

Interview Matthias Kunkel, productmanager ILIAS



Matthias Kunkel

1. *ILIAS is developed for universities and other educational institutes. Can you tell something about the reason for this development from scratch?*

“The development of ILIAS goes back to 1997 when the term ‘Learning Management System’ did not even exist yet. At that time we ran a project to improve the situation of learning and teaching at a huge German university and we collected ideas what to do to improve this situation. So our teachers / professors at the Cologne university were involved from the very beginning in the design of ILIAS and what it should offer and support. Today, we still practice this “community-driven development”. The requests and ideas of our users have an important influence on the software development of ILIAS.”

2. *What are the most important advantages/benefits for educational institutes using ILIAS? I mean by this especially the general ‘story’ about this – if possible.*

“One important advantage for educational institutions is the possibility to participate in the further development of ILIAS within the frame of an open source software project. There are clearly defined channels to communicate requests and needs for new or improved features, for participating in crowd funding activities for new features or for organizing interests in the software development process, e.g. improvement of performance, better usability, implementation of new features like portfolios, learning communities or improving the ability to run e-exams with ILIAS.

Another big advantage is that ILIAS is a bundle of different features that are all offered in one user interface and are all part of one software system. The name ILIAS reflects on this concept – it is an abbreviation: Integriertes Lern-, Informations- und Arbeitskooperations-System – or in English: Integrated Learning, Information and Collaboration System. Also other LMS offer a set of features in one system – but we are very much focusing on this integration aspect. There is a portfolio system and a competence management system within ILIAS because this allows a better and tighter connection between features compared to a loose coupling by plug-ins or interfaces.

Or think of content creation: Already the very first version of ILIAS offered an integrated authoring tool to create online learning modules. Later, we were the first open source system with an integrated SCORM 2004 editor. Creation and use of content can be done in one system – and collaboratively, as all these tools are online tools.

A lot of universities in Germany see the test & assessment of ILIAS as a big advantage as it allows to create and to run online exams. Automatically processed test results save time to teachers. A set of different test types and a lot of configuration possibilities support different assessment scenarios. At some universities in Germany, more than 50.000 online exams have already been realized successfully.

At the time being, we are very much focusing on social learning and supporting learning communities. Universities using ILIAS do not need additional software but get this functionality within the ILIAS software package. One objective against our approach is that a portfolio feature in ILIAS could never be as good as dedicated portfolio software that is just made for this. But the feedback we get from our users is that they do not need all these options of such specialized software but mainly the basic features – and it is

important for them to connect such a feature with other learning activities and to avoid that learners have to jump from one software application to the next.”

a) *Are these specific for the German situation?*

“I guess this is not a specific German situation. At least, it is the same in Switzerland where several universities use ILIAS too. But the influence of German users to the software development of ILIAS is strong. Nevertheless, we are open for input from other countries as well.”

b) *In what does ILIAS distinguishes itself from other e-learning platforms? (By the way, do you rather talk about a ‘platform’ or about a ‘learning management system (LMS)’ regarding ILIAS?)*

“I am not good in describing what ILIAS makes better than other tools. Of course we are looking what our competitors are doing. But there are people who have a much better overview on what ILIAS does better than other tools or not.

I personally prefer ‘platform’ as I see ILIAS as software that offers tools and options for learning, collaboration and communication. It does not manage them (mainly). We can even ask if learning can be managed... But ‘Learning Management System’ is the popular term for software applications like ILIAS so we often use this label.”

3. *The ILIAS-brochure says (German): „Als Ergänzung zu Präsenzveranstaltungen werden in ILIAS Kurse angeboten, in denen Studierende neben Folien und Skripten auch Diskussionsforen, Tests und Arbeitsgruppen finden.“*

What is an ‘Arbeitsgruppe’ in this context? I mean, it seems to be pre-eminently for ‘real life’? The same for ‘Folien’?

“Folien means slides. We want to clarify that you can do more with ILIAS than just uploading the slides and papers you prepared for your lecture. ILIAS helps teachers and tutors to offer discussion forums for launching communication among students and with the tutor, to offer tests for self-evaluation and for online-exams, and “Arbeitsgruppen” – or working groups – where students can organize their own collaboration environment and use the tools of ILIAS for their learning processes too (a bit what is commonly known as Personal Learning Environment – PLE).

Most institutions use ILIAS for blended learning and not for pure online learning. That is why you have several tools in ILIAS that can be used to add e-learning activities in addition to real-world classroom teaching but these are not made for fully substitute face-to-face teaching. One general idea of ILIAS from the very beginning was to save time in classroom for good teaching and collaboration by moving several activities to the online phase. We never wanted to stop teaching and learning in lectures or classrooms. But we wanted better prepared students and more possibilities of collaboration, interaction and learning activities.”

4. *‘Join the free spirit’: is this a statement – or slogan, pay off - ILIAS wants to use in marketing and corporate communication?*

“‘Join the free spirit’ is a slogan we already use for years. It means that ILIAS is not just a piece of software but an idea. We invite all interested users to join our community of users and developers. If you visit an ILIAS conference you hopefully get this community feeling that feels even a bit like a big family. It is not just a marketing slogan but a statement.”

Matthias, thank you very much for this insight in the background of ILIAS!

*Aly Breemhaar,
25 november 2015*