Let's play - educational online-rallies

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1. Online-rallies – definition, description and advantages

The term "rally" originally comes from the field of car-racing. However what is described here has nothing to do with cars but refers to the pedagogical understanding of the term "rally". Seek-rallies, city-rallies, fantasy-rallies etc. are examples of pedagogical rallies but are primarily realized in face-to-face situations. Considering an educational rally in general can be defined as a contest between a group of people competing against each other within a given time frame or a fixed route. The winner is determined by positive outcome of the tasks given at the different stages during the rally. The mentioned aspects apply also to online-rallies.

Now then, how can an *online*-rally be defined? An online-rally is a game-based e-learning approach or complex method which combines self-study, based on activities, and a little personal online-tutoring in a virtual environment. Online-rallies try to motivate and activiate the learner through the gaming-character, the competition and the scope of authentic tasks. The central objective is that the participants show different competencies and practical skills including problem-solving and computing skills. Online-rallies are based on action-oriented learning, formative assessment and mostly done in an asynchronous mode with a concrete start and endpoint. These method can be used in many different contextes, different educational institutions and for different target-groups. Online-rallies can be classified into individual and cooperative online-rallies. The cooperative rallies can be further divided into collaborative and group-based online-rallies. That implies the three types of online-rallies:

a) Individual: the participants play separately against each other
b) Cooperative: the whole group of participants works together and plays against the "system"
c) Group-based: Several groups play against each other

Online-rallies are not a complete new way of online-teaching, but are a new combination of different approaches and methods. The following graphic illustrates the different influencing factors which are only mentioned briefly in this article:

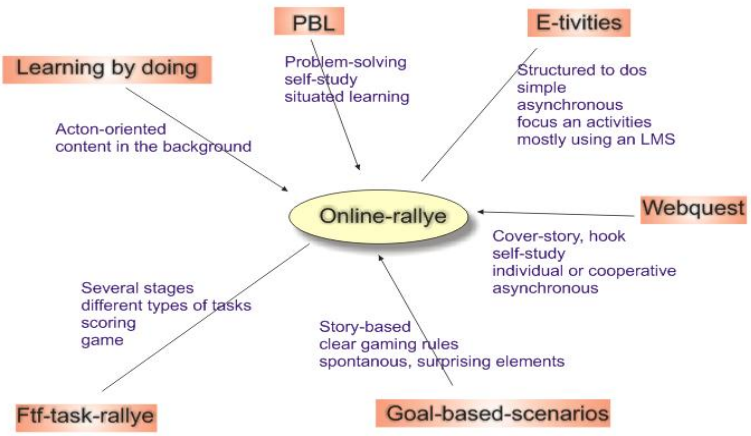

Figure1 : Theoretical base of online-rallies

A single online-rally can be used several times and with several groups. Therefore on the one hand an online-rally is a method to train a big number of participants and on the other hand it's possible to play the game with only a few persons. Online-rallies are very flexible and expandable. Small pieces of the rally, like single activities, the design-pictures or the rules can be exchanged very easily. Activities can be easily reused or replaced. Because of this, there is no problem to improve or to vary a rally or even to take the structure and build a new one. The whole online-rally can also be reused several times. Further more the effort of the online-tutoring is considerably reduced. Participants appreciate that they have to deal with different kind of tasks, they can decide how involved they become in the rally and the different activities. They see how they become better. Some get their motivation from their individual progress, other from the comparison with the other participants.

The virtual campus of Rhineland-Palatinate (VCRP) uses online-rallies since 2005. The up to date rally is part of the online-qualification program TBDL and aims to university teachers. The TBDL01 online-rally is an individual rally around the topic "e-learning tools". In the following we will refer to the TBDL01 online-rally as an example.

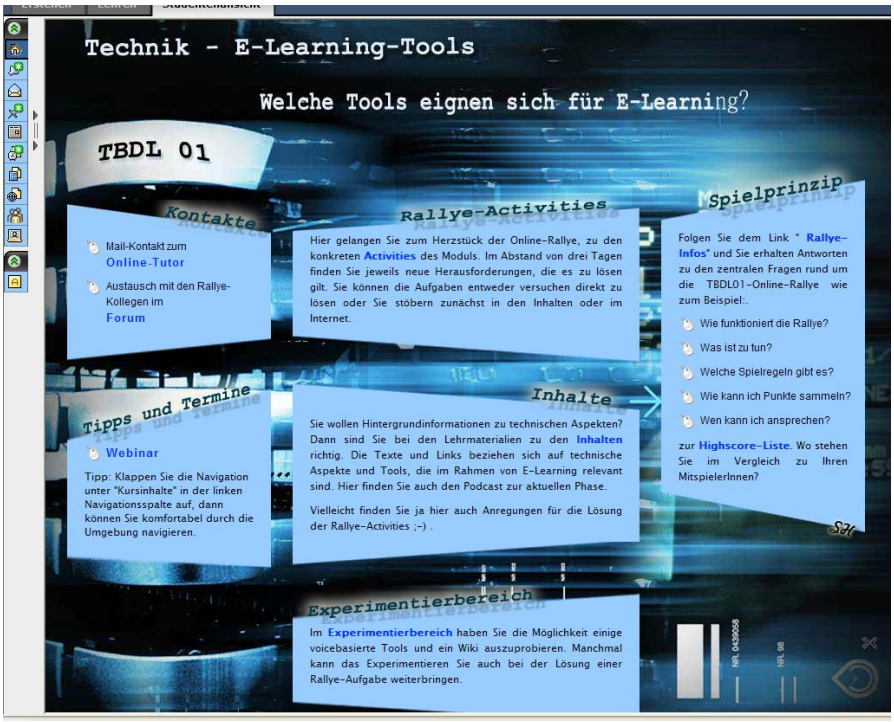

Figure 2: Start-up page of the TBDL01 online-rally

2. Five main aspects of online-rallies

When you intend to realize an online-rally you have to look at the following main elements

- the framework
- the gaming rules
- the activities
- the highscore-list

- the online-tutor

The framework
Start with a good gaming idea in mind. Maybe there is a real thematic story you can use, an actual problem or you have a nice avatar playing a special role in the game. Analyze the general conditions for your e-learning scenario, like number of players, number of online-tutors, general resources etc. Ask yourself the following questions:

a) What's the goal of the whole game?
b) How long should the rally take place?
c) How high is the expected workload?
d) In which way should the activities be passed through e.g. step by step, random, individual?
e) Should the rally be integrated or combined with other e-learning scenarios?
f) Should the rally be combined with face-to-face elements?

Example:
The TBDL01 rally is based on authentic questions and problems identified in e-learning consulting meetings. The framework is determined by the TBDL qualification program, that means the rally is in German language, lasts 5 weeks and is realized totally online. The rally is combined with a webinar in the third week.

The gaming rules
The rules define when a participant gets scores and climbs the highscore-list. The gaming rules reflect the gaming concept and have to be prepared before phrasing the activities and the start of the game. The main function of the gaming rules is to structure the game and to give an orientation to the participants. In the context of the rules you have to decide how many and what kind of level you need. The gaming rules should include advice or hints for the participants. Depending on the rules there are also different roles, tasks and effort for the online-tutor during the game.

Example:
In TBDL01 the most gaming rules refer to the activities, e.g. every third day there appears a new activity in the environment which have to be solved. There are clear deadlines for the activities. It is not necessary for the participants to work on all activities but the more activities they work on the more scores they can reach.

The activities
Every online-rally includes several activities for the participants, based on the goals of the topic and the aspired competences. The activities are the motor of the whole rally, they lead the participant action during the game. The activities should be authentic, prototypic, not too complex, clear phrased, easy to evaluate, clearly structured and should always include a concrete problem. In ideal case they are many different types of activities. The exact number of activities depend on the overall duration, the rules and the planned workload.

Example:
In TBDL01 there are 13 activities and two bonus-activities, divided into three levels of difficulty with different scores and allocated to five different topics. Every activity includes the description of the following aspects: initial situation, overview, goal, instructions, hint to further information and if included extra scores.

The highscore-list
The higscore-list is part of the formative assessment of the rally. On the one hand the scoring underline the gaming and competition character, on the other hand it brings transparency to the individual progress and compares the reached level with the whole group. It is important to define the maximum score which the participants can reach in total and for a single activity. Based on this you can define the connection between the scores and the different gaming-levels. It is important to have several levels, so that the participant can fast reach the next level. You also have to think about extra scores, e.g. for fast handling, going deeper into the theme of the activity or special gaming element like finding artefacts within the learning environment.

Example:
There are five different competence levels in the TBDL rally. Every week it's possible to climb the highscore-list. The maximum score of the basic activities, the maximum score of all activities and the minimum score for the certificate were defined before the game.

The online-tutor
The online-tutor is the person, that develops the rally concept and puts it into practice. He/she has to choose the suitable online tools and has to prepare the online environment, including homepage, structured “folder”, activity area etc. One main challenge is to develop the activities.
During the rally the tutor coordinates the game from the background. He/she has to make sure that everything works properly and the participants are able to learn in the online environment. Depending on the type of the activities he has to evaluate the answer respectively the problem solution, give feedback and organize the scores.

Example:
In the TBDL rally the main work for the tutor occurs before the rally and mainly includes at the first time, preparing the concept and to design the environment. During the rally his/her main tasks to evaluate the activities that are not checked automatically and to put the highscore-list online.

Finally, here are ten steps for developing your own online-rally:

1. Start with a good idea in mind
2. Check the general conditions
3. Plan the rough structure of the game
4. Define the structure of the activities (categories, score and level system…)
5. Prepare the concrete activity
6. Plan the online learning environment (draft)
7. Transform the online environment (files, design, tools…)
8. Prepare the formative assessment (e.g. higscore-list)
9. Invite the participants
10. Start the rally and make it a special event

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