Chapter 11
The Premises for Learning Successful Virtual Collaboration in Self–Organizing Teams

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors introduce a global synchronous e-learning platform that is used for teaching virtual collaboration, multicultural communication, and business process management. The platform has been used in joint learning sessions between international universities, and the data of the study has been gathered from self-reflecting essays of the participating university students. The authors analyze the data from the point of view of how the students create a social and cultural identity in this totally virtual environment in which no student will probably ever meet face-to-face his or her team members and collaboration partners. They consider both the environment as a social construction as well as an environment that is technology supported. In this respect, the chapter has several implications for educators in the present global and ever-technology-richer university environment.

INTRODUCTION

Speculations on the role of information technology in organizations and its implications for organizational design have flourished now for decades, time after time when new information technology solutions take place in the working environment. A recent development in this area is the application of different eLearning applications and platforms in education. Although the use of these systems is commonplace, researchers and educators still do not have a clear overall view,

what kind of eLearning application is desirable and functioning. This chapter seeks to add new knowledge in the field of virtual collaboration in a synchronous e-learning environment, especially in how to generate a functioning virtual learning environment in which the student collaboration is motivated and eager, and is reported to be meaningful.

In recent years, global teams – teams that are both geographically distributed and culturally diverse – have been increasingly used to collaborate on projects involving innovation and complex

team processes. It is not uncommon that teams are quickly put together and have to perform in an ad hoc fashion on a project task. Especially when team members have not worked together before, they have to establish their teamwork processes and invent their collaboration quickly. They further have to be adaptive to an ever-changing context. Success in this kind of environment comes with experience (Köhler, Fischlmayr, Lainema, & Saarinen, 2013). Today we do not yet have a clear picture how this relatively new technological environment has affected and will affect the role of information technology in educational organizations and their organizational structures.

The turn of the twenty-first century has meant a shift from traditional organizations to more extensive use of virtual organizations and virtual working. Virtual organizations can be defined as geographically distributed organizations whose members are bound by a long-term common interest or goal, and who communicate and coordinate their work mainly through information technology (Ahuja & Carley, 1998).

As soon as the advancement of ICT has enabled such forms of working and organizing to develop that don't build on physical proximity and face-to-face contact, they have been rapidly adopted worldwide as a new model of organizing knowledge-intensive work. Many organizations have introduced the virtual organization model for their interrelated operational units at locations far from each other, or project teams of specialists that are dispersed on different continents (Lähteenmäki, Saarinen, Fischlmayr. & Lainema, 2009). And as Wasko, Teigland, Leidner & Jarvenpaa (2011) note, the skills acquired in virtual worlds are precisely the skills demanded today by real-world organizations, like (p. 650) (1) *leading a large virtual team of people with diverse demographic backgrounds from across the world without any formal authority over these individuals*, (2) *suc-*

cessfully developing and implementing strategies under pressure, (3) *networking to acquire necessary information and resources*, and (4) *building trust and managing cross-cultural conflict without face-to-face communication*.

Empirical studies have shown that virtual teams tend to have high-quality decisions, are more creative, and are more satisfied with the outcome of work than workers in traditional organizations (Rico and Cohen 2005). Many organizations are nowadays relying heavily on virtual teams. The invisible virtual organization that links its members together doesn't involve them the same way as a traditional organization does (Hertel, Geister, & Konrad, 2005). These networks do not automatically get socially organized into proper teams in the traditional sense. They might find new and even more competitive forms of organizing than direct control and hierarchical command chains.

The value of the theoretical discussion remains weak without empirical evidence from the successfulness of teaching the virtual and how students engage and identify themselves in the virtual environment. In this study we are interested in how to enhance the premises for learning successful virtual collaboration in a dispersed e-learning environment. The case simulation sessions are "adhocratic" by nature: adhocracy involves project teams that come together to perform a task and disappear when the task is over (Morgan, 2006). The topic is relevant and important on a global scale as the challenges for modern learning environments are worldwide. We think the group with the most to gain from this chapter will be teachers in higher education who are interested in enriching experiences for their students. The chapter also touches upon topics like e-learning as socio-cultural system, challenges of ICT-based innovations in higher education, culture and e-learning, and new trends in e-learning.

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