

Chapter 2.12

Designing the Virtual Classroom for Management Teaching

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ABSTRACT

With the modern business environment becoming increasingly dependent on technology, management teaching in higher education faces the challenging task of effectively leveraging technology in diverse learning environments. This chapter discusses the use of virtual classrooms, namely collaborative, information technology-mediated teaching endeavours in management education at universities. The overall aim of this chapter is to provide insights for those who are responsible for the development of management curricula and to give specific guidelines to management educators interested in integrating IT-based teaching to increase teaching effectiveness when designing virtual classrooms.

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INTRODUCTION

The business environment within which management education takes place is becoming increasingly competitive. As schools are seeking prestige in terms of research outcomes and teaching evaluations (Armstrong & Sperry, 1994), information technologies (IT) play a crucial role in their pursuits to differentiate service offerings and enhance learning (e.g., Berger & Topol, 2001; Pallab & Kaushi, 2001). On many campuses, this led to “technologically-driven change” (Blake & Jarvenpaa, 1996, p. 38; Green, 1999).

However, the integration of IT into the curriculum is by no means trivial. Traditionally, there was only a loose link between theoretical/conceptual frameworks and their business applications. The

bridging of theory and practice was managed by assignment questions, examples in texts, case studies, guest speakers or by integrating business projects into the curriculum. In a technology-oriented world, students are able to switch directly from conceptual and theoretical underpinnings and their application to the real world (Blake & Jarvenpaa, 1996). Thus, the integration of IT into classrooms generates substantial changes to how learning and teaching takes place, and can therefore become an arduous task for educators and education researchers (Webster & Hackley, 1997; Green, 1999).

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES OF IT-BASED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Integrating information technology into university classroom confronts educators with numerous opportunities as well as challenges. IT is incredibly powerful in the facilitation of display of information and the access to explicit information. Leidner and Jarvenpaa (1995) argue that this increases the sharing and construction of knowledge in the classroom. The use of information technology (IT) in the classroom therefore creates a rich set of new educational opportunities (Alavi et al., 1997; Webster & Hackley, 1997; Garrison, 2000; Meier & Simon, 2000), especially for management as well as marketing, where real-world examples play an enormous role and student participation is encouraged to enhance team-building skills and marketing competencies (Ueltschy, 2001; Sinkovics et al., 2004).

IT has so become an effective means of enabling intentional changes in teaching and learning process (Leidner & Jarvenpaa, 1995). Following Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, IT enables the integration of a greater number of learning experiences into the curriculum. Kolb's view implies that students' comprehension of abstract ideas will be facilitated by immersing them in direct experiences that demonstrate the utility

of the concepts taught (Alderfer, 2003). Kolb's (1984) cycle of experiential learning consists of four stages: concrete experience, observation and reflection, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. The student first is involved with the concrete experience. In the next stage he or she reflects and processes the information received during this experience. In stage 3 these experiences urge participants to create new concepts of their own, and finally the student uses the generalizations from the stages experienced to develop strategies and guidelines for similar but maybe more complex situations. While doing so, the student gains a clear idea about the experience and also knows how to transform it into activities and strategies. IT-mediated teaching can strongly support these learning processes, by providing actual experience-based learning and assessment and there is every reason to believe that the integration of technology into education will continue to increase with technological advances. It goes beyond the simple provision of computer access and training to faculty and students. IT can play a strategic role. It can be used in a systematic way for designing, carrying out and evaluating the whole process of learning and teaching in terms of specific objectives (Garrison, 2000).

Not surprisingly, the integration of IT into management education has become a topic of interest in education and research. Little emphasis has been placed on the organizational context in which IT-based learning and teaching takes place in traditional higher education institutions (Kerres, 1998). This is an issue of high importance, since using IT is also a risky endeavour for management educators, where many sources of failure do exist. Integrating IT into a university classroom needs a lot of extra preparation and a high degree of interest in modern educational technologies. Students, on the other hand, are also challenged because they may get easily frustrated when IT is not properly introduced into the learning environment. Any meaningful and sensible integration of IT into the modern classroom needs to be guided by the

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