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► **To cite this version:**

Folkert Castelein, Vivek Ratna. The Global Life Long Learning Communities (GL3C) Project. Conference ICL2007, September 26 -28, 2007, 2007, Villach, Austria. 7 p. hal-00197229

HAL Id: hal-00197229

<https://telearn.hal.science/hal-00197229>

Submitted on 14 Dec 2007

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Life Long Learning: collaborative learning, learning environment & portfolio's. ICL, Villach, Austria. Sept. 26 - 28

The Global Life Long Learning Communities (GL3C) Project

Folkert Castelein & Vivek Ratna

Global Learning Institute & Digital Learning Solutions

Key words: Adaptive and intuitive environments, Knowledge management and learning, Collaborative learning, ePortfolio's, Pedagogical and psychological approaches, Just-in-time learning, Learning by Doing, Cost effectiveness.

Abstract:

In our opinion learning is moving from pushing content to an individual into the integration of formal & informal learning, just in time help and coaching, and is highly adaptive. There is a way to improve how people, organizations, and institutions are learning and working together. Therefore the Global Learning Institute and RSM Erasmus University launched the Global Life Long Learning Communities (GL3C) project and invites you to join. We started this project by first determining the cause as to why there are hardly any successful L3 groups and to find a way to improve this. We are learning how best to support all the requirements of potential L3 groups with a safe, fully integrated web based platform. The results in phase 1 were promising and we are continuing the project in phase 2.

1 The initiative for the GL3C project

The Global Learning Group started the GL3C project, in early 2007, based on our experiences with our learning & working application used by a variety of audiences and groups. The application is built on a kernel of open source software and combines functionality from an LMS (Learning Management System), a digital workplace (collaboration & communication) including Blogs, Wiki, and ePortfolio.

We believe that learning is moving from pushing content to an individual into the integration of formal & informal learning, just in time help and coaching, and is highly adaptive. Learning in teams and creating deliverables. Content is based on stories, cases, articles and reports. The GL3C technology is built to support this concept. This platform would be supportive to the Life Long Learning requirements.

We have found that most of our clients were struggling with a highly ambitious functionally rich Collaborative learning environment with too many functions / options. Clients continued to use additional applications they were familiar with such as project management software, and as an example Microsoft SharePoint. Individuals (registered users) could not make choices either in what function and applications to use but the reasons behind those choices. They continued to use the platform in combination with MSN, Skype, mail, other applications for social networks and collaboration, and more.

We came to the conclusion that the Life Long Learning Community was very scattered, if at all we can talk of such a community. We could not find huge L3 communities. We also noticed that there was a tremendous lack of good usable content and experts (available instructors / coaches), that were difficult to find, to share and with varying levels of expertise.

In view of the above we decide to launch the GL3C project, with the **Objective** (the BHAG: Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal) of offering GL3C at no charge to individuals and on a low cost basis to not-for-profit institutions and to “Become number one in Life Long Learning Communities environment for every possible group and individual, connecting people to learn, exchange and support”.

Target groups are (but not limited to): students, adults, alumni, communities of interest for professionals, subject matter experts, Special Interest Groups, peer groups, business units, and more.

2 The launch of the GL3C project

2.1 Professional support

We found professional and scientific support for our initiative at the Rotterdam School of Management (RSM), Erasmus University, after discussing the plan with Prof. Dr. Ir. E. van Heck and his assistant Dr. M.K.M. Ibrahim. We verified our ideas and needed validation of our approach. We were facing challenges such as (1) What is the target group looking for in terms of functionality for L3? (2) Are they looking in any particular direction any way? (3) Under what conditions and circumstances will they work together, building on ideas, share content, invite friends / colleagues? (4) How to deal with content, coaching, help from professionals (subject matter experts) on specific items? (5) How do we support the individuals and groups pedagogically and psychologically? Do we need mentors / counselors? We had many more similar unanswered questions.

We decided to conduct an experiment with a student group from the master class “E-Organizations”. This experiment also included other individuals in smaller groups from our client base.

The students had been studying full time for several years at the university and are familiar with using Blackboard and two other supportive (administrative) systems.

Over the months April – July 2007, E-Organizations was delivered in 8 sessions, with 8 assignments, PowerPoint presentations and several books and articles. The 8 sessions were plenary, the rest of the learning process was virtually. The students worked together in small teams of 3 to 4. The assignments (and grades) were on an individual basis.

During the learning process only the GL3C suite was available for delivery, communication, collaboration & teaming, assignments and feedback.

2.2 Technical support

At the start of the curriculum, during the first plenary session, the students were told where to find all the information (the URL), how to log in, and the objective of the GL3C project. One of the assignments in E-Organizations was:

“Look around and explore the GL3C platform. Think about existing functionalities that need improvement or additional functionalities that you would value to start using GL3C in daily activities. How do we meet the BHAG requirements from a technology perspective? Under what conditions would you invite friends, colleagues, to use GL3C? Which characteristics and functionalities are required?”

There was no further introduction or training delivered. All options (functionality) of the application were activated, knowing fully well that they did not need all of them to complete or follow the curriculum.

3 Feedback from the students

3.1 *The learning process in E-Organizations*

The learning process in E-Organizations went well. Some students asked questions like Where do I find my assignments? Where can I find the articles? But most of them found their way themselves. They used forums for questions and answers. They also used forums to form their own learning teams. Within two weeks there was a generic group with all the presentations (per session), articles, enriched on a weekly basis.

They had formed groups per team. They were heavy users of the digital workplace but not of the LMS part. In the LMS they found access to their groups, some generic news and their assignments. In the LMS there were no web based learning modules available. E-Organizations only worked with presentations, articles and assignments plus feedback.

3.2 *Exploring the GL3C suite*

Here are the statistics based on this experiment:

- 26 % of the students were positive with some remarks and comments for improvement
- 59 % of the students called it acceptable and provided a list of improvements/ /enhancements, with remarks and comments
- 15 % of the students were negative because they did not see the added value compared with MSN and existing social networks

Personal performance

Many students were complaining about the navigation and complexity of the collaborative learning environment. They had to find their own way while working in E-Organizations. They did not understand why so many functions were available when they had no use for them during the learning process. They were right, we did not tune the platform for the E-Organizations curriculum. During this phase we did not adapt or customize the technology and provided an open learning environment.

Some students were complaining that they had to explore a new platform after being familiar with Blackboard. They were focused on their study and on applications they were using on a daily (also private) basis and not interested in contributing to this project.

Despite the above all the students were able to find their way around the platform in the short term using the technology to complete the master class. Working in the groups was effective, using private and public digital workplaces, forums, chat, mailbox, library, maps with documents with version management and more. But only 3 of them started to build a personnel ePortfolio (with all functionality of a group) and invited others to join that portfolio (or personnel workbench). Some students really explored all functionality to get a picture of a L3 environment.

The platform

It was clear that under the conditions the navigation was not sufficiently intuitive. Sometimes too many clicks were needed. There were too many options and ways to navigate. Many students mentioned the combination of integrated functionality as a huge benefit. One platform that can support all requirements for L3, portfolio, getting help, collaboration and communication and access to content would be great. They liked it that any one can register without help or authorization from an administrator. They suggested a search function in the individual profiles to search for 'interesting people'. The performance was very good. They came with suggestions for enhancements like virtual meeting & video conferencing, access to (free) content, getting help from coaches on request, and more.

Team performance

Within the groups the functionality really supports effective collaboration. An important remark was that without available content, without a list of subject matter experts / coaches and without a specific task / project, it does not stimulate to start using the platform and to grow it with friends, colleagues and other contacts. For that reason many functions were not explored. No documents / knowledge were created besides the deliverables for the master class.

Information quality

The teams made their deliverables collaborating in groups. Functions like version management and comments were helpful. It was easy to monitor what was done looking into the folders of the library they had built.

It was not possible to measure results and the quality of other products or knowledge documents because none of the groups produced one.

3.3 Conclusion and next steps

It is clear to us that we have to deliver a new release based on all recommendations. To improve the navigation, making more functions optional. A better overview on the personnel home page and some enhancements.

We are enhancing the platform with new functionality like virtual meeting and – class room (video conferencing included), whiteboard, more search options and access to open content repositories (some content may cost a small amount of money depending on ownership) and add links.

A not too complex authoring system to import or build re-usable content and to design, share and maintain learning paths. Users can build their own shelf of relevant re-usable content.

We will start to build a list of experts and coaches, available for help (depending on questions and sharing knowledge for free or at a low price. We will add a ranking mechanism to be able to rank content and/or learning objects and/or experts and coaches. Only then will we be able to continue research in how and when people are building, sharing, enriching content and knowledge.

We all can notice that an L3 community does not start spontaneously. Even alumni from a university are not united into learning communities. It may start with small groups, working together in a project or a course. There must be a common interest or a specific task for a team. Only working and sharing together will build trust and confidence.

From that beginning it may grow with involvement from others. It will only grow if the right functionality is available, starting simple and growing more complex over time depending on relevance for the participants. Content must become available and the community must build on all contributions from the members (key words are: quality, accessibility, relevance).

To support the growth of users, it must be possible to register yourself in the hosted environment and getting the right to start your group or ePortfolio without any involvement from an administrator (no overhead). Users can look into the profiles in the users list and may invite others to their group.

The costs per registered user would not exceed one USD or Euro per month. Additional costs that may need to be incurred would be for specific content, help from experts, being coached, and bandwidth costs in video conferencing.

So far, we have called this phase 1. With what we have learned and with a new release of the platform, we started phase 2 (see under Ch. 4)

Invitation

We have invited (project) teams and departments from organizations and institutions to work with us during the GL3C project using the technology and to provide feedback and comments in polls and interviews. You can also join the project. If interested please contact one of the authors.

4 GL3C project phase 2

After evaluation with RSM Erasmus University we have redefined the objectives for phase 2 research and experiments. Find the scope and the invitation to join, below.

Online collaborative tools and attitude of teams in virtual workplace

Introduction

Within the knowledge intensive economy, competitive advantage is dependent on successful transfer of Information between employees and knowledge dissemination within the organization. The use of online collaborative tools can facilitate communication and produce various performance benefits including:

- Drive business strategy by sharing knowledge regarding best practices
- Generate new lines of business or new offerings and products by combining novel knowledge and existing knowledge within different business units
- Effective and efficient problem solving by sharing knowledge concerning past experiences
- Improve personal professional skills by following online courses
- Driving and monitoring a change or implementation process

In addition to the above mentioned personal and organizational performance benefits, the use of online collaborative tools can support solving societal challenges such as traffic jams by decreasing physical travel. To realize these benefits, in-depth analysis is required to determine specific characteristics of the organization, culture, existing IT architecture and an analysis of the work of individual employees and their personal aspirations.

Main research questions

- 1- Which attributes improve acceptance and usage of collaborative tools within virtual teams?
- 2- How does the use of online collaborative tools influence interpersonal trust, quality of shared information and knowledge dissemination among employees?

Sub questions in this research are the following:

Personal performance

- How do online collaborative tools influence the development of interpersonal relationships between knowledge employees?
- Which characteristics of online collaborative tools enhance knowledge sharing?
- How can online collaborative tools improve the productivity of knowledge employees?
- What are the main psychological and/or pedagogical issues that should be addressed to build successful effective online teams?

Information quality

- How do online collaborative tools improve the quality of information sharing?
- Do collaborative tools have distinctive influences on different dimensions of information quality?
- Which role does IT infrastructure play in enabling effective knowledge transfer and empowering team members?

Team performance

- How can collaborative tools enhance the agility of teams (e.g. reacting to environmental changes, increasing the speed of existing processes)?
- How can collaborative tools realize cost efficiencies?
- How can collaborative tools create a climate of innovation?

Research RSM Erasmus University

Researchers at RSM Erasmus University are collaborating with Global Learning Institute to investigate the use of collaborative tools.

Every case study encompasses:

- Introduction into the organization
- Discussions with management, HRM and IT regarding their vision and expected benefits of collaborative tools in a digital workplace
- Conducting an initial survey to assess perceptions, attitudes and anticipations of using collaborative tools
- Implementation and use of collaborative tools in a digital workplace
- After 2 – 4 months of usage, conducting a survey to evaluate the use of collaborative tools and to evaluate success and potential improvements

Investments

- Meetings and discussions with key players to tune the platform according to the characteristics of the team. This can involve selecting or configuring specific collaborative tools and adding content.
- Cooperation with researchers and Master students from RSM Erasmus University. This can involve participation in surveys and interviews
- Out of pocket costs to be discussed depending on numbers, customization and the role of RSM

Value

Participation in this research offers the following benefits:

- Insights into acceptance and usage of collaborative tools within your organization
- Insights into the current level of information quality within your organization and the influences of online collaborative tools on information quality
- Insights into potential benefits of online collaborative tools within your specific business context

The research will produce concise reports and scientific publications. Non-disclosure agreements can be adopted to conceal company names and sensitive information.

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