

How to use the virtual team working platform efficiently?

Jean Lecocq and Philippe Mercenier

HE Léonard de Vinci – ECAM

e-mail: mrc@ecam.be

New perspectives on sustainability n° 1, 2009, p. 53-56

Introduction

Claroline is a collaborative eLearning and eWorking platform released under Open Source licence (GPL). It gives to trainers the possibility to organize on line training spaces for trainees who can interact between them and with the trainers while reaching the training spaces. Doing that, Claroline offers to trainers and trainees various tools which can be activated considering specific users' needs.

But, if one considers the generic character of the available tools, Claroline is also a platform which can be appropriate for various uses in various contexts. So, in this presentation, the Claroline's potential of use is shown within the particular framework of the Euroweek project which aims at organizing a remote collaboration between students coming from various European universities. They have to work out a project together and to present and to defend it during a one-week meeting organized within one of the participating universities. In the present case, the platform use deals more with project management than with training, although this dimension is clearly present when students are concerned.

In order to clarify the matter, the text proposes, initially, a short description of the platform and its characteristics, before examining the various aspects of the use which can be made of the platform in this

particular context. The conclusion presents various problems noted during the use of the platform and proposes solutions considering future use.

Presentation of the claroline platform

History

Initially started by the UCL (Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium) in 2001, within the IPM (Institute of Pedagogy and Multimedia), the Claroline project is supported by a large international community of users and developers. Translated in 35 languages, Claroline allows more than 1000 institutions identified in the World (in more than 80 countries) to create and administer courses and collaboration spaces through the web.

Since 2003, the project has benefited from the developments carried out by the ECAM - Industrial Higher Institute, associate member Léonard de Vinci Higher School and from the support of the Walloon Region.

The fast growth of the community of users and developers reveals the need for organizing the community to ensure the quality of the developments and the continuity of the project. In order to meet this objective, it was decided to create the Claroline Consortium during the second annual Conference of Claroline users held in Vigo (Spain) in May 2007. Constituted in the form

of an international not-for-profit association, it currently gathers the following partners: Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium), Léonard de Vinci Higher School (Belgium), University of Quebec in Rimouski (Canada), Universidad Católica del Norte (Chile) and Universidade de Vigo (Spain). Other partners, in particular from France, should join the Consortium soon.

Claroline is thus a project recognized and appreciated internationally. Among other awards, one can mention the UNESCO 2007 Prize for the use of ICT in education.

Educational base

Claroline is based on strong educational principles coming from the literature on the added value of technologies for training purposes. The student is placed at the centre of his learning project. The main force of Claroline, and the origin of its success, lies in the guidelines which prevail for its development: simplicity, flexibility and stability. Simplicity: starting with Claroline does not require a long training, as well for the trainer as for the trainee. Flexibility: the trainer is by no means constrained in his training choices; he has tools which he can organize and use according to his needs. Stability: the new versions of the platform, developed according to strong quality requirements, are diffused only when they were sufficiently tested to reduce the risks of bugs. By those characteristics, one shows that Claroline is a powerful catalyst of the teaching renewal in the institutions, in particular within the framework of the Bologna process.

Structure

The platform is designed on the basis of a three-level structure.

The first level consists of the homepage of the platform. In addition to the function of user authentication, it allows to present general information, the list of the course categories and a research tool.

By introducing his login and password, the user reaches the second level, his own homepage. He finds there various general tools (possibility to register within courses or, eventually, to create new courses, possibility of modifying its personal

data,...), personalized information, as well as the list of the courses he is registered in.

While clicking on a course title, the user reaches the homepage of the course. This homepage presents to the user customized information and the list of the available tools, according to the users and the training needs.

Available tools

A specific list of tools (dedicated to information, communication, organization, collaboration and evaluation) is thus associated to each course. They are selected by the trainer according to the specific training needs. The Claroline platform proposes the following basic tools :

A “Description of course” tool which allows trainers to transmit specific information about the object and the organization of the course, organizing them in headings: required competences, objective, support, evaluation methods,...

A “Users” tool which presents the list of the users registered in the course space. It allows in particular the trainer to register or unregister participants in the course and provides information on the various users, in particular their electronic address.

An “Agenda” tool which allows the trainer to register dated events related to the course. The “Agenda” tool is associated with a global diary of the user gathering the events of all the courses he is registered in.

An “Announcement” tool which allows the trainer to publish the information concerning the trainees. It also allows the trainer to send an announcement by e-mail to one learner or to a group of learners.

A “Documents and links” tool which allows to manage any documents of whatever format and to create hyperlinks. The “Documents and links” tool can be organized in directories and sub-directories.

An “Exercises” tool which allows to create online exercises with a list of questions. Various types of questions can be elaborated: multiple choice, true or false, filling blanks, matching. The tool allows to save the results obtained by the learners and to follow their progression in the exercises via the course statistics.

A “Learning Path” tool which allows the trainer to build a complete sequence of learning activities. It allows to put modules together that consist of documents, exercises or standardized imported contents (SCORM). The evolution in the learning sequence can be conditioned with the success of certain activities.

An “Assignments” tool which consists of a space in which the learner can submit a work in response to a request of the trainer. This work may be an individual work or a group work. Files can also be attached. The tool allows successive corrections by the trainer and by the trainees.

A “Wiki” tool which allows users to collaborate on the same document and to follow the history of the modifications.

A “Groups” tool which allows the trainer to create several groups of learners registered in course space. The members of the group can access their own tools: chat, documents and links, forum and wiki.

A “Forum” tool, a public discussion area, which can be divided in topics and sub-topics. Its use allows trainers to organize the exchanges of ideas, opinions or information, and to maintain an easily retrievable trace of the asynchronous conversation.

A “Chat” tool which allows users to exchange synchronously, for example, to harmonize the work of the group. The tool also allows users to save the carried out conversations.

Beyond these basic tools, it should be noted that the modular character of the platform makes it possible to use various other tools developed by the community. Let us note for example a “Survey” tool, a “Glossary” tool, a “Podcast” tool, a “Videoconference” tool, ... and the list of available tools is regularly growing.

Furthermore, the trainer can use dedicated tools:

A management tool, entitled “Edit Tool List” allowing him to activate the tools needed by the course and to define the rights that the various categories of users will have on these tools.

A “Space Settings” tool allowing him to define specific parameters for the course, in particular the access criteria.

A “Statistics” tool allowing him to follow the activity carried out within the framework of the course, globally or by each user, and in each tool.

Claroline and the euroweek

Context of use

The Euroweek purpose is to invite students coming from Universities established in different countries to constitute teams and “tele”-collaborate on selected subjects. Their objective is to present the result of their work during an international conference held in one of the participating Universities. To accompany them in their work, the students are followed by teachers coming from the Universities represented in the team.

This particular context of platform use makes that adaptations of the platform, initially designed to be used as a training platform, must be carried out. So, for example, the vocabulary used has to be partly modified. These adaptations are easily feasible due to the possibilities of parameter setting of Claroline.

But let us see how the project leader can adapt the platform, and singularly its project space, to efficiently use the platform and the tools.

Preliminary advice

Ease of use is one of the main characteristics of the platform for everyone that doesn't dare PC. Anyway, some basic behaviour rules can facilitate the use of the platform.

Rule 1: I fully read the page on which I am working and I have a look at all the options of action which are proposed on this page by letting the mouse slip on those.

Rule 2: I do not hesitate to click on the proposed options even if it means to go back if the option does not match what I was expecting.

Rule 3: If I do not see how I can go on, I have a look at the online help or documentation (<http://www.claroline.net>).

Rule 4: Generally, navigation in the pages is easy, either via the textual proposed options or icons, or via the possibilities of the navigator. And I do not forget that all roads lead to Rome!

Starting with the project

Starting the Euroweek project means that the platform manager has first to set up all project spaces in a standardized way, so that each project leader reaches his own project space when connecting for the first time. The students and teachers collaborating in the project are also registered by the platform manager. So that, as soon as he is connected to the project space, the project leader can begin with the customization of the project space according to the specific needs of the project; so he can select the tools which will be used by the users and, if required, he can modify the rights of the users on some of these tools.

Then, the project leader will place a welcoming word on the homepage of the project. Then, it can be imagined that he will use the tool “Description of project” to present its vision of the project and to propose some rules of implementation of collaboration. He will undoubtedly propose a planning of project realization by using the tool “Agenda”.

Always during the launching phase of the project, the project leader will wish to provide a dedicated documentation base to the students. To do that, he will use the tool “Documents and links”, previously organized according to the subject of the project.

According to the project needs, and in particular according to the desired organization mode, the project leader will probably set up discussion subjects within the “Forum” tool and open one or more working spaces using the “Groups” tool.

Ongoing with the project

According to the evolution of the project, the project leader will generally decide to reorganize the “Documents and links” space, to open new groups spaces and/or to create new forums of discussion.

But he will also undoubtedly need to communicate with the users using the “Announcements” tool.

To increase the interaction between the users further, he will also need to organize a synchronous meeting by means of the “Chat” tool.

Finally, he could be able to carry out an investigation related to the project by using the “Exercises” tool, or to propose a workflow presenting and commenting the project phases by means of the “Learning Path” tool.

To finish this fast presentation of the use of the Claroline tools in the particular context of Euroweek, let us say that the students will ideally use the tools placed at their disposal in their space of group to develop the project: documents and links, forum, chat and wiki.

Conclusion and perspectives

Considering what was said earlier, it seems that we can conclude that using the Claroline platform within the framework of the development of a Euroweek project is highly interesting. If correctly used, the various tools proposed can undoubtedly help the project leader and all the users to complete the project.

However, today’s use of the platform seems to be relatively poor. One can consequently try to determine the reasons in order to propose solutions for a better future use.

The first problem which can be identified is the duality of platforms used during the Euroweek project. From one hand, the participants have to use a platform dedicated to project proposal and registration. Then they have to move to the Claroline platform to realize the project. And to add some more confusion, the two platforms use different logins and passwords. In order to solve this problem, we propose to use the platform dedicated to project realization. We indeed think that this platform can also be used for project proposal and registration of participants.

The second problem is that the use of the platform must initially be the fact of the projects leaders and that, from this point of view, preliminary training is required. That is the purpose of this paper and the associated presentation. We hope that they will contribute, as a first approach, to solving this problem.

The third problem relates to the competition between the platform and the various collaboration tools which the users are accustomed to: e-mails, skype and other Google.docs. From this point of view, the solution lies in introducing similar tools in the platform (and this possibility is presently taken into account in the roadmap of the Claroline project), but also in the paramount importance to gather ALL the elements of the project in only one place.