

POLARIS: The first impressions

by

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In the POLARIS-project at the University of Maastricht a new developed groupware application will be tested in two curricula (Medicine and Law) in the coming curriculum year 1997-1998. At this CSCL-conference in Toronto the application will be demonstrated and the first results of the experiments will be discussed.

The first step in the development of the POLARIS-application was a comprehensive analysis by a survey among students and teachers of the learning activities in the two curricula. The results of this study, in combination with a review of experiences with electronic learning environments elsewhere as well as a review of relevant learning theories, were the input for the formulation of the user requirements of POLARIS. The second step was the development of the functional design and the prototype. The project team tested several versions of the prototype with two user groups (teachers and students) and the findings in these tests were used for the development of the experimental version that will be demonstrated. The application is developed in Lotus Notes (4.5) and supports two elements that are essential for the practice of problem based learning in Maastricht:

1. Support of searching, processing and saving of information. In self directed learning students regularly perform these activities after the definition of their learning issues. The system contains all necessary tools (word processor, concept mapping tools, databases, Internet-browser, etc.) to support these activities.

2. Support of group collaboration. Students submit their contribution in a shared group environment where peers can read and comment their input. The results of this collaborative activities can be transmitted to a personal database for later use.

One of the features of POLARIS that was given special attention in the development is the support of reflection in collaborative learning. The software contains a range of merge functions by which users can create aggregative views of the results of peer interactions (discussion threads, reports by keyword or learning issue, questions + answers, etc.) which can be used for reflection.

In the poster presentation the software will be demonstrated and a summary of the results in the first experiment in the regular curriculum (october - november) will be discussed.