
Chapter XII

A Web-Based Platform to Mentor Distance Learners

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ABSTRACT

Highlighted in this chapter is the fact that the majority of organizations face the enormous challenge of supporting their employees' thirst for expanding their skill base. Provided is an example of a university and an organization collaborating to implement successful training and learning programs in order to develop employee skills and knowledge in IT and managerial issues such as knowledge management. The authors hope that the case discussed will inform researchers of an appropriate model in designing an interactive learning environment to mentor distance learners and, additionally, of the potential to eliminate the barriers imposed by the traditional classroom.

INTRODUCTION

The majority of organizations face the enormous challenge of supporting their employees' thirst for expanding their skill base. As a result, universities and organizations are currently collaborating to implement successful training and learning program in order to develop employee skills and knowledge in IT and managerial issues such as knowledge management (KM). For this reason, as early as 1993, the National University of Ireland, Cork, introduced a Diploma in Credit Union studies to provide professional training for a range of Credit Union personnel, including full-time staff, directors, and volunteers. The course is designed on a distance-learning model and has been supported, to date, by a tutorial system

in regional centers. However, students identified a need for more support, the type that only a virtual learning environment can provide. The focus in this chapter is on the development of an interactive learning environment to mentor distance learners. Indicated in the case study is a strong requirement for the utilization of such an environment to increase support for and collaboration between the distance learners. We conclude that a structured communication system has the potential to eliminate the barriers imposed by the traditional classroom.

BACKGROUND

Weiser (1991) argued that, “the most profound technologies are those that disappear. They weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life.” Technology can and does aid groups, be they educators or students (Hiltz & Turoff, 1985), but it is not as profound as the textbook (Caroll, 1968). Videoconferencing, multimedia, learning systems, and Internet-based training (IBT) are examples of technologies that are having a profound impact on training, however, they cannot be labeled as “profound.” At the same time, computers are seen as a merger of hardware, software, and networks through the Internet to form learning communities (Dede, 1996). This alternative is becoming a profound medium for instructional delivery (Harasim et al., 1995). Human interaction through networks facilitates the breakdown of communication barriers and inhibitions that often stifle the open exchange of ideas in traditional classroom groups (Cuban, 1993; Damarin, 1993; Eisenberg & Ely, 1993).

Groups

Groups are defined as people who are aware of one another and have the opportunity to communicate (McGrath, 1984). The study of people as individuals and in groups started as early as the 19th century. For example, Gustave Lebon (1896) investigated the absorption of individuals into a crowd, losing their personality and adopting the collective mind of the group, be it a departmental group (Huczynski & Buchanan, 1985) or a group of students. The role that groups come to play in their organization or university cannot easily be tied to simple models (Adam, 1999). Organizations and the functional areas within evolve over time, and the result is rarely a neat arrangement of groups and procedures (Brown & Magill, 1994; Strassman, 1995). The word group seems to suggest cooperation and collaboration in any environment, be it organizational or educational. However, research is full of as many examples of conflicts as cooperation (Putnam & Poole, 1987; Easterbrook, 1991). Easterbrook (1991) argued that chaos and anarchy are more reliable models for human interaction than any other to provide a basis for the design of computer-supported communications systems. Communication does not necessarily encourage collaboration, for example, discussion forums can, if not properly structured, result in information overload and, therefore, structural chaos; 10 threaded replies can result in 10,000 unstructured responses and queries.

Group Decision Support Systems (GDSS)

GDSS can be seen as outside the frame of this chapter, which is not concerned directly with decision making but with the development of a distance-learning environment (DLE). However, it needs to be addressed as a technological means to enhancing communication between learners. DeSanctis and Gallupe wrote a milestone article on GDSS in 1987, where they defined them as combining “communication, computing and decision support technolo-

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