

Via Nova Academy

J. P. T. Thijssen

Via Nova Academy, The Netherlands, University of Amsterdam Business School, The Netherlands, University of Maastricht, The Netherlands, & SPACE Network, Belgium

INTRODUCTION

Currently there is much debate about the gap between business schools and the business world (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003; Huff, 2000; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). One of the arguments is that business schools focus too much on "scientific" research and lack relevant business context and real-world experience. This problem of the detachment of the academic world from the business world forms the basis of the research efforts at the department of Information Management at the University of Amsterdam over the past 20 years.

The university as an institution is at a decisive moment in its history. It is confronted with numerous outside challenges: the demand as well as the supply of education is globalizing, the coming generation of students differs significantly from preceding ones, the need for life-long education is replacing the classical learning period between ages 18 and 23, and new technologies call for new learning models. If concepts like "learning organization" and "learning society" are valid, then the university should be a pioneer in this field.

However, despite the changes of the past 30 years, the (European) university system has not been altered fundamentally. Learning still precedes working. Professors teach students the outcomes of their research, or they teach what they have read before. Students attend lectures, read books and articles, and take exams. Most of the time, learning processes at the university still take place in the splendid isolation of the ivory tower.

One of the most disturbing aspects of universities is that learning continues to be viewed as *a passive process*. The teacher is perceived as the unquestioned dispenser of objective knowledge, and students as the uncritical receivers. Students can complete their study by sheer absorption and accumulation of knowledge. The actual learning process follows a predetermined route, that is, a fixed curriculum, even though univer-

sities tend to emphasize self-guidance on the part of students in carrying out learning tasks. The teacher's role is restricted to designing the curriculum, prescribing the learning path to be followed, and giving students feedback on the extent to which they have acquired the learning content. Moreover, most students work their way toward graduation in solitude.

The main improvements of learning-by-sharing on existing learning models are the systematic introduction of the external world into the learning process and the reciprocal nature of the interactions involved: business individuals with students, students with teachers/researchers, and teachers/researchers with business individuals. All learn from the shared learning experiences.

The learning-by-sharing model, as outlined below, is under full implementation at the University of Amsterdam. To facilitate contact between participants, meetings and informal gatherings are held to bring students, teachers, and business individuals together. These gatherings result in many new ideas, out of which several useful projects have already been developed. The use of the learning-by-sharing model increases the speed and depth of learning considerably, and the interaction satisfies the educational needs of all parties involved.

Our proposition is that the dynamics in the business environment force businesses and business schools to revitalize together (Goshal & Bartlett, 2000; Nadler, Shaw, & Walton, 1995; Volberda, 2004) through learning-by-sharing (Huizing, 2002; Maes, 2003; Thijssen, 2007; Thijssen, Maes, & Vernooij, 2002). As is argued earlier, alternative learning models are required to overcome the gap between business schools and business and face the challenges of a networked society together. The research question addressed in this chapter is: how can the gap between academic rigor and practical relevance be overcome in a networked society through learning-by-sharing?

PURPOSE OF VIA NOVA ACADEMY

This chapter describes the value creating activities of Via Nova Academy as a collaborative-networked organization based on theory of learning-by-sharing and theory of entrepreneurship (Shane, 2003) as well as social entrepreneurship (Dees, 2001) as developed at the University of Amsterdam. Via Nova Academy founded by the author in 2004 is a network of academics, students, and practitioners helping individuals, teams, organizations, and networks to innovate and grow through learning-by-sharing and co-create social value. Social value is defined (Thijssen, 2007) as “the combination of human capital, social capital, cultural capital, economic capital and ecological capital as input and outcome of collaborative value creating activities. Learning-by-sharing aims at leveraging social value to transform from an ‘undesired state’ to a ‘desired state’”.

Via Nova Academy joined the University of Amsterdam to co-develop the learning-by-sharing model in 1998. The technologies used range from face to face contact, on-line contact, design workshops, educational programs, research programs, innovation labs and publishing. For many of the projects a dedicated Internet environment supports the collaborative processes of value creation. In the academic world Via Nova Academy is connected to the international EDiNEB network on the topic of educational innovation in economics and business with academic conferences, a membership Web site www.EDiNEB.net and a book series published by Springer. Another international connection is SPACE, a collaborative networked organization of 75 schools of higher education with 2 conferences annually with a first research conference in Cyprus in March 2007. The Space Web site and intranet supports communication and project work (<http://users.skynet.be/space/>).

In the world of government and business Via Nova Academy is connected to many practitioners who share the common purposes of collaborative social value creation through learning-by-sharing. Examples of which are the European Union, national, regional, and local governments in various European countries, and innovative businesses as KPMG Business Innovation, eCultura in Spain and Portugal, Kairos Future in Sweden, Experientia in Italy, ID&T, Q-dance and Lost Boys in the Netherlands etc..

Criteria for collaborative networked organizations as Via Nova Academy are considered as follows:

sharing a common purpose, bringing together people with different talents both online and off-line, identifying opportunities, and capturing these opportunities through collaboration and co-creation of social value. Via Nova Academy focuses on bringing together students, researchers, teachers, and practitioners to close the gap between theory development (academic rigor) and practice development (practical relevance) through learning-by-sharing to co-create social value.

THE LEARNING-BY-SHARING MODEL

We will now briefly introduce the learning-by-sharing model and explain how literature studies, case studies, interpretative studies, and longitudinal action research in a hybrid research approach have generated design categories and principles for learning-by-sharing.

Figure 1 shows the learning-by-sharing model (Maes, 2003, pp. 249-257; Thijssen, Maes, & Vernooij, 2002, pp. 189-198), where knowledge institutions as universities and schools of higher education and business are joining forces in networked teams of students, teachers, researchers, and practitioners, closing the gap between theory and practice. In the past 20 years the Department of Information Management of the University of Amsterdam has experimented with alternative learning models, most of them incorporated in a successful postgraduate course in Information Management. It started 20 years ago with the start of an Executive Master in the Information Management Course and a number of experiments with connecting the university to the business world. From 1998 these experiments were formalized in a number of case studies of various learning-by-sharing projects and literature research (Heron, 1996, pp.52-58; Heron & Reason, 2001, pp.179-198; Reason, 1994, pp. 40-56). Through an interpretative study (Thijssen, 2007) a cross-case analysis was carried out, hints and cues identified, and patterns analyzed. Through longitudinal action research the learning-by-sharing model was tested and evaluated in the period from 2002-2007 in a complex social setting of combating poverty and social exclusion in the Netherlands (Thijssen, 2007) and in business innovation projects. The accumulated knowledge and experience over time contributed to a set of learning-by-sharing design categories and learning-by-sharing design principles for the co-creation of social value in a networked organization. The lessons learned from

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