

# **Internet Based Learning Environments in Higher Education: Experiences from the HALÜBO-Project**

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## **Abstract:**

In our paper we present experiences from a joint Project, which was started in 1998 and since then has been realised every summer term by the Universities of Hamburg, Lüneburg and Bochum (HALÜBO)(GER), involving at times up to 80 students. In the respective seminars selected European policies and practices in general and higher Education were studied and discussed by means of traditional seminar working techniques as well as new working tools, e.g., the internet, chat rooms, etc. In our paper we reflect on the advantages and restrictions related to such a mixture of working techniques in view of developing social competence within the Internet.

The European process of integration is steadily moving forward, since 1993 and the coming into force of the Maastricht contract also with a greater effect on European general education systems. Even though this development is by no means yet a central topic for future teachers and others in higher education, it clearly affects their professional and personal future. Another world-wide rapidly developing movement takes place in the field of the new media, especially in the area of internet based teaching and learning: Virtual contact situations, claiming for intercultural as well as media competencies. Why are these important competencies? Intercultural competence in virtual contact situations can contribute to a globalized and regionalized society, permitting peaceful co-existence and leading to the dismantling of prejudices and stereotypes. Up to now the interaction between intercultural and media key competencies has been rarely considered; the subject of social competence, which can be regarded as decisive in global as well as regional contact situations in the Internet, is by no means a central topic of academic research and practice. In our presentation of the HALÜBO-project we will deal with the relationship between intercultural competence and the Internet, in order to enrich the very technically oriented discussion by an often neglected aspect: Based on the presumption of a mutual influence between the Internet and intercultural competencies, the influence of a social competence through the Internet will be discussed on the basis of three case studies, which, due to their paradigmatic character, are of definite importance for the development of a 'global social competence' in the Internet.

Just how far the Internet poses a chance for intercultural learning depends very much on how far the Net lends itself to learning processes. So the important question is, which new opportunities the Internet-based learning environments offer for the development of intercultural competence for learners of different cultural backgrounds. One possible target size lies in the connection of the effects of the new media with a differentiated understanding of society. At the same time, the technical development allows for the integration and creation of an interactive design of the various media. It is at this point where the process of community building becomes increasingly important, since social actors can join forces with one another or with many others because of a common interest. This process will be encouraged in the international context and by the Internet, creating trans-national societies, consisting of many sub-societies. The new media therefore has the potential of being identity-founding, because trans-national societies unite people of different cultures; for example, through trade, immigration and emigration or shared activities in the Internet. This doesn't mean though that the state or the related concept of the international community becomes obsolete nor that the artificial partialization of the society must increase (Kleger 1997). But because trans-national spaces are at the same time trans-cultural, they require a corresponding competence from the social actors going beyond the traditional intercultural understanding. It must concern itself with a trans-cultural competence which allows the social actors to deal with many cultures of the trans-national society, since with the multitude of contact possibilities, not all specific cultural competencies can be conveyed. Objectives for a global

social competence can therefore be culture-overlapping fundamental competencies, of which a trans-cultural social competence is one, consisting of sociability, communicative flexibility and sensitivity.

The three case studies of the HALÜBO-project represent typical characteristics of international learning environments within the Internet; and although the range of possibilities for their technical design will continuously change, they are of a paradigmatic character because they are based on the following three basic sensitization possibilities: The project is concerned with learning environments working by sensitization through explanation and training (Type 1), through consensus creation (Type 2) and through knowledge construction (Type 3). For Type 1, case study CCED (Cross-Cultural Explorations and Dialogue) was chosen, an online-communication training which since winter 1998 has been expanded by accompanying video conferencing. DEMETER (Distance Education Methods in Teacher Education and Research) was chosen for Type 2 and HALÜBO (Hamburg-Lüneburg-Bochum) for Type 3. On the whole, all three learning environments proved capable of initiating a learning process centered around the creation of a social competence going beyond one culture toward a sociable, open and considerate learner. Within the framework of the exploratory character of the study, it can be suggested that the Internet is well suited to the construction of trans-national societies since, through the development of social competence, the process of community building is supported, whereby people of different nations and cultures band together out of common interest. This bond can also be understood in terms of the perceptions of one's own subjectivity which is part of identity and culture developmental processes.

The best learning effect though, we are convinced, would be the result of a combination of the three types of seminars, since a comprehensive trans-cultural competence cannot be provided by just one type of Internet learning environment. This would be conceivable in serial modularity, a type of seminar not easy to realise in the European university system because of its organisational constraints. The teletutoring structure should therefore have a more pronounced influence on the virtual and partially virtual universities of the future (Geyken et al. 1998). At the same time, only a few universities are likely to prevail as truly virtual institutions (single model). Instead, they are more likely to become Add-on or More-Quality models (dual mode), which perform parts of their services virtually.

## References

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