A course on the net - Students’ experiences from the activity in a collaborative learning process in the Fle2 environment and how the experiences affected their participation

The study examines one case of students' experiences from the activity in a collaborative learning process in a networked learning environment, and explores whether or not the experiences explain the participation or lack of participation in the activities. As a research task the students' experiences in the database of the networked learning environment, participating in its construction, and the ways of working needed to build the database, were examined. To contrast the students' experiences, their actual participation in the building of the database was clarified. Based on actual participation, groups more active and more passive than average were separated, and their experiences were compared to each other.

The research material was collected from the course Cognitive and Creative Processes, which was offered to students of the Department of Textile Teacher Education in University of Helsinki, and students of the Departments of Teacher Education Units giving textile education in Turku, Rauma and Savonlinna in the beginning of 2001. In this course, creativity was examined from a psychological and sosiocultural context with the aim of realizing a collaborative progressive inquiry process. The course was held in a network-based Future Learning Environment (Fle 2) except for the starting lecture and training the use of the learning environment. This study analyzed the learning diaries that the students had sent to the tutor once a week for four weeks, and the final thoughts written into the database of the learning environment. Content analysis was applied as the research method. The case was enriched from another point of view by examining the messages the students had written into the learning environment with the social network analysis.

The theoretical base of the study looks at the research of computer-supported collaborative learning, the conceptions of learning as a process of participation and knowledge building, and the possibilities and limitations of network-based learning environments.

The research results show, that both using the network-based learning environment and collaborative ways of studying were new to the students. The students were positively surprised by the feedback and support provided by the community. On the other hand, they also experienced problems with facelessness and managing the information in the learning environment. The active students seemed to be more ready for a progressive inquiry process. It can be seen from their attitudes and actions that they have strived to participate actively and invested into the process both from their own and the community's point of view. The more passive students reported their actions to get credits and they had a harder time of perceiving the thoughts presented in the net as common progression.

When arranging similar courses in the future, attention should be paid to how to get the students to act in ways necessary for knowledge building, and different from more traditional ways of studying. The difficulties of students used to traditional studying methods to adapt to collaborative knowledge building were evident on the course Cognitive and Creative Processes.