenshot of a soft-skill online course in a content-oriented platform

4 Collaboration in a Room-Based Environment

In the previous section we have outlined some major downsides of a purely content-centred view of soft-skill learning. Content-orientation may be appropriate for factual learning where the focus actually is on the learning content. Soft skills, however, are not only about “knowing that”, but much more about “knowing how”. More precisely, soft skills are about interacting with other people which obviously is a practical task.

Moreover, most of the skills listed above are themselves related to collaboration. Communication, conflict management and coordination skills are fundamental prerequisites to collaborative work. Following ROSCHELLE & TEASLEY [9], we define “collaboration” as “a coordinated, synchronous activity that is the result of a continued attempt to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem.” In a collaborative environment, these soft skills can be trained and practiced, making the ability to collaborate a learning objective in its own right. Thus, it is desirable to rethink web-based soft-skill courses from a collaboration-centred point of view, and, when offering the course on the web, to deploy them in a community-oriented, rather than a content-oriented environment.

4.1 Content Orientation vs. Community Orientation
Most eLearning environments currently deployed, however, follow the content-oriented approach. Their architecture focuses on content management, content authoring, and content provision, whereas communication and collaboration facilities are considered add-ons, if provided at all. In contrast, the community-oriented approach focuses on the collaborative processes of communication and knowledge construction. Content objects are means to foster these processes — e.g. a theoretical introduction or a group work assignment — and/or results (one might even say “by-products”) of these processes, codifying knowledge constructed cooperatively. Figure 2 illustrates the two approaches: in a content-oriented approach, communication and collaboration tools are grouped around content elements (left), whereas in a community-oriented approach, they are embedded in a collaboration infrastructure (right).

Figure 2. Content-oriented (left) vs. community-oriented (right) approach. The purple boxes symbolize content objects.

A related discussion on content-orientation vs. collaboration can be found in the first section of [10]. It should be noted that purely community-oriented platforms in reality are very rare, and that developers of content-oriented platforms strive to complement them with collaboration tools. These tools, however, are often isolated, cf. the example above.

### 4.2 Structuring Content and Collaboration in Virtual Rooms

Quite a few CSCW and CSCL systems follow a room-based approach which is often referred to as the “room metaphor”. In [4], the authors give an exhaustive list of features which both real and virtual rooms are comprised of. A major advantage of environments based on the notion of virtual rooms is their support not only for “real” collaboration which by definition is synchronous, but also for cooperative (potentially asynchronous, with more individual actions) and mixed scenarios of group learning and group work [11]. Collaborative learning platforms based on the room metaphor are often referred to as “cooperative knowledge spaces” [2]; examples of such platforms are CURE [5] and open sTeam [6].

A key feature of room-based systems is their ability to partition the “world” of people and objects which has a structuring effect on both objects and discussions. Thus discussions can take place in close proximity to the objects being discussed, while avoiding disturbance by other discussions which regularly occurs if the only communication tool is one single, course-wide forum. Access to a room can be controlled and limited, enabling users to share privileged access to objects in a smaller group. Both these features considerably facilitate finding a shared context for group work. Moreover, as we have pointed out earlier, discussions in a soft-skills context tend to have sensitive subjects as well. A more confidential environment can foster these discussions, which are an important part of a soft-skills course.
Since virtual rooms can be arranged and connected by doorways freely, semantic relationships between objects in different rooms can be visualized and made perceivable to users.

Room-based systems also support awareness of other users’ presence. Obviously, a person present in the same room is a potential communication partner, making awareness a key prerequisite for communication and (synchronous) collaboration. Sensing that person’s actions enables coordination and helps to retrace the actions. The ability to coordinate is a key feature to leadership and traceability of actions is helpful in conflict management. Thus, awareness can give substantial support for real-world training scenarios. To sum up: structuring and awareness features of room-based collaborative platforms can enhance the learning experience in soft-skill courses fundamentally.

5 Outlook

We have outlined the downsides of a mainly content-oriented approach to online professional soft-skill training and how they may be overcome by switching to a community-oriented approach. Providing information to the participants is not the main goal of a soft-skill course as described here. Soft skills need to be practiced, and we argue that a collaborative environment makes for a good training ground.

It should be observed that simply putting content into a cooperative knowledge space will not solve the issue. Rather, the whole course will have to be rethought focusing on collaborative scenarios and a thematic structure that is reflected by the concept of virtual rooms. We expect to improve the quality of the courses the employees attend, thereby improving their soft skills as well.

References:

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