BOOK REVIEW

Teaching and Learning with Virtual Teams

Reviewed by: Valentina Zangrando, Universidad de Salamanca, Spain

Sharmila Pixy Ferris and Susan H. Godar
Teaching and Learning with Virtual Teams
Information Science Publishing
ISBN: 1591407087 (Hardcover)
303 pages
Copyright 2006
www.idea-group.com

This book is intended to continue the original debate started with a previous work (Godar & Ferris, 2004) concerning the capabilities of virtual teams. Assuming the idea according to which teams are, or at least they should be, one of the involved components in eLearning initiatives, this work is devoted to study some of the main elements regarding workgroup in virtual or blended learning contexts. This volume collects, in 12 chapters, several experiences with virtual and collaborative teams on different academic contexts.

The focus is that there is a new learning paradigm raised in higher education contexts because of the development of eLearning situations, both online and blended (i.e., supporting in-classroom activities). The academic world is clearly implied on the integration of online learning on higher education didactical plan, but there is not a strong and consolidated methodology to apply to eLearning at this moment; even more, it is not clear whether the main actors in this process, and particularly teachers, will be ready to efficiently use technological resources on learning activities or not. The use of virtual teams in business and corporative contexts is so extended as to report results and case studies are well known and analyzed, but there is not enough literature available to study virtual teams in the academic world. This work is a useful contribution for the world of education and, particularly, for didactics on higher education contexts, by providing the results of studying how learners really learn in different online experiences around the world. Selected and analyzed experiences are focused for their use as examples of how students learn to work together in small groups or teams, both in virtual and “local” contexts, and virtual and international collaboration. Actually, the authors of every single chapter provide their personal
approach by analyzing several learning experiences from the United States to Europe (France, Belgium, and Poland), from Singapore to South Africa.

Theoretical background is based on collaborative learning, defined by the authors as “an instruction method in which students at various performance levels work together in small groups or teams toward a common goal,” where “the students are responsible for one another’s learning as well as their own” (p. vii). Although there is not an immediate application of any traditional pedagogical theory, collaborative learning theory is at the moment the most accepted one in online learning contexts; so collaborative learning is emphasized as the most suitable theory for teaching-to-learning process with virtual teams.

“Virtual teams” or “virtual groups” are used in this book as equivalent terms. Every team or group is characterized by a suit of properties like the number of its members, reciprocal dependence of participants in order to achieve the desired goals, active interaction, and communication among all group members. In addition, the team or group is enriched by the experience of “virtuality,” that is to say, the relationship is mediated by the Internet and computers. This work is made up of four sections.

**Section I: From E-Learning to Learning in Virtual Teams.**

This section constitutes an initial approach to virtual teams’ topics, trying to show, with theoretical background and case studies with group of students, how methodological basis of online learning must be focused to the analysis of teamwork dynamics in order to get effectiveness in online learning activities. Chapter I of this section (By Diane Boehm, from Saginaw Valley State University, USA, and Liliana Aniola-Jedrzejek, from Poznan University of Technology, Poland) is intended to describe a collaboration experience with groups of students coming from the United States and Poland. The authors sum up with seven “good practice” principles of the framework to promote an international collaboration model based upon reciprocal understanding and an open attitude toward other cultures; the main purpose is to be useful for teachers interested in carrying out virtual collaboration and intercultural experiences. A theoretical framework called “learning style flexibility” is applied in chapter II to learning in virtual teams. The authors (Pieter du Toit, from University of Pretoria, South Africa, and Peter van Petegem, from University of Antwerp, Belgium), according to this theory, research for the appropriate methods to develop the entire learning potential by studying team roles and social skills.

In chapter III, Robert Zheng, from Temple University (USA) researches for the critical issues concerning the use of WebQuest for designing and developing eLearning experiences according to the constructs of constructivist theory. According to the main achieved conclusions, the author gives suggestions to improve the actual experiences of designing virtual groups.

Chapter IV closes this section with a theoretical approach on efficiency in virtual teams. Pnina Shachaf and Noriko Hara, from Indiana University (USA), suggest an ecological approach for studying virtual teams, particularly based upon these factors: team boundaries management, technology use, and external environment and properties. This study comes with the description of the instruments for effectively managing virtual teams.

**Section II: Strategies for Effective Teaching and Learning in Virtual Teams.**

This section is focused on the strategies to maximize potential results coming from interaction and collaboration between members of a virtual team. Tashmi Assudani, from Xavier University (USA), explores in chapter V the conditions to develop eLearning experiences in geographically dispersed contexts where the absence of a common cultural framework turns learning experience into a socio-technical process.
Chapter VI is intended to study virtual teams in learning programs with working-adults. Gregory B. Northcroft, from University of Illinois, Terri L. Griffith, from Santa Clara University, and Mark A. Fuller, from Washington State University (USA) describe their experiences and suggest some strategies for developing, training, and management of virtual study groups.

Instructor’s role is the main topic of chapter VII. Kara L. Orvis, from Consortium of Universities of the D.C. Metro Area, U.S. Army Research Institute, and Andre L. R. Lassiter, from Minnesota State University (USA), describe trainer’s work in order to identify and manage the relations between students in CSCL environments. Likewise, some suggestions to face trainer’s interventions for promoting interaction among students are given.

Chapter VII, by Patricia J. O’Connor, from Queens College, City University of New Cork, and Susan H. Godar, from William Paterson University (USA), is intended to study the evaluation topics and strategies by means of analyzing a global marketing course.


One of the most benefited fields by developing an appropriate methodology for eLearning experiences is the field of international collaboration where students coming from different countries interact together without sharing a common physical context and, in addition, with all the advantages and disadvantages of intercultural communication. Anne-Laure Fayard, from INSEAD (France), develops her experience with a distributed classroom in a MBA course, held in two campuses, placed on France and Singapore. Other case study, on chapter X, describe a Student International Collaboration Project (SCIP), analyzed by Kathryn Hashimoto, from University of New Orleáns, and Jean-Marc Lehu, from Université Panteón Sorbonne (France).

Section IV: Teams and Technology.

This section is devoted to study the role and place of technological tools in the work of virtual teams. In chapter XI, Karen Rohrbauck Scout, from Western Washington University (USA), studies the implications of CMTS (computer-mediated technologies) on cognitive skills development and collaborative work on virtual teams, according to the classification and cultural artifacts by Wartofsky (Wartofsky, 1979). Finally, chapter XII, by Stephen A. Rains, from University of Arizona, and Craig R. Scout, from University of Texas at Austin (USA), ends with an evaluation of technologies available nowadays to virtual teams by analyzing several experiences took out from authors’ courses.

CONCLUSION

According to the characteristics emphasized in these paragraphs, teaching and learning with virtual teams is especially useful for those educators and instructors, mainly from higher education context, interested on improving the teaching-to-learning process by assuming virtual team methodology. The topics involved in this book are miscellaneous, from theoretical issues and effective management of virtual teams to the application of pedagogical models to eLearning. Nevertheless, these topics refer to practical situations and experiences to illustrate the theoretical framework involved, and that is why case studies are so interesting. The rigorous organization of sections and chapters facilitate a selective consult or reading of this work, according to reader’s interests and necessities.

REFERENCES


Valentina Zangrando works as researcher at the University of Venice (Italy) at SSIS del Veneto, where she cares about the experimental development of SSIS Institution and its international exposure, especially toward European and Latin America areas. She is the main author and the actual coordinator of ALFA—MIFORCAL project (UE) lead by the University of Venice; as a consequence of this project, her researching activity is now focused on convergence processes in the field of High School (secondary) teacher’s training in Europe and Latin America. She is a member and active researcher of GRIAL Group at the University of Salamanca, and collaborates with several international training initiatives like the eLearning Master programme, lifelong learning courses, etc.