

Shared Learning Team

Second trial autumn semester 2020

Clients: FHICT, Diensten O&O and Dienst H&F
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1. Introduction

Background information: In order to respond successfully to our rapidly changing society organizations must become learning organizations, with strong and structural collaborations in the work field. A Shared Learning Team (from now on shortened to SLT) is a group of people within a hybrid learning environment, working on an intricate problem (complex social issues), and in which the learning and development of all team members plays a major role. At FHICT the concept of working in SLT's is well founded and researched in pilots. During the spring semester of 2020 the first project group started working with the SLT principle. After process reflection and introducing the SLT Instruction Manual, the second group started in September 2020.

Researched context: This SLT consisted of four students, two FHICT lecturers and one work field partner. A 'fly on the wall' joined the weekly team meetings in order to monitor the SLT principle, the group process and to coach the process facilitator along the way. From a distance this 'fly on the wall' was guided by a SLT expert of Fontys. Due to COVID-19 all meetings happened online via MS Teams. The students met once a week at Strijp TQ until the second lockdown in December.

Researched sample: During the fall semester in 2020 65 project groups have worked on authentic projects. Among these groups one team has worked as an SLT, in which lecturers and the work field partner participate and learn as tantamount team members.

Timings: The data collection took place throughout the fall semester from September 2020 to February 2021.

1. Introduction

Research goal: in order to understand the SLT principal and its practices for the large-scale Strijp TQ research, I (Jolijn Jansen, researcher Hybrid Learning Environments) joined the weekly team meetings to observe. This research focuses partly on which aspects of the physical learning environment in the InnovationLab influence the educational concept. Working in SLT's is mentioned as one of the main ambitions to be implemented in the educational concept of FHICT. From this perspective, my main research goal was to see how working in SLT's is put into practice in the InnovationLab and how participants experience it. In addition I fulfilled the SLT-role as 'fly on the wall'.

Research approach: In order to answer the research question: *How are SLT's put into practice in the InnovationLab and how do participants experience it?* I made **observational notes** during all weekly team meetings. I focused on group interaction, noted what I heard and saw. After each meeting I called with the process facilitator and sometimes with the project facilitator as well to reflect on the group process, share my observations and shared thoughts about next steps. Sometimes I requested the help of a SLT expert to guide the facilitators. These observations are shown in Chapters 4.1 and 4.2.

Thus, during the research I switched roles from **observant** to **participant**. In order to remain as objective as possible it is important to reflect on my own actions and experiences as they may have influenced the researched process. Therefore, I have documented my personal reflexivity* along the process and will share my experiences as an observant participant at the next page.

To conclude the SLT process the entire group reflected on their experiences. I facilitated this by programming a small **questionnaire** and guiding the end conversation with the group. These results are shown in Chapter 4.3.

2. Researcher reflexivity

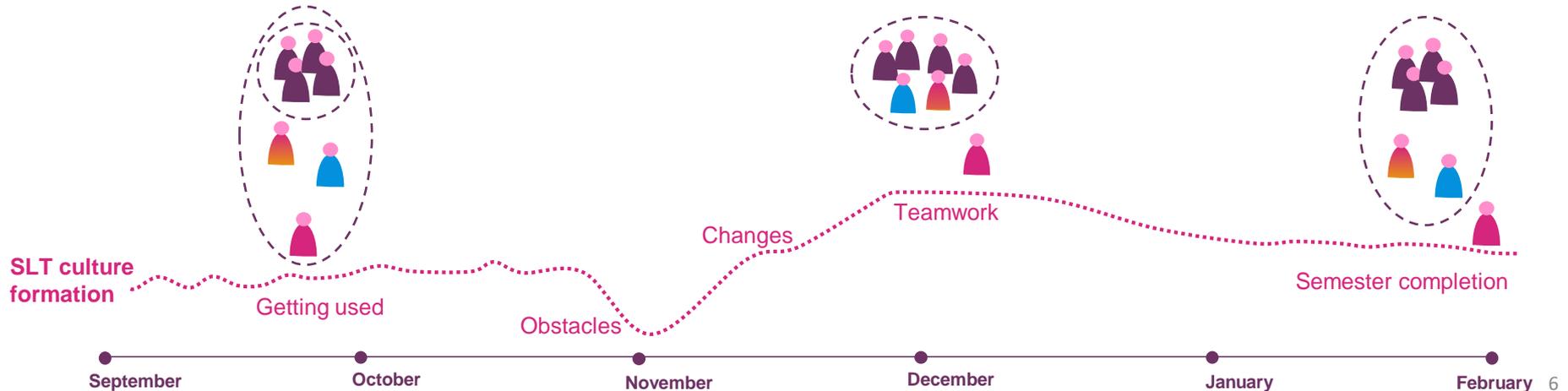


Fly on the wall: being a participant observant

- At first, I preferred to join this SLT in order to observe. Soon it became clear that a ‘fly on the wall’ was also supposed to coach the process facilitator and to guard the SLT principle. Normally this would be a SLT expert, which I wasn’t. Sometimes I felt that others thought I was, as most questions about the SLT principle were directed to me. If I could not answer them based on the instruction manual and conversations with the SLT experts, I shared my notes with an SLT expert or we had a phone call to discuss whether (and how) to interfere.
- In general, I observed the online meetings by turning off my camera and microphone. Sometimes I had an active role when it came to SLT assignments, such as filling in the Team matrix, guiding the Perspective Exchange Sheet and reflecting on the SLT process. In these moments I have influenced the researched context, as well as through the coaching conversations I had with students. Sometimes these conversations led to a different way of working, such as using an agenda, doing scrum-standups all together and assigning tasks to all team members, introducing group reflections, creating clarity between the roles of process- and project facilitator.
- Due to a shortage of time I could not observe interim collaborative practices besides the weekly group meetings on Monday. This gap I tried to fill during the conversations with students by asking about their other collaborative activities.

3. Management Summary

At the start of the project the team got introduced to the SLT principle and started with some teambuilding activities. As the students had close contact a group within the group could be identified. They seemed to find it difficult to assign tasks to the lecturers and work field partner. Meanwhile the meetings were practical and content-oriented, with little room for dialogue and reflection. After a coaching session with an SLT expert the project- and process facilitator introduced group retrospectives, scrum stand-ups and divided tasks among all team members. From then the interaction, dialogue and reflection increased. Simultaneously one lecturer drifted apart due to a lack of contact. At the end of the semester the team focused on merging files, discuss transferability and presenting at IIP Symposium, where the students were mostly in the lead. It seemed as if the educational forms took over the SLT principles that have been developed thus far.

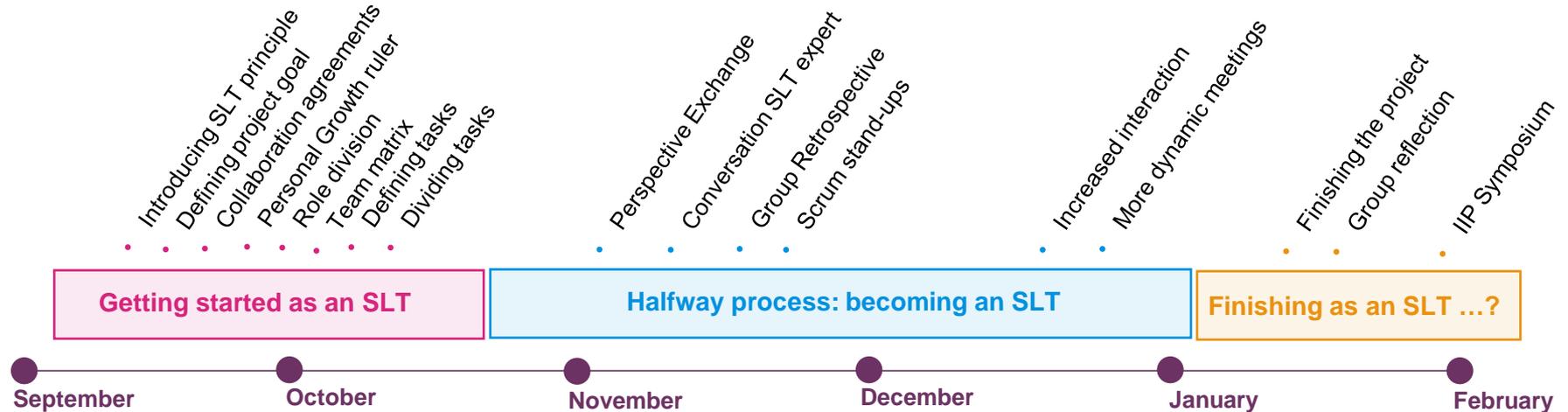




4. Results

4.1 Process flow

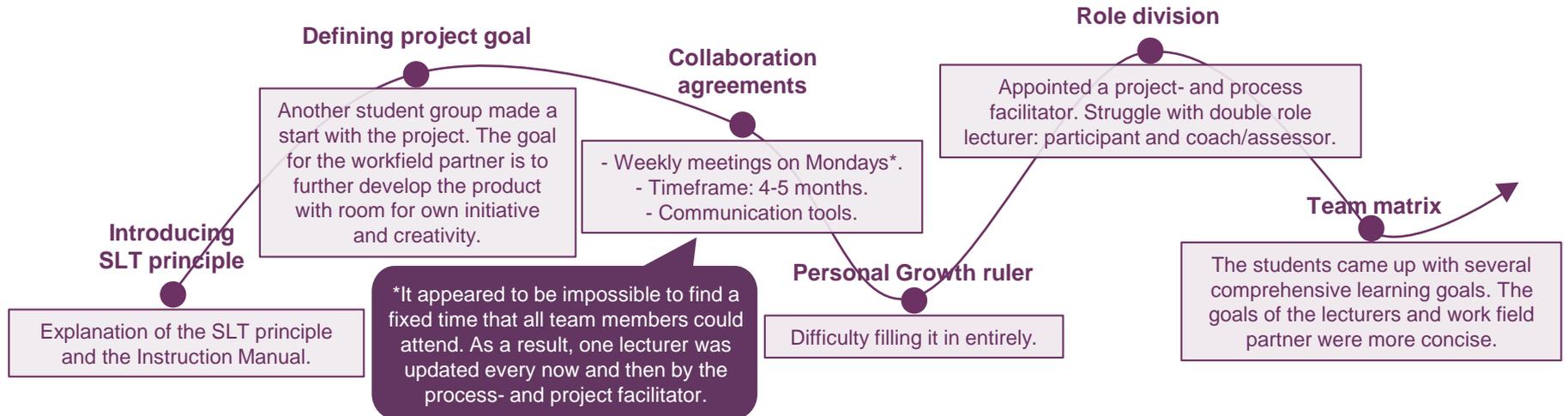
During the semester the SLT has gone through various processes. In the beginning time was spent to get to know each other, introduce the SLT principle, divide roles and start with the first assignments of the Instruction Manual. Subsequently the team dived into the project to further develop the existing product. Simultaneously they discussed their tasks on a weekly basis and reflected on the process on a monthly basis. In the end the project was finished as far as possible and suggestions were made for further development with all team members. Some time was reserved to reflect on 'being an SLT'.



4.1 Process flow

Getting started as an SLT

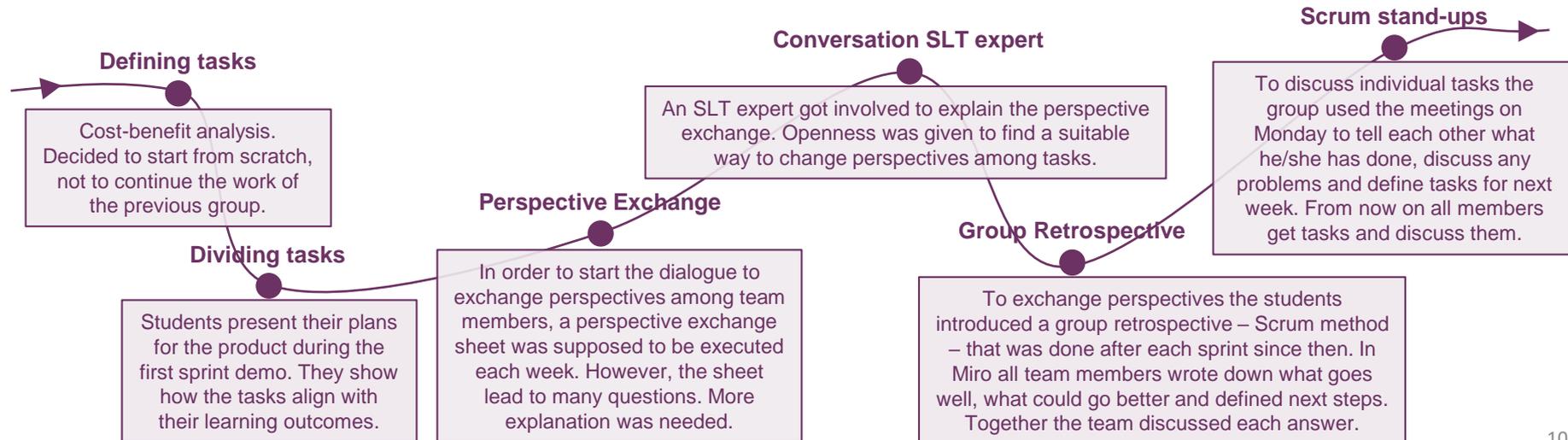
At the start about half of the team members knew that this would be an SLT. Explanation about the concept was needed and given by one of the lecturers. He introduced the Instruction Manual to the team and all members read it. After the first meeting to get to know each other, the purpose and making work appointments, the team started with the first SLT assignment: filling in the Personal Growth Ruler. Next, a process- and project facilitator were chosen and the Team matrix got filled in, where each team member mentioned individual talents/expertise, learning goals and tasks.



4.1 Process flow

Halfway process: becoming an SLT

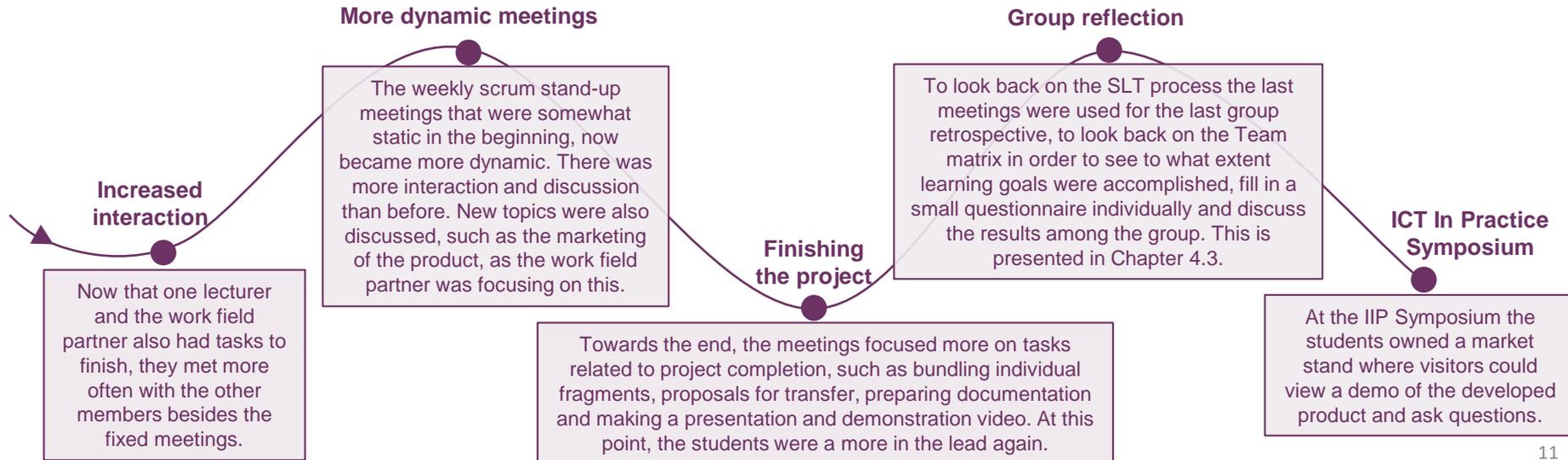
As soon as goals became clear the students started researching, analysing and designing. They had to make sure to reach their individual learning goals needed to pass the semester. Therefore, the process did not differ that much from a 'normal' project group. After a couple of conversations between the fly on the wall, the process- and project facilitator the SLT principles emerged and the team started implementing new ways of working with more room for dialogue and reflection.



4.1 Process flow

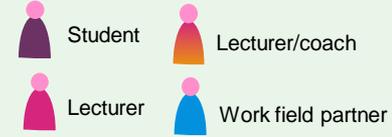
Finishing as an SLT ...?

In comparison to the start of the process a change was observed. During meetings students were presenting their work and plans and the lecturer and work field partner were mostly giving feedback. As soon as all team members adopted tasks everybody presented or gave feedback and tips. In general the weekly stand-ups became more interactive and dynamic. In the end of the process the students were a bit more in the lead again, focusing on ending the semester.

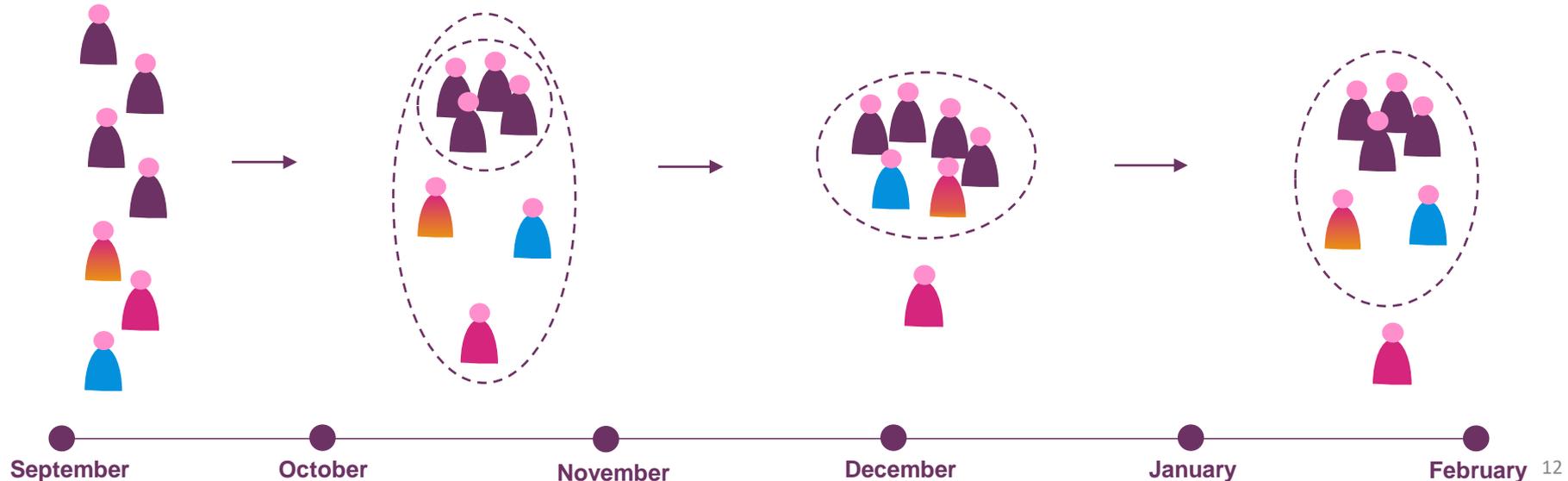


4.2 Group formation

LEGENDA



In the beginning all team members stepped into the team individually, also the students had not worked with one another before. As soon as everybody got to know each other, the students had close contact through daily meetings and the whole team came together once a week. Along the way one lecturer missed those meetings due to mismatched agendas and as he got no concrete tasks further on, he kind of disappeared. When the other members all got tasks the interaction between the team members increased and ideas got transferred more often. In the end focus was put on finishing the project and for students to pass the semester.



4.3 SLT process evaluation

SLT experiences

Positive experiences: All team members enjoyed working in an SLT. They describe it as a pleasant, informative and synergetic experience. They liked the fact that everybody learns, that it broke down barriers between students, lecturers and stakeholders, that everybody acted in a professional, but also informal and personal way and that the knowledge of lecturers was more accessible. Also for lecturers it is nice to get a stronger link with research trajectories and to have the possibility to work with technology.

Complex role issues: In fact, this way of working corresponds with the scrum way of working, where everybody learns and shows their progress. The biggest difference in an SLT is that lecturers and the stakeholder are part of the team and needed tasks as well. The fact that some team members had other roles outside of the SLT team, such as coach or stakeholder, made it muddy: *“In a Scrum team there are clear defined lines, you ask your lecturer for coaching and show your stakeholder what you are doing and ask for agreement, but now you ask for an opinion and incorporate the lecturer and stakeholder into the process. We had to switch roles continuously.”* One of the lecturers struggled with his double role as team member and assessor, which prevented him to fully participate in the beginning. Thereby, it seemed difficult for students to hold non-student SLT members accountable for missing a deadline or forgetting to do their tasks. Also, different workloads between team members made it complicated to divide tasks; some members could only spend a few hours a week and others 4 days a week.

Poor preparation: In general the chaotic start in the beginning has been noted as unpleasant. A lot was unclear about the SLT concept and the fact that this would be an SLT in the first place.



5. Conclusion and continuation

5. Conclusion and continuation

How are SLT's put into practice in the InnovationLab and how do participants experience it?

Since spring 2020 this is the second team that has worked as a Shared Learning Team. In order to work as an SLT, it was important to let go of old habits and roles. At first this seemed hard as the project group appeared to be more of a group of students within the team, focusing on getting started with their own tasks and learning goals and finishing the semester. Giving tasks to a lecturer or work field partner was a bit odd for the process- and project facilitator. Along with some guidance from the 'fly on the wall' and an SLT expert the ideas of the SLT principle were emphasized and new ways of working were tried, sometimes abandoned again or adopted in the process.

Some **challenges** came up along the way:

- It was not clear to some team members that this was an SLT and what that meant.
- Double role of a lecturer: team member and assessor.
- Mismatching agendas led to reduced contact with one team member.
- Students giving tasks to lecturers and the product owner was challenging, especially for students with other cultural backgrounds.
- Some assignments in the instruction manual were not clear enough.
- In the finishing stage of the semester the educational system seemed to overrule the SLT principles.

Also, **new insights** are gained:

- Interaction increases and role exchange happened after all team members started working on a task and shared/presented their results and ideas with the group.
- Combining Scrum with SLT practices is possible and fits the needs of the group.
- Good opportunity for lecturers to get more involved with research trajectories and to work with technology themselves.

Instruction Manual

Looking back on the followed steps that are mentioned in the SLT Instruction Manual, not all steps have been followed as promptly. Such as:

- Both the process- and project facilitator would have weekly access to a Fontys expert to discuss the group and execution of their role. This expert was engaged by a distance (as soon as the fly on the wall needed support).
- Perspective Exchange Sheet: team members did an individual attempt but did not understand the questions that were asked.
- Project debriefing: this has not happened, at least not during the observed meetings on Monday.
- Creativity Product Semantic Scale: intentions were there, but the latent stakeholder was very busy and by the end the new semester already started so the action was skipped.

Additional actions

Along the process new structural actions have been adopted, such as:

- Planning Poker, introduced by the workfield partner.
- Personal Strengths session, introduced by the workfield partner.
- Group retrospective in Miro.
- Reflection questionnaire in MS Forms.
- Reflection on the Team matrix in the end.

Continuation: planned process improvements

In the next semester the SLT experts strive to start with two new SLT's. Based upon continuous feedback some improvements have already been discussed and changes in the approach are defined.

Some important changes are:

- Announce in advance that this is an SLT and what that entails.
- The instruction manual will not be used for guidance anymore.
- A training will be developed to introduce the SLT principle. Also, best practice examples will be shown.
- An SLT expert will guide the first meetings in order to explain the SLT concept and guide the important starting activities such as the Personal Growth Ruler, Team matrix and choosing a project- and process facilitator.
- A fly on the wall will observe and coach during the entire process.
- There is room for students to integrate the Scrum method with the SLT principal, if they feel like it.

Extra room for improvement

Some of the mentioned improvements are not directly being solved by this new plan and offer food for thought:

- Provide SLT documentation with explanation, context and examples.
- Align the SLT concept with Agile Scrum.
- Make sure that members are available at least 1, preferably 2 days per week.
- Make sure that members are flexible in scheduling.
- Consider the possibility to let the work field partner include colleagues in order to support them in investing enough time.

Future research: during the next semester the new SLT('s) will be followed from a distance by gathering insights via the SLT experts.

6. Colophon

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