Abstract:

Taking part in professional education is increasingly difficult for highly-skilled employees and executives because they cannot afford to be away from work for the time traditional face-to-face seminars demand. Individual, self-guided learning, on the other hand, lacks the benefits of direct interaction with people interested in the same subject. This calls for a combination of individual and collaborative learning in a virtual setting that preserves the flexibility of individual learning but augments it with virtual seminars that do not necessitate leaving work or travelling for extended periods. In this paper, we present a software environment for such virtual seminars built on widely available technology that provides tools to create a shared context of interaction among the participants and that enables a tutor to structure and facilitate virtual cooperation for learning. This environment was put into practice in a pilot course. Based on this evaluation we survey the fit of the software design for these situations of synchronous, dispersed group work. We particularly explore the role of a tutor or facilitator for successful virtual communication and
cooperation. Furthermore, we present first insights into whether virtual seminars could help to improve isolated individual learning through a certain amount of scheduled events and motivating interaction with others. Finally, we describe the information systems community as an ideal test bed for such innovative ways of learning that could help to give IS research a greater bearing on the practice of the field.

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