A Process-Oriented and Technology-Based Model of Virtual Communities of Practices: Evidence from a Case Study in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This article hypothesizes that virtual communities of practice (VCoPs) are valuable to business schools and universities because they contribute to the emerging paradigms of just-in-time, action-based informal learning. It presents a real case study of a VCoP called Virtual eBMS that was built by applying participative observation (Yin, 1994). In particular, the article provides a process-oriented model of Virtual eBMS that is composed of four main elements: the people participating in the community, the processes and the purpose of the community in terms of the value created for the business school, and the technology enabling the interactions between the community members. Indeed, from a technological point of view, the community is supported by an integrated Web learning and knowledge management platform, described in terms of the main knowledge processes triggered and the correspondent technologies supporting the actions. Finally, the work presents some preliminary results and the value created through the use of Virtual eBMS.

Keywords: action learning; community of practice; e-learning; higher education; knowledge management; virtual communities; virtual eBMS

INTRODUCTION

The rapid, discontinuous, and nonlinear changes of today’s economy, their qualitative and quantitative leaps (flux), the technological revolution, the collapse of time and space, and the increase of complexity are affecting not only the business environment, but also education. If the new task is to educate students for highly dispersed, flexible, unstable organizations with great emphasis on value-reinventing processes, the educational community must increasingly address issues
of identifying, understanding, and articulating information, experience, and knowledge (Baets & Van der Linden, 2003). New styles of learning approaches characterized by efficiency, just-in-time delivery, solution orientation, knowledge applications, and anywhere access based on Internet-based learning processes are rising (Maureer & Sapper, 2001).

The paradigm shifts in management education require that students are not simply passive recipients of expertise but rather cocreators of their just-in-time and action-oriented learning. Learning is more characterized by interpretation, experimentation, and problem solving than description and analysis. It is a journey through the world in which individuals live, and through networks of self-knowledge and self-development (Baets & Van der Linden, 2003). Hence, the learning environment should be considered as a place where different stakeholders (program heads, faculty, executives, directors, corporate action learning sponsors, advisory boards) and students mutually engage in developing new understanding, approaches, and unbounded sets of perspectives.

These conditions trigger a rethinking of the traditional business schools and Universities models: New organizational forms based on virtual communities of practice (VCoPs) are strongly recommended. There is no doubt that the concept of VCoPs is relevant in order to discuss learning approaches in higher education. Lave and Wenger's (1991) approach gives us the possibility to analyse learning as a social practice that goes on at the microsocial level, largely through engagement in the tasks at hand.

Starting from the above considerations, this work is aimed at the following:

- Defining an integrated VCoPs model supporting all of the knowledge management (KM) cycle in a business school
- Integrating knowledge management organizational and technological aspects in a VCoPs model for a business school
- Defining an integrated Web learning and knowledge management system aimed at enhancing learning opportunities both in daily researchers’ practices and in students’ learning experience

In order to address these points, at first we reviewed the CoPs literature to demonstrate that VCoPs are relevant organizational models for emerging learning approaches in business schools. Then we proposed an integrative model of VCoPs named Virtual eBMS (E-Business Management Section) as a result of an empirical study of a higher education community, the eBMS of Scuola Superiore ISUFI, University of Salento (Italy). Finally, some results will be presented in terms of the value created by Virtual eBMS for higher education.

VCOPS AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL SUPPORTING BUSINESS SCHOOLS

Existing Literature on VCoPs

For the purpose of our work, the operational definition for communities of practice is “groups of individuals who participate in a collection of activities, share knowledge and expertise, and function as an interdependent network over an extended period of time with the shared goal of furthering their ‘practice’ or doing their work better” (Allen, Evans, & Ure, 2005).

CoPs typically involve people who are located in the same vicinity. To overcome the typical problems of dispersion, it is necessary to take advantage of Internet technologies. As a consequence, a new typology of communities emerges: the virtual communities of practice. A VCoP can be seen as a distributed community of practice, which refers to a group of geographically distributed individuals who are informally bound together by shared expertise and shared interests or work. Such individuals depend on information and communication technologies to connect to each other (Daniel, Schwier, & McCalla, 2003).

Moreover, when adding “virtuality” to the concept of CoPs, we mean, following Cohen and
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