

Motivation and media-competence as a central factor for successful virtual seminars

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Virtual seminars as a form of tele-learning are becoming a well established instructional form within universities and educational offers for adults. The critical gist of many virtual seminar projects are two problem sets, typical for tele-learning applications: low media-competence and low participation rates. Substantial solutions for these problems are not yet available.

During a bi-national virtual seminar, based at the University of Goettingen and at the Rensselaer Politechnic Institute, Troy, NY, these phenomena were of research interest. Communication media for the seminar were synchronous (chat) as well as asynchronous CMC tools, supplemented by newsboards of the instructors and other information available from a homepage. The seminar was split into two parts, a preparation phase (partly virtual) within each national group and a virtual cooperation phase. Data was gathered at three points on motivation, media-competence, identification with the seminar, study-techniques and cooperation/communication behavior.

A clear positive result of media competence training was an overall good achievement and a heightened participation both in off-topic, casual and on-topic communication. Secondly, the drop-out rate of three students out of 22 is low. Continuous identification measures in relation to media competence lead to a median split into high and low media competence participants. These revealed two distinct identification and personal attraction patterns. Highly media competent students are low identifiers during the first phase and recupe during the more demanding virtual phase. They are easily bored of their „stupid“ colleagues. Low media competence leads to an inverse pattern. Their identification rises during the training phase and drops during the virtual phase. Concerning personal attraction they feel more attracted to the „technical wizards“.

Media competence training interventions are necessary for a successful seminar, but they need to be differential in their target population, otherwise phenomena known from school contexts, e.g. the underachieving overachiever, are likely to appear.

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