

Chapter 15

Collaborative Learning Experiences in Teaching of e-Business Management

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the e-Business Management Section (eBMS) of the Scuola Superiore ISUFI at University of Salento (Italy), the case of the International Master in e-Business Management (IMeBM) is discussed here which is aimed to contribute pragmatically to create e-Business Capabilities in Mediterranean Countries. This chapter presents the results obtained in the Laboratory Phase of the first two years of Master's editions, i.e. 2006 and 2007 editions. This phase has been designed on blended (on-line and off-line) learning experience. Specifically, it has been structured by mixing the delivery of some Web learning courseware with face-to-face meetings with mentors and e-Business experts. The technological platform designed, developed and adopted for the Web learning activities is called the "Virtual eBMS" that represents the collaborative learning environment of the Mediterranean School. The pedagogical approach adopted by the School, named ("Learning-in-Action") together with some considerations on the effectiveness and the implications of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) strategy are also deliberated upon. It also presents how the whole case of the International Master in e-Business Management generated intellectual capital assets, described in terms of Human Capital (competences developed in the e-Business context), Social Capital (networks and cooperation with local institutions and companies) and Structural Capital (research projects).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-909-5.ch015

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The e-Business Management Section (eBMS) of the Scuola Superiore ISUFI is an interdisciplinary department focused on Digital, Organizational and Strategic Innovation, with a specific focus on Mediterranean area. In 2004, the school conceived and launched a challenging project aimed to create the “Mediterranean School of e-Business Management”, a network-based organization constituted by competence centers in Southern Mediterranean Countries. Each center is specialized in developing qualified human capital and in promoting new projects for diffusing strategic, digital and organizational innovation, to support the modernization of traditional productive industries (Agro industry, Tourism and Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts), Public Administration, as well as of high-tech sectors (Aeronautics, Aerospace, Electronics, Software and Automotive) and Public Administration.

The official start-up of the project was in 2004. Today, besides the Italian node of the network, represented by the Euro Mediterranean Incubator (www.ebms.it), there are three more active competence centres in:

- Morocco, in partnership with Al Akhawayn University;
- Jordan, in partnership with The University of Jordan;
- Tunisia, in partnership with Technopole El-Gazala of Tunisi and the sponsorship of the Tunisian Ministry of ICT.

SETTING THE STAGE

Economic and social development is strongly related to the development of human capital, which is related to education (ESCWA, 2005). Recent studies published by the World Economic Forum, INSEAD and World Bank document reflects the connection amongst Human Capital assets, Innovation capabilities and e-Readiness index, in the perspective of the richness of a Country.

Through education and training, countries are able to improve the skills of their citizens, and their national innovation systems. In this framework, a nation's human capital becomes fundamental for the success of the country, if efforts are to be connected, to develop skilled human capital so as to increase the digital literacy penetration. In this context the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries have been able to expand their education and training systems and succeeded in narrowing gender, rural and socio economic gaps in access to schooling and training resources. However, the fact remains that only few countries in the MENA region have developed effective learning programs. Education systems in most MENA countries provide limited opportunities for individuals to gain more skills and acquire more knowledge after completing their formal education (World Bank, 2003).

Derived from the necessities of the MENA countries in this area and the expertise in reforming human capital creation processes required for the digital and knowledge based economy, the Mediterranean School of e-Business Management was created to represent a cluster of research centers, which seek to distribute innovative practices in traditional institutions and emerging sectors among the networked countries. This network aims to improve the knowledge exchange flow and sharing of expertise among its members along with other local entities; and facilitates and supports the diffusion of strategic, digital and organizational innovation within private and public institutions.

In this conceptual framework, this chapter attempts to describe the empirical results obtained during the e-Business laboratory phase of international edition of master level program in e-Business Management, in terms of e-Business Capabilities developed within the laboratory activities.

The general objective of the entire Master is to develop the professional profile of *Digital and Organizational Innovation Engineers* who are able to conceive, design, and diffuse e-Business

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