

Chapter XVII

E-Learning and Knowledge Management in the Global Context

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses how the independent nature of entrepreneurs, combined with the enabling features of digital information technology (IT), may lead to a situation where paper-based and campus-specific classroom education is at best uncomfortable and at worst almost meaningless. It describes how IT literacy preconditions the current generation of learners toward acceptance of e-learning technologies as they are currently emerging. The management of industry knowledge rests on an IT platform, which responds to individual needs in specialized roles in disparate parts of the world. The purpose of the chapter is to define and capture the latest thinking in applied education and relate this to the mindset of the emerging generation of entrepreneurs. To this end, industry and business education cases are drawn upon to illustrate key points, and a framework is provided for better understanding knowledge management in the emerging global context of e-learning technologies.

INTRODUCTION TO LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT: THE LINK EXPLORED

This section looks at the inter-relationships between “learning” and “knowledge management” aspects and how their understanding and attributes have changed over the past few decades.

What is Learning?

How do we define and explain learning? There are a number of interpretations and definitions, all of which focus on awareness of new information or different way of doing things. All living creatures, regardless of their species, go through a learning curve as part of continuous environmental adaptation. Humans learn in a combination of ways, dependent on their learning preferences, backgrounds, experiences, and learning styles. Observation, reading, listening, training (in and out of classrooms, or jobs), and individual experiences, are some of the mediums of learning new information. A typical learning sequence for someone in an established economy involves going to a school to get an understanding of the basic concepts followed by an undergraduate degree in choice of field such as marketing, management, information technology, medicine, or law. In the past few decades, subsequent to globalization forces, having an undergraduate degree is not sufficient to remain competitive in the marketplace and accordingly entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs (or corporate managers) alike are furthering their knowledge by undertaking advanced university degrees and other types of training and vocational updating. Globalization and the rapid uptake of technology (including Internet), together, are transforming education as it has been known, with subsequent evolutions in the way learning occurs and the way in which knowledge is managed. E-learning and new forms

of knowledge management are hallmarks of the global technology era.

Definitions of learning that properly capture the nuances of the practice, and the art, of being a student or a teacher vary between commentators. There exist a number of standard descriptions of learning, but a valid question often pertains to the exact nature of learning. For example, is learning a process or a set of characteristics that become manifest in a person? Ramsden (2003, p. 6) asserts that learning is about altering the way one perceives phenomena related to a subject. This definition accedes to the fact that learning is, at least, not a noun. Stepping outside the formality of western languages, we find instances where the subject, rather than acting out the verb is recipient of the action, as in “learning is happening with Mary, or learning is going on with Mark.”

Biggs (2003, p. 13) proposes that learning is about “conceptual change.” This definition approaches the fact that context of a situation determines learning, almost as much as the individual learner’s perception of the context. Laserna (1990), from her work in Columbia, indicates how ease of learning is associated with the environment in which learning occurs. Likewise, Nandwa (1990) reveals how learning in Kenya is embedded traditionally in the social community and occurs within the medium of the oral literature, which belongs to the community. Change to the Internet environment, therefore, requires management of the processes as well as the structure and context against which learning occurs. From the perspective of individuals and businesses in the global economy, positioning learning as a type of personal, social, and organizational change is a productive area that can enable a clearer perspective of what learning is, where it happens and how it occurs.

Loi and Dillon (2006) reassert the ecological view of learning as emerging from a system in which both stasis and change play their parts. In the ecological metaphor, information can

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