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**Chapter XXXI**

**On-Line Case Discussion:  
A Methodology**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Over the past several years, a number of research studies have investigated the application of Internet technologies to the classroom. Most of the research focus on asynchronous technology such as newsgroups or Web sites, or on GSS. No research investigates the possibility of conducting on-line case discussion. As case discussion in the classroom is a key pedagogical method in an executive program, our research examines a methodology for on-line case discussion. In this chapter, the results of an experiment conducted in an executive MBA program to investigate the use of on-line case discussion is presented. First, other research to determine the distinguishing characteristics of case discussion is reviewed. Then, the pedagogical context for the experiment is provided, and the experimental method is described. Finally, the results of a satisfaction questionnaire completed by the participants in the experiment are presented. Suggestions for further research and experiments are also discussed.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Over the past several years, a number of research studies have investigated the application of Internet technologies to the classroom. No research has investigated the possibility of conducting synchronous on-line case discussion, however. As case discussion in the classroom is a key pedagogical method, especially in an executive program, the research described in this chapter examines the conditions in which such a pedagogical

method can be used in a virtual environment. We are interested in determining if technology-based tools can be used to create interactivity that is similar to that found in classroom case discussion. First, we review the literature. Then, we describe an experiment to investigate the use of on-line case discussion and present the results of that experiment. Finally, we discuss a study of students' satisfaction.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The case method is, by nature, a teaching method adapted to the classroom and especially to executive programs (Benbasat, Goldstein, & Mead, 1987; Erskine, Leenders, & Mauffette-Leenders, 1981; Matejka & Coss, 1981). This pedagogical method is common, and many faculty members use it to teach Information Technology or Management Information Systems. Interactivity is one of the distinguishing characteristics of this pedagogical method. Many undergraduate and graduate programs have introduced Web-based learning, which is defined as any kind of learning that makes significant use of the WWW (Goodyear, 2001). These technologies are interactive through text, voice, graphics, video, shared workspaces, or combinations of these forms. Most of the Web-based programs, however, use multimedia Web sites and newsgroups. Most of the commercial platforms have many functions, enabling asynchronous discussion and collaborative work. One of these tools is the chat function, which enables synchronous discussion. Thus, recreating a classroom case discussion is a new possibility. Most other research, however, is focused on asynchronous capabilities (Goodyear, 2001; Tyran & Shepherd, 2001). Synchronous technologies such as IRC or Instant Messenger encourage clarity of expression and formalization of knowledge. On the contrary, synchronous technologies are time consuming. It is also hard to capture real-world working practices or tacit knowledge with this type of electronic media.

Another criticism with on-line chat discussion is the lack of expressive richness. As Goodyear (2001) stated, "This is most clearly the case with text-based communications and it is often cited as a major drawback of this form of web-based learning. Some 'workarounds' include the use of 'emoticons' (such as a :<) to represent irony or joke. But it is also worth noting that 'expressive richness' can work — or fail to work — on a number of levels. Text-based messages may not have the expressive richness of a quick and lively verbal exchange. On the other hand, well-crafted text can be much more rich than the stumbling improvisations we all hear and produce in seminars."

The development of teaching programs based on electronic platforms raises the question of the effectiveness of these tools in the learning processes (Tyran & Shepherd, 2001). The experiment conducted for this research aims to test a system seeking an interactive equivalent to that of a traditional classroom case discussion, thus providing for a comparison between the classroom teaching process and the virtual teaching process (Asensio, Hodgson, & Trehan, 2000; Tyran & Shepherd, 2001).

## **EXPERIMENTAL METHOD**

The design of the experiment respects the principles of the constitution of virtual learning communities in order to build a technical and cognitive environment that provides for dialogue within a community (Berge & Collins, 1993; Berge, 1998; Kollock, 1997).

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