

EXPANDING THE ROLE OF E-ROOMS IN DISTANCE LEARNING APPLICATIONS TO MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The role of distance learning in management education is changing rapidly as a result of advances in technology and globalization. So-called asynchronous learning nets (ALN) are paving the way for a whole new approach to delivering business know-how at a time and place of the student's choice. ALN help enhance the overall business curriculum by improving course integration and consistency. E-rooms are one important component of the ALN design philosophy. The purpose of this paper is to present how e-rooms can be used to enhance learning efficiency and understanding in an ALN environment with a particular emphasis on management education.

INTRODUCTION

The number of working adults that are returning to the classroom is growing rapidly. The College Board reports that nearly 75% of all students enrolled in higher education also work (King, 2002). Effective business education for working students calls for both flexibility as well as customization. This proposition is due to the variety of educational and professional backgrounds that working students bring to a graduate level MBA program as well as to the need to accommodate growing travel demands (Monks, 2001). The working business student is typically interested in a practical curriculum that focuses on results and convenience. To meet these demands, the traditional method of knowledge transfer that features the constraints of fixed location, time and learning pace is being replaced with more user friendly and customized learning systems (Kathawaia, 2002). The Internet is the key ingredient in this new delivery stratagem. Today, Internet based distance learning in higher education and industry is experiencing rapid growth (Coppola, 2002). Many working students who

have been exposed to Internet instruction tend to favor this delivery approach (Lungren, 2003).

In asynchronous learning most content and know-how is provided outside the walls of the traditional classroom at a time and place of the student's choosing (Jorgensen, 2002). While asynchronous content delivery is a key ingredient in the new learning paradigm a variety of traditional instructional modalities also need to be utilized. Some examples include: interactive classroom team presentations, interactive faculty lectures and interactive laboratory team simulations. One learning stratagem that recognizes the need for a proactive and integrated learning experience is the Instructional Management System (IMS) cooperative initiative (Graves, 1999). This initiative is designed to promote systematic thinking regarding the delivery of higher education to improve learning outcomes and to increase return on instruction investments. Specific principles of the IMS initiative include: education involves more than a single course, a course is more than content, content is more important than lecture notes, convenience is important and quality assurance requires an integrated learning approach.

CUSTOMIZED AND INTEGRATED LEARNING

The dictates of modern business practice call for MBA graduates to have both a global as well as an integrated business perspective (Schmotter, 2004). The growing role of globalization calls for insights into outsourcing as well as management practices in a variety of cultural environments (Friga, 2003). The focus of an integrated business learning environment is on how management functions such as operations, finance and marketing are linked. Meeting these challenges call for a significant redesign of the traditional

Thirty years from now the big university campuses will be relics. Universities won't survive."

--Peter Drucker (1997)

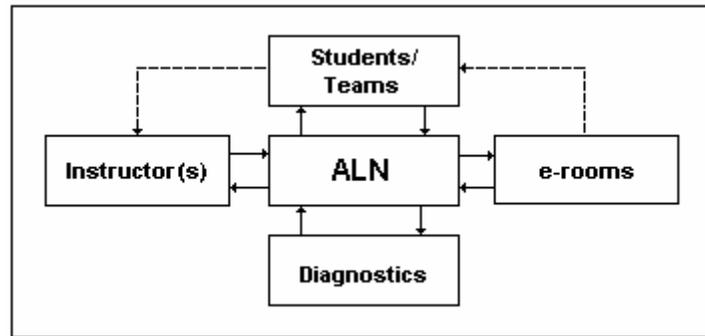


Figure 1 – ALN Overview

MBA curriculum. This is where ALN can help. Figure 1 presents an overview of the ALN paradigm featuring the role of e-rooms. In this context the e-rooms serve as a conduit between instructors and individual students or student teams. The use of e-rooms in an ALN environment is particularly attractive for case analysis and conducting negotiations in business simulations (Freiemuth, 2002).

A growing body of evidence indicates that flexible and customized learning systems like the one outlined in Figure 1 are specifically effective for working students involved in a graduate level business degree program (Shih, 2003; Wang, 2002). In particular, ALN provide an efficient vehicle for enhancing students experience in understanding how to capture and process information from a variety of sources at a time and place of the students choosing. This interactive and dynamic learning process tends to mirror the business environment for many working students and thus it also serves as a reinforcing agent. Additionally, ALN are particularly attractive for delivering content and enhancing collaborative learning in Executive MBA (EMBA) type programs (Mazza, 2004). This attractiveness is due, in part, to the often widely distributed geographical locations of students and the ongoing work related travel demands.

e-ROOMS

Collaborative learning via chatroom exercises represents an important ALN design feature. An e-room is a web-based system for sharing a variety of files and documents. Chatrooms are an essential feature of the basic e-room design. There are two basic chatroom options: linear (synchronous) and threaded (asynchronous). In a linear chatroom environment students are encouraged to interact proactively in near real time to a specific case or problem. The primary focus is on the interactive process. A professor-moderated linear chatroom is the standard variant (Van Dolen, 2002). In a threaded environment the focus is on message content. Analysis and comments are available for review and discussion by students who enter the e-room at a later time. Hybrid systems that combine features of both linear and threaded e-rooms are also used. One major concern about e-room exercises is the phenomenon called “collective loafing.” That is, the condition wherein students

only participate when called on. The key to the effective use of e-rooms is to provide for ongoing student interaction and to measure student participation (Ross, 2004).

Chat-trees represent one approach for addressing the problem of “collective loafing”. Figure 2 presents a simplified overview of the chat-tree framework. In this learning environment students are organized into teams. Depending on class size, teams can be further divided into groups. The basic idea is to organize the e-room assignments in such a way that student “loafing” is minimized. Each team is assigned a leader who is responsible for interacting with each team member in terms of discussing and collecting responses to issues posed by the facilitating instructor. These responses are then distributed to the instructor and to other teams. The same organizational and reporting process is followed if lower tiered groups are involved.

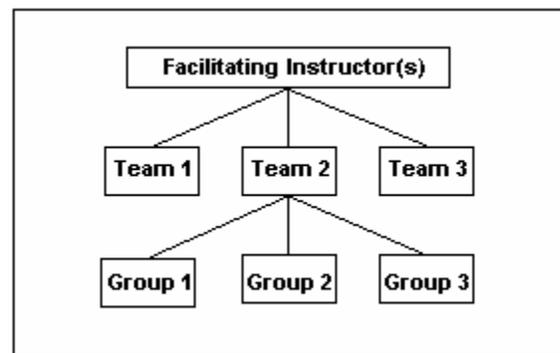


Figure 2 – Linear Chat-Tree Format

In this learning environment, the instructor can also initiate real-time quizzes for maintaining student participation (Bauer, 2002). Used in this way, e-rooms can help develop collaboration skills and increase team member’s accountability (Eastman, 2002). At the end of each e-room session, student participation is recorded electronically and an e-mail is sent to each student summarizes their involvement. E-room learning has been found to be effective for developing reflection, collective inquiry and skillful discussion skills (Driver, 2003). More specifically, e-rooms are extremely convenient especially

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for working students. In a linear chat-room exercise a student can save upwards of 60 minutes in reduced commute time compared to conducting the same exercise in a traditional classroom setting. Even further efficiencies can be realized for threaded chat-room assignments.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of customized asynchronous learning nets for management education is on the rise. E-rooms are a key ingredient in the ALN paradigm. The purpose of this paper is to outline how e-rooms can be used to enhance the learning process in a distance-learning environment. Today's MBA curriculum calls for both a global as well as an integrated perspective. ALN optimize the use of the Internet to provide an effective distance-learning context for business courses and programs while enhancing faculty and peer interactions. E-rooms represent an important ALN design feature and provide the opportunity for collaborative learning that often yields a positive impact on the educational experience. Students must remain challenged during each e-room exercise. This can be accomplished through a chat-tree format. An essential e-room characteristic is real time feedback. This capability provides students with insights that often are not present in a traditional classroom environment. Presenting the broadest range of interactive experiences optimizes the opportunity for effective learning. E-room based assignments are particularly attractive for working students who often have a difficult time visiting the campus on a regular basis. This is especially the case for EMBA type programs where infrequent classroom schedules and extensive student traveling are the norm. The key to the successful utilization of e-rooms for management education is the monitoring, reporting and feedback of student participation and performance.

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