



Using Web-Based Technologies in a Graduate Class to Develop an Entrepreneurship Knowledge Portal

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to share the experiences and lessons learned from an experimental graduate class using Web-based technologies that resulted in the development of a statewide entrepreneurship knowledge portal. Given the demands for Web-based systems and technologies to facilitate entrepreneurship, this class experience could be used as a model to help other states build or improve upon their entrepreneurial Web-based systems. The research was driven by the results of a comprehensive Kauffman Foundation study of Maine entrepreneurs' needs. This article also explores issues and challenges associated with teaching a complex course using complex Web-based technologies, distance delivery techniques, and working with entrepreneurs to meet their needs.

Keywords: distance education; educational experiences; entrepreneurship; graduate education; virtual team; Web portal; Web-based technologies

INTRODUCTION

A lack of resources represents one of the major hurdles faced by most entrepreneurs. This often is compounded by a lack of information and a sense of helplessness in terms of knowing where to find this vital knowledge or whom to ask for

help (Evans & Volery, 2001). As information technologies become increasingly crucial to business success and competitiveness, entrepreneurs also are discovering their value (Kourilsky & Walstad, 2002). The ability to use technologies effectively to capture valuable knowledge

during all phases of entrepreneurial business creation and growth can significantly help the success of a new business.

Using Web-Based Technologies in a Virtual Class

Online education often is defined as involving the Internet and Web-based technologies to deliver distance education. It can be delivered asynchronously, where the students and instructor do not communicate in real time, using Web-based technologies such as asynchronous discussion forums, repositories, and e-mail. It also can be synchronous, where the students and instructor communicate in real time using Web-based technologies such as chat rooms or teleconferencing over the Internet (Martinez, 2004).

Despite the technologies, motivating and engaging students in a Web-based virtual environment remains a major challenge. Brower (2003) suggests that one solution lies in creating virtual learning communities, where the instructor takes the role of learning facilitator and students become engaged in the virtual discussion forums without the pressure of personality differences. This allows students and instructors to express freely their opinions and ideas. Chou (2003) also suggests that interactivity with technologies enhances the learning experience. For example, on-demand whiteboards between online participants facilitates the exploration of concepts. A user-friendly interface to Web-based tools that engage students in collaboration, problem-solving activities, and exploration can support virtual communities and is one effective solution for dis-

tance learning (Hedberg, 2003). In the academic world, however, such interactive technologies are still in their infancy.

Entrepreneurship and Economic Change in Rural States

In Maine, nurturing and developing successful entrepreneurs is especially important. As a rural state, Maine historically has depended heavily on natural resource-based industries, which have been in decline for years. Much of the state's manufacturing base has moved outside the country, as textile, leather, apparel, and paper firms have closed or significantly downsized their labor forces. While Maine's unemployment rate appears to be low, the replacement jobs have not been as financially rewarding as the lost manufacturing jobs that generally paid higher wages and offered more benefits. As a consequence, Maine has been left with many areas of underemployment and poverty (Ho & Kontur, 2001; Lachance & Speros, 2001). A recent economic analysis found that "Maine's per capita income has chronically lagged the national average by 12% to 15%, placing Maine 36th among the 50 states" (Ho & Kontur, 2001, p. 4).

The value of entrepreneurship to Maine as well as to countries around the world is documented by a National Governor's Association study examining entrepreneurs as a source of economic growth. Since 1980, 34 million jobs have been created by entrepreneurs and small businesses. This research also documented the roles of entrepreneurs in creating new industries and replacing those

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