Chapter 1
Virtual Communities of Practices in Higher Education: Which Processes and Technologies? Evidence from a Case Study

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ABSTRACT
This chapter hypothesizes that Virtual Community of Practices (VCoPs) are valuable to Business Schools and Universities because they support effectively the emerging paradigms of just-in-time, action based and collaborative learning. It presents a case study of a VCoPs called “Virtual eBMS” in Higher Education setting, described as a process-oriented model, composed by four main components: The People participating in the community, the Processes enabling the knowledge flows within the community, the Purpose of the community in terms of value created for the Business School, and the Technology facilitating the interactions between the community members. Indeed, from the technological point of view, the community is supported by an integrated Web Learning and Knowledge Management platform, whose functionalities support the corresponding knowledge processes and actions. Some preliminary results expressed in terms of Intellectual Capital will end the chapter, along with the value created for the community members.

INTRODUCTION
The rapid, discontinuous and non linear 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 the education. If the new tasks 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, solutions orientation, knowledge applications and anywhere access based on internet based learning process are arising (Maureer & Sapper, 2001).

The paradigm’s shifts in management education require that students are not simply passive recipients of expertise but rather co-creators of their Just in Time and action learning. Learning is more characterised by interpretation, experimentation, problem solving than description and analysis. It’s 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 coordinators, faculty, executives, director, corporate sponsors, advisory board) and students mutually engage in developing new understanding, approaches and unbounded sets of perspectives.

These conditions trigger a rethink of the traditional Business Schools and Universities models: new organizational forms based on Virtual Communities of Practices (VCoPs) are strongly recommended. There is no doubt that the concept of VCoPs is relevant in order to discuss learning approaches in Higher Education. Wenger’s approach gives us the possibility to analyse learning as a social practice that goes on at the micro-social level, largely through engagement in the tasks at hand (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Starting from the above considerations, this chapter is aimed at:

- defining an Organisational and Technological VCoPs model supporting all the knowledge management (KM) processes in higher education setting;
- describing an integrated Web Learning and Knowledge Management system aimed at enhance learning experiences and research practices.

In order to address these points, at first we reviewed the CoPs literature to present VCoPs as relevant organizational model for emerging learning approach in Higher education setting; then we propose an integrative model of VCoPs named “Virtual eBMS”Community, organized along the four main components People, Processes, Purpose and Technology, as a result of an empirical study of a higher education community, the Euro- Mediterranean Incubator at Scuola Superiore ISUFI – University of Salento (Italy). Finally some results will be presented in terms of value created by the “Virtual eBMS” Community for the education and research activities of the Incubator.

VCOPS AS EMERGING MODEL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Theoretical Background on VCoPs

The concept of communities of practice (CoPs) has rapidly gained ground in fields such as KM and organisational learning since it was first identified by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Brown and Duguid (1991). CoPs are “groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). CoPs which are groups “of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), are seen as an innovative way to manage knowledge and sustain innovation (Lesser & Prusak, 1999). With origins that take us back to the corporations of craftsmen in classical Greece and the guilds of the Middle Ages, where practices were transmitted.