Chapter 17

A Process–Oriented and Technology–Based Model of Virtual Communities of Practices: Evidence from a Case Study in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper hypothesizes that Virtual Community of Practices (VCoPs) are valuable to Business Schools and Universities because they contribute to the emerging paradigms of just-in-time, action based and informal learning. It presents a real case study of a VCoPs called “Virtual eBMS”, that was built by applying the participative observation (Yin, 1994). In particular, the paper provides a process-oriented model of the “Virtual eBMS”, that is composed by four main elements: The People participating in the community, the Processes and the Purpose of the community in terms of value created for the Business School, and the Technology enabling the interactions between the community members. Indeed, from a technological point of view, the community is supported by an integrated Web Learning and Knowledge Management platform, described in terms of the main knowledge processes triggered and the correspondent technologies supporting the actions. Finally, the work presents some preliminary results and the value created through the use of the “Virtual eBMS”.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid, discontinuous and non-linear changes of today’s economy, their qualitative and quantitative leaps (flux), the technological revolution, the collapse of time and space, and the increase of complexity are affecting not only the business environment, but also the education. If the new tasks is to educate students for highly dispersed, flexible, unstable organizations, with great emphasis on value reinventing processes, the educational community must increasingly address issues of identifying, understanding and articulating information, experience and knowledge (Baets & Van der Linden, 2003). New styles of learning approaches characterized by efficiency, just in time delivery, solution orientation, knowledge applications and anywhere access based on learning process internet based are arising (Maureer & Sapper, 2001).

The paradigms shifts in management educations require that students are not simply passive recipients of expertise but rather co-creators of their Just in Time and action learning. Learning is more characterised by interpretation, experimentation, problem solving than description and analysis. It’s a journey through the world in which individuals live, and through networks of self-knowledge and self-development (Baets & Van der Linden, 2003). Hence the learning environment should be considered as a place where different stakeholders (program heads, faculty, executives, director, corporate action learning sponsors, advisory board) and students mutually engage in developing new understanding, approaches and unbounded sets of perspectives.

These conditions trigger a rethink of the traditional Business Schools and Universities models: new organizational forms based on Virtual Communities of Practices (VCoPs) are strongly recommended. There is no doubt that the concept of VCoPs is relevant in order to discuss learning approaches in Higher Education. Wenger’s approach gives us the possibility to analyse learning as a social practice that goes on at the micro-social level, largely through engagement in the tasks at hand (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Starting from the above considerations, this work is aimed at:

- Defining an integrated VCoPs model supporting all the knowledge management cycle in a business school;
- Integrating Knowledge Management organizational and technological aspects in a VCoPs model for a Business School;
- Defining an integrated Web Learning and Knowledge Management (KM) system aimed at enhance learning opportunities both in daily researcher’s practices and in student’s learning experience.

In order to address these points, at first we reviewed the CoPs literature to demonstrate that VCoPs are relevant organizational model for emerging learning approach in business schools, then we propose an integrative model of VCoPs named “Virtual eBMS”, as a result of an empirical study of a higher education community, the e-Business Management Section (eBMS) of Scuola Superiore ISUFI – University of Salento (Italy). Finally some results will be presented in terms of value created by the “Virtual eBMS” Community for Higher Education.

VCOPS AS ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL SUPPORTING BUSINESS SCHOOLS

Existing Literature on VCoPs

For the purpose of our work the operational definition for Community of practices (CoPs) is “Groups of individuals who participate in a collection of activities, share knowledge and expertise, and function as an interdependent network over an extended period of time with the shared goal of
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