

# Chapter 3

## A Web-Based E-Commerce Learning Community in Brazil

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter demonstrates usage of a Web-based participative learning environment, which has enabled graduate students in e-commerce classes on the Executive Master in Business Administration Programme taught by the Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration at Getulio Vargas Foundation, based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to share and disseminate their knowledge among themselves. An illustrative single case study is applied in order to achieve this purpose. The structure of this virtual environment on the web is analysed. Findings about the participation level of the students in this group, the impact of regional influences – since classes are given throughout Brazil – and the role of the moderator in the leverage of this environment are also presented in this research, which attempts to establish how Internet technology can be effective in the development of virtual learning communities.*

### INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world economy has experienced a prolonged period of instability, with changes arising from different sources and paradigm shifts occurring systematically. This has given rise to a pressing need for establishing new mental models to deal with a turbulent

environment marked by continuous technological innovations, which have affected the business and personal environments equally. Among these innovations, Internet technology and its applications have proved a veritable revolution and landmark. These changes – as a sole constant – have defied businesses and their executives to forecast future trends and develop their intellectual capital, so as to take advantage of the technological revolution which sweeps us all along in its wake.

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Besides, we now live in a virtual knowledge economy, based on intangibility, intelligence and innovation (Roos *et al.*, 1997; Stewart, 1997; Sveiby, 1997). The elimination of distance made possible by real-time digital links connecting all the players involved in productive processes, has rapidly transformed political, economical, social and job-related relationships (Cairncross, 1997; Jarvenpaa & Tanriverdi, 2003).

For this reason, professionals working in the business arena have increasingly realized the need for ongoing training throughout life, as knowledge cannot be considered a mere commodity. They are returning to the lecture halls in a quest for analytical frameworks that can be used in their daily work. They are also looking for more “professional laterality” (Joia, 1999), in order to be of greater value to their companies, to leverage their employment prospects and/or to redirect their professional careers.

In this context, Executive MBAs are increasingly being offered in Brazil to make it possible for professionals unable to study on a full-time basis to get a master’s degree in the management field, as it will be explained in the next section.

Thus, the general purpose of this chapter is essentially to examine how a participative tool based on the web, linking different e-commerce classes throughout Brazil, belonging to the Executive MBA of the Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration at Getulio Vargas Foundation, might be used to change the traditional teaching and learning *praxis*, so as to foster the creation of an alternative pedagogical framework. This would be one which, rather than replace the current instructivist and behaviouristic model completely (Sherry, 1996 and Boghossian, 2006), is able to complement it in such a way as to make it more constructivist (Piaget, 1974) and socially participative (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, this article strives to establish a balance between the real (brick and mortar) and virtual (click and

buy) worlds, attaining a CAM (click and mortar) world (Lee & Whang, 2001 and Saeed *et al.*, 2003), which is considered the cornerstone in the strategic use of the Internet (Gulati & Garino, 2000; Porter, 2001).

Based on that, the main questions this research intends to tackle are:

- Does a web-based virtual environment enhance collaborative work? How?
- How does the physical location of the students influence their participation in a web-based environment?
- Why is a moderator needed in a web-based virtual environment and how can her/his importance be measured?

In order to answer these research questions, this chapter is structured as it follows. After this introduction, the context where the research problem is embedded is set forth, by analyzing the main characteristics of the Executive MBA programme under analysis, and the profile of the students that have taken part in this research is unveiled. Then, the concept of learning community is deployed so as to support this investigation as well as its findings and conclusions. It follows the presentation of the research method adopted in this work in order to have the research questions already presented answered. Then, after presenting the structure of the web-based learning community under scrutiny, it is analysed the interventions made by both the students (members of this aforementioned community) and the community’s moderator, in order to consolidate the data collected. After analyzing the data collected for tendency curve estimation of time series, via statistical analysis based on linear and exponential regressions (Bianchi *et al.*, 1999 and Cameron, 2005), and data triangulation (Yin, 1994), concluding remarks are set forth in order to have the research questions answered, and recommendations for future research are presented.

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