

## Chapter V

# Learning in a Geographically Dispersed Context: Building a Community of Learning in Dispersed Space

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### Abstract

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*The use of the Internet to deliver management education has increased dramatically over the last decade. Academic institutions and business organizations are harnessing technological advances to enable Web-based learning for individuals who are geographically dispersed across different physical locations. One source of learning for such individuals is their interaction with their dispersed peers. However, it is challenging for dispersed individuals to interact with each other and to learn from each other because of a lack of common context among them. This chapter*

*aims to explore the conditions that are conducive to ferment learning in a dispersed setting. The findings demonstrate that dispersed learning is a socio-technical process. The chapter concludes with implications for Web-enabled institutions to develop competencies to build a community of learning in dispersed space.*

## **Introduction**

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In the field of management education, the use of the Internet to deliver management education has increased dramatically over the last decade (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). Technological tools such as shared knowledge repositories and chat rooms create an opportunity for fostering collaboration and are employed to help build knowledge infrastructure among geographically dispersed<sup>1</sup> individuals. Although such tools enable the access to the knowledge of dispersed<sup>2</sup> individuals, it remains a challenge to appropriate this knowledge for generating new learning through electronic forms of communication. In the context of delivering education through the Web, this raises concerns for the dispersed individuals to learn from each other.

Research in the area of Web-enabled education is limited and has so far looked at the technological and pedagogical characteristics that influence Web-based learning (Arbaugh & Durray, 2001; Leidner & Jarvenpaa, 1993; 1995). This research has contributed much to our understanding and has yielded very interesting insights in advancing the theoretical base and in offering practical implications for Web-enabled learning. However, the academic literature provides little understanding of how dispersed individuals effectively collaborate and learn from *each other* virtually<sup>3</sup>. The research on dispersed collaboration and knowledge management is young and the domain is still being mapped out (Susman & Majzrchak, 2003).

This ethnographic research aims to examine how dispersed individuals learn from each other in a Web-enabled setting. The first section of the chapter reviews the knowledge-based view of the firm and dispersed collaboration literatures to guide this work. The perspectives from these literatures suggest why learning in a dispersed setting may be problematic. This section builds the context for my research question, which I examine with an in-depth ethnographic study. The findings suggest that certain conditions are conducive to fostering Web-enabled learning. I then discuss the implications of these findings

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