

Distance Education Degree Programs for the Malaysian Working Adults: Acceptability and Negotiability Perspectives

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Abstract— The objective of this study was to determine the acceptability and negotiability of the distance education degree programs from the School of Distance Education (SDE), Universiti Sains Malaysia for the working adults in Malaysia. Since its establishment, SDE has been involved in building up human capital development in Malaysia by providing higher education through distance mode to the Malaysian public. Qualitative approach was used in order to seek greater understanding through discussion and sharing of experiences. Two specific issues namely, acceptability and negotiability were addressed. Thirteen participants from the states of Sabah and Sarawak which are located in East Malaysia were interviewed. Indicators of acceptability and negotiability as used in this study found that degrees awarded are highly regarded by society and employers. Graduates are able to get job promotions, assign to greater responsibilities and high sense of job security.

Index Terms— Acceptability, Distance Education, Human Capital Development, Negotiability

I. INTRODUCTION

Distance education programs, especially in the form of correspondence study have been around for more than a century and benefited millions of students world over. In Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) through the School of Distance Education (SDE) was the pioneer in producing graduates through distance mode.

The main characteristic of distance education is the separation of the learner and the instructor. With the advancement in the communication technologies, the separation of teachers and students in time has been greatly reduced. The most important advantage offered by distance education is accessibility. Place and time will no longer become barriers to education especially to the working adults. The flexibility of distance education in terms of time and place allow adults to study without leaving their work places or homes.

The need for further education beyond high school has become more and more pressing over the years, particularly for adults. The fast changing global economy and technology have caused tremendous effects on employment, education and social patterns in Malaysia and other countries.

One of the SDE's objectives is to enable working adults to pursue higher education and has managed to attract Malaysian adults to enroll in its degree programs since its establishment. Currently, SDE offers academic programs at undergraduate and graduate level. For undergraduate level, degree programs which are offered by the SDE are Bachelor of arts, management, science and social science. Graduate studies are also offered in those four areas.

SDE utilizes a combination of media for the teaching and learning activities such as printed materials, video conference (this facility is not available in the state of Sabah and Sarawak), face-to-face and internet. In delivering study materials to students, printed materials in the modular form still remain an important medium.

Since the establishment of SDE which used to be known as an off-campus unit in 1971, many studies have been done on SDE's students learning, students' participation, effectiveness of the delivery systems and students' support services. However studies on performance of its graduates, acceptability, negotiability and marketability of the degrees from SDE are still lacking.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study was to determine the acceptability and negotiability of the distance education degree programs from SDE to the working adults in Malaysia.

III. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative approach was used in order to seek greater understanding through discussion and sharing of experiences. This study addressed two specific issues namely, acceptability and negotiability (Sharp and Sosdian, 1979) of the degrees awarded through distance mode as experienced and perceived by the graduates of the SDE.

This report was based on the interviewed conducted on 13 participants from the states of Sabah and Sarawak which are located in East Malaysia. Six participants from Sabah and seven from Sarawak were interviewed. These two locations are unique as they represent areas that are geographically far from SDE and have less developed infrastructure facilities.

The participants in the study were recent graduates from SDE between 2004 and 2007. As such their addresses and contact numbers were still easily available to the researchers.

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Purposive sampling was used to identify the willing participants.

Data were collected through open-ended interviews which were deemed appropriate for this study to produce a rich and substantial understanding of a complex phenomenon (Attinasi, 1986 cited from Pang and Appleton, 2004). Question guide was used to initiate and redirect conversation towards the two issues. However, participants were allowed to express freely their opinions and ideas beyond the acceptability and negotiability issues of the degree they obtained from the SDE.

Interviews were conducted mainly in Malay language and when necessary English was also used. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed and the transcriptions analyzed to identify common themes.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, the central themes were acceptability and negotiability of the degrees as perceived by the participants. According to Sharp and Sosdian (1979) acceptability mainly as acceptance by educational institutions at the next higher level while negotiability refers to the degree's usefulness in the world of work, and includes, for instance, access to jobs, promotions as well as licenses. Some modifications to the concept of acceptability were made to include personal satisfaction, sense of personal fulfillment and that of the family's, sense of the worthiness of the degree compared to other similar qualifications as well as a credential for further studies. No modification was made to negotiability concept. Indicators were similar to those used by Sharp and Sosdian (1979), which include obtaining a different job, a promotion or increase in pay or income, more job responsibilities, an increased sense of job security and greater respect or status from the employer and colleagues.

For acceptability concept, majority of the participants interviewed indicated a sense of accomplishment and personal satisfaction when they had completed their study. They were also very proud of their degree. They admitted that they had gained new knowledge, perspectives and more self-confidence. Personal growth and development were also considered as an important reason for studying at SDE.

"... and then when I started study, I was already 46. What I got was satisfaction there." (KC-3)

"I feel very proud ... having a degree is an achievement as I missed this opportunity before..." (KC-1)

The reason why I joined the distance learning program was to seek knowledge. Knowledge is more important, with knowledge we can compete with others in our workplace. To have wide knowledge was the priority. Career advancement was secondary to me and of course it was my dream to have a degree. (KC-6)

Another aspect of acceptability that was related by the participants includes eligibility to continue at higher level such as master degree. An executive said that he will continue to study further.

"...to up grade myself. And never be satisfied...I'm now pursuing Master in Business Administration (MBA)." (KK-2)

"I'm now applying to continue my study (master level) at a university nearer to my hometown. I hope I can study up to Ph.D level." (KC-6)

For negotiability, several participants were able to get job promotion and three participants were called for promotion interviews. One participant had just applied for a new post and waiting for an interview. Even with the same post they were given greater responsibilities.

A few participants mentioned about greater respect or recognition from colleagues and employers. A chief enforcement officer observed:

"... when we have a degree our status is a little higher. They (colleagues) now respect me because of my academic qualification. We are now equal or on the same level...but I'm still in my previous position." (KC-7)

An officer shared his job duties:

"I have more responsibilities now as I've been recognised as a degree holder. I can lead my colleagues and do counselling works at department level. I was asked to conduct seminars and courses for others. Those are extra duties because of my degree" (KC-6)

Pertaining to job security after having a degree, participants were more confident. According to them, their job performance had improved and they are able to give more contribution to the organisation. Another factor to this sense of security was being in government service as in the case of a few participants.

"I feel I'm secured. Department head trusts me and has confidence in me. I do follow all instructions by my superiors and also carry out several initiatives." (KC-6)

The feeling of satisfaction and proud is understandable if we knew of what they had gone through. Some of them had a very hard time to adapt as distance learners especially during their first year. Studying through distance mode needs different approach and considerable amount of sacrifices on the part of adult learners. The academic and financial difficulties faced by them sometimes could be a real burden and cause an emotional stress.

Students from Sabah and Sarawak had to spend more money and time than students from West Malaysia. For instance, to cover the travelling cost to attend the compulsory annual intensive course at SDE in Penang. Dass (2001) found out among the major problems faced by the distance learners were related to time management, study, academic financial difficulties and sense of isolation. They were able to succeed despite all these obstacles with sheer determination and grit in obtaining the degree.

Students from these two states relied heavily on the printed learning materials given by the SDE. They had to be self directed learners and established their own networking to overcome loneliness. Due to the exorbitant cost, SDE could

not provide live audio or video conferencing facilities for tutorial and discussion with instructors for students in Sabah and Sarawak. These facilities were available only at the regional centers in West Malaysia. SDE would tape the video conference sessions and send the CD copies to students and this would take several days to reach them. Since the year 2006, SDE was equipped with broadband connection which allows SDE's students from anywhere in Malaysia (in fact anywhere in the world) to follow live video streaming via the internet.

Some of the findings in this study are very much similar to other previous studies with regard to why adults continue to study. The reasons were found to be many and complex. Sewall (1984) revealed several reasons why adults choose to pursue a degree: (1) to develop a new career; (2) just to learn; (3) to have satisfaction of having a degree; (4) to achieve independence and a sense of identity; and (5) to gain career advancement. Participants in this study have shown that adults can study through distance mode and able to fulfill their dreams.

V. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Malaysian working adults have benefitted from distance education degree programs intellectually and materially. Acceptability and negotiability of the degrees through distance mode were clearly visible based on the experiences and perceptions of the participants. A few aspects of acceptability and negotiability that were highlighted - degrees from School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia are accepted by other higher learning institutions, respected by society and employers. Graduates are able to get job promotions, greater responsibilities and job security.

The findings of this study might be seen as one of the steps in understanding the role of distance education in higher education and the needs of human capital development in Malaysia. In future, studies that include employers as participants should be conducted to determine the extent of acceptability and negotiability of distance education degree programs.

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Characterizing Leadership and Role Management for Resource Sharing

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Abstract—One of the outstanding ways of enhancing human capital development is rooted in collaboration and leadership. No enterprise can make progress in whatever its endeavor if collaboration and leadership is poorly addressed (Jeston and Nelis, 2008). Collaboration is needed in every sectors of life (family affairs, educational accomplishments...). Collaboration may be horizontal (as in play groups) or horizontal (as in teacher to student relationship). Leadership can exist both in horizontal or vertical collaboration. The question at the heart of this work is: How can leadership in collaboration be characterized and explored to enhance human resource sharing? To answer this question, leadership attachment, collaboration typologies and leadership style were used to propose a model in a second order collaborative environment. Collaboration is deemed to produce contributions that can be personalized and shared contributions. Shared contribution is stored in a digital form for its global access.

Index Terms—Collaboration, Leadership, Resources sharing, Knowledge, Experience.

I. LEADERSHIP: A PRECURSOR TO COLLABORATION

A knowledge management report is quoted with the assertion that “under the influence of globalization, and the impact of information and communication technologies (ICT) that modify radically our relationship with space and time, the hierarchical company locked up on its local borders becomes an extended company, without borders, opened and adaptable” [6]. The reference implied the importance of sharing in a global environment. Indirectly, collaboration and intricacies of collaboration are invoked when sharing work is put in place. In a broader consideration, leadership may be implied where more than two people work together to realize a common goal.

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Leadership has been defined as the art of motivating a group of people to act towards achieving a common goal [9]. Another definition was given as the capacity to establish direction and to influence and align others toward a common goal, motivating and committing them to action and making them responsible for their performance [1]. Leadership can not be done in a mono-effort work. Someone (or a group of people) is being led by another person. The “led” and the “leader” has to work together to achieve a set objective/goal. An important collaborative project must consider its leadership implication. This is particularly significant when leaders are being changed as a result of leadership vacuum created by unforeseen circumstances (leadership succession). Leadership succession can be realized through different methods. Though this work is not in the domain of personnel or enterprise psychology, a little glimpse to leadership appointment is of importance because attainment of set objective(s) in collaboration may be traced to effectiveness of leaders which may be related to how the leaders are appointed (cf. second definition of leadership above). Though detail elaboration of appointment of leaders is not necessary to this work, a brief synopsis will enhance the work. Four types of leadership appointments are possible:

A. Appointment of Leaders:

Leaders can be appointed using several methods described in management studies. It was assumed that to certain extent, the way leaders are appointed can play a role in realization of objectives in collaborative efforts. Though appointments of leaders are not a focus in this work, four methods of leadership appointment were identified.

Privileged: Leaders may be appointed through his perceived privilege. A member of a team may become a leader because he is advantaged in terms of finance, politics, natural endowments (oratory, influence) social or academic privileges compared to other members of the same team.

Implied: In case of a previous leader leaving behind a vacuum either because of death or transfer of service in a way that was not envisaged, another leader may be implied. The new implied leader is generally not prepared for the task. An implied leader may be aware of the incoming role or not. The distinguishing feature of this kind of leader is that, he is not prepared for the role when he is made leader. An implied leader may combine other kind of appointment like privilege, selected or acquired.

Selected: It is common to have leaders selected through popular vote or election. This is one of the commonest ways

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of appointing leaders to positions.

Acquired: Leadership may be acquired with time or by formation. This kind of leadership normally makes adequate preparation for the leadership role. It is the most desired kind of leaders in an enterprise.

A part from appointment of leaders, the way and manner of functioning of a leader is of importance to realization of objectives of a group. Leadership dominance is of importance in the activities of a group.

B. Leadership Dominance in Collaboration:

Different kinds of collaboration are possible with or without leadership. The interest here is in where leadership is obvious. By leadership dominance, the deliberation is implied. Leadership can be implied in all kinds of collaboration. Leadership role is of significance when dominance was inclined to how a leader executes his role in a collaborative work. Two types of leadership were considered.

1. **Sole leadership:** Leader may occupy a position of dominance all the time and in the entire facets of collaboration. He is all in all with respect to a collaborative effort. This may happen when the leader is the originator of the collaborative effort. He has to guide others to achieving the common goal. His absence in the effort will jeopardize the realization of the common objective.
2. **Shared leadership:** It is possible to share the leadership role in a collaborative effort. The reason may be as to enforce the commitment of several or all member of the collaboration. Shared leadership definitely has its disadvantages. It is a known fact that not all leaders will have the same leadership style. Three types of shared leaders are possible.

Time Based: A leadership activity may be dependent on time. In other word, leadership is assigned with time

Task Based: This happens when a common goal is subdivided into subtasks. Each task in the common goal is headed by a leader.

Role based: It is also possible to have leaders that occupy a specific role or activity in a common goal (or sub-goals). The success of each leader associated to a role. This is a factor of success for the global goal.

It was the interest of this work to evaluate the influence of leadership style and leadership acquisition in a collaborative environment. The levels of contribution were also evaluated along with these specificities of leaders. One of the questions tackled in the work was, how is leadership related to collaboration?

II. LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

A. First-order collaboration:

First order collaboration is collaboration where participants are directly addressing the common task without specific reference to other participants in the collaboration. Different type of first order collaboration is possible. Of interest to this work are four types described as follows:

Independent participants with balanced roles, common task: The participants came into the collaboration by the experiences they have acquired. The participants have similar or comparative experiences. Each participant can do what any other participants will do. The particularity in this case is that only one participant can not do the work. Example is a set of bees attacking a target. The task can be represented as a summation of individual contribution.

$$\text{Task} = Tg \cdot Rg \cdot \sum_n Ig$$

Where Tg is a unit of generic task, Ig is the generic identity and Rg is the generic role. The task for each of the participant is identical to the task of any other participants. The collaboration is managed by a centralized harmonization. It implies that the work of participants in the collaboration is viewed with respect to other participants in the collaboration. Example can be cited of a set of laborers harvesting fruits.

Independent participants with unbalanced, unified goal: It is possible to have participants coming into collaboration with divergent experiences and separated task. The participants are rated differently with their experiences and their contributions. The task of one participant is dependent on other participants only at the level of final result. A task and contribution of a participant is loosely dependent of task and contribution of other participants. A herd of buffalos can protect themselves from an attack from lions as long as they work together. The role played by individual buffalo is not the same across the herd. The unified goal can be summarized as

$$\text{Task} = \sum_n Tp \cdot Ip \cdot Rp$$

Where Tp is personal task of a participant, Ip is the personal identity characteristics and Rp is the personal role in the task.

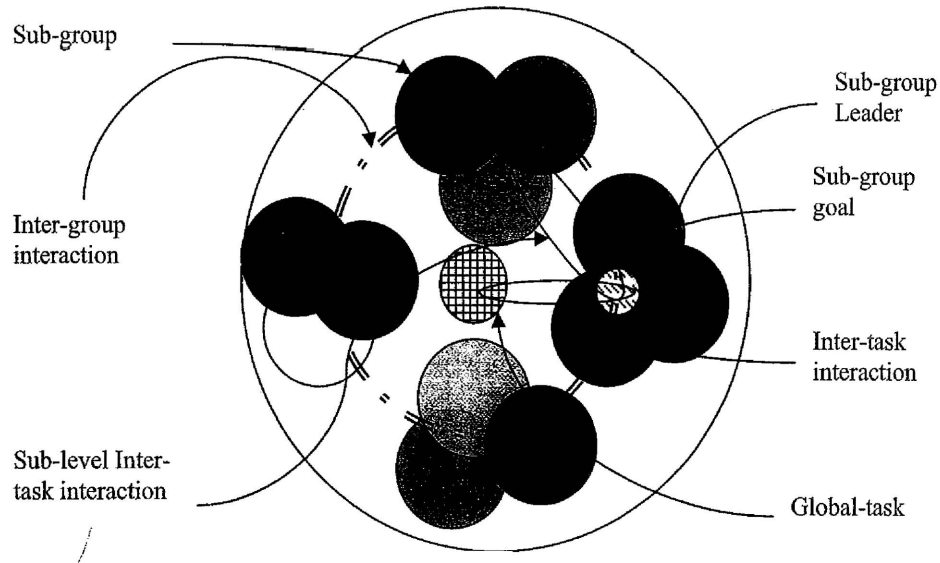


Fig. 1. Second Order Collaboration with Inter-personal and Inter-task Interactions

Independent participants with balanced roles, unified goal: It is possible to have participants coming into collaboration with divergent experiences and separated task. The participants are rated equally with their experiences and their contributions, though they may have divergent experiences. A common denomination is used to rate the participants. The task of one participant is dependent on other participants only at the level of final result. A task and contribution of a participant is dependent of task and contribution of other participants. The contribution of one participant though independent of others, it is achieved bearing in mind the other participants.

$$\text{Task} = T_b \cdot \sum_{i=1}^n I_p \cdot R_p$$

Where T_b is a unit of balanced task, I_p is the personal identity and R_p is the personal role.

Independent participants with varying roles, diversified goal: Collaboration may involve cases where participants come into collaboration with divergent experiences and separated task. The participants are rated independently with their experiences and their contributions, they may have divergent experiences. A common denomination is not used to rate the participants. The task of one participant is completely independent on other participants not only at the level of final result but at the level of individual contribution. A task and contribution of a participant is independent of task and contribution of other participants. The contribution of one participant though independent of others, it is achieved without bearing in mind the other participants. The only consideration is the consciousness of collaboration.

$$T1.R1.I1 \neq T2.R2.I2 \neq T3.R3.I3 \dots \neq Tn.Rn.In$$

Where T_n is personalized task, I_n is personalized identity and R_n is personalized role.

Independent participants with balanced roles, diversified goal: Collaboration may also involve cases where participants come into collaboration with divergent experiences and diversified goal. The participants are rated relatively balanced with their experiences and the contributions, though they may have divergent experiences. A common denomination is used to rate the participants. The task of one participant is completely independent on other participants not only at the level of final result but at the level of individual contribution. A task and contribution of a participant is independent of task and contribution of other participants. The contribution of one participant independent of others, it is achieved without bearing in mind the other participants. The only consideration is the consciousness of collaboration.

B. Group Collaboration:

Each of the previously described methods in the individual methods of collaboration (first-order collaboration) can be applied to group collaboration (second-order collaboration) as well. Though derivatives of first-order collaboration are possible in the second-order, this work is not intended to emphasize the transformation of first-order to second-order or relationship between first-order and second-order collaboration. However, close attention will be given to interactions in the second-order collaboration.

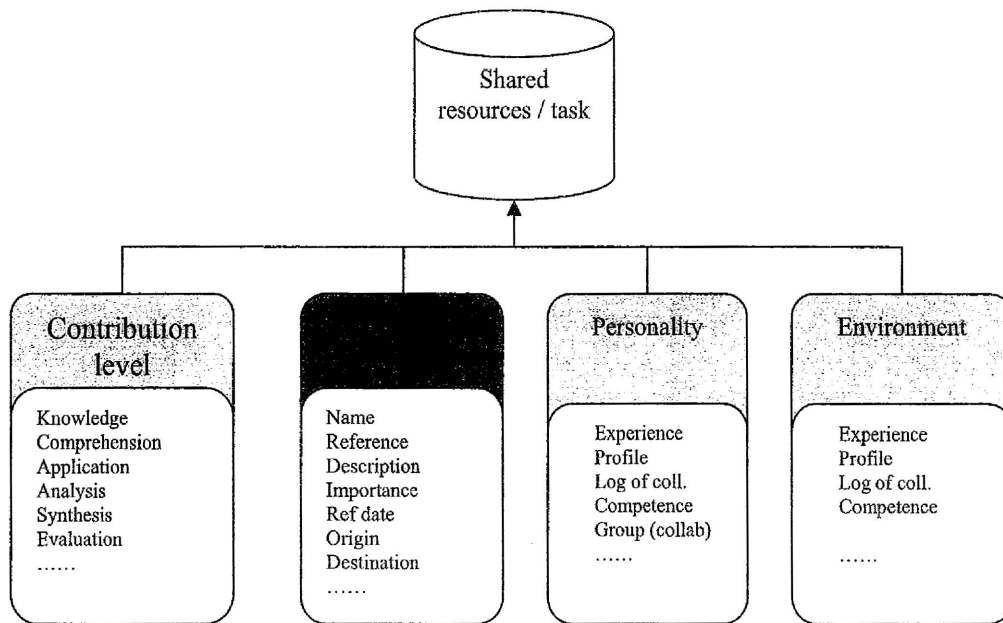


Fig. 2. Components of Shared Resources in Collaboration

Interactions: Second order collaboration is defined as collaborations within collaboration. This is common in systems where task can not be achieved by single collaboration. Example is a university system where the global task (at the university level) is subdivided into faculty tasks. Subsequently, in the faculties, faculty task are subdivided to departmental sub-tasks toward realization of faculty task all within the global university task. It can be summarized as follows: faculty task is being realized as second-order collaboration in the university task; department task is a second-order collaboration of faculty efforts. Of course, departmental work may even be considered as third-order collaboration within the university realization of objectives.

Second-order collaboration can be described with a simple illustration of figure 1. In the collaboration, it has six elements of: task, sub-task, interactions, participants, environment and collaborations.

The proposition here is to divide a common task into sub-tasks. This is because a task is being regarded as summation of other tasks. Better still, a global task is a combination of "graduated" or isolated (but related) tasks. The relationship between tasks is better considered in social works and personnel / enterprise psychology, it is not of importance in this work. For example, a thousand kilometers journey are journeys of separated "graduated" one kilometer journeys. In a case where participants play roles in realizing objectives, there may be leaders with specific roles in the sub-tasks. In reality, this is the commonest type of collaborative work. Example is a battalion of soldiers with special units. Each unit

is headed by a lieutenant. In a banking sector, we can have different kinds of units headed by a leader. The objective of setting up leaders is principally for coordination and for realization of sub-tasks within the global task.

All the highlighted parameters of leadership appointment, leadership role and the entire environment of collaborative efforts are of consideration for effective resource sharing when it is done for its reuse. Situating this work in a computer supported collaborative work; these details are being put in place using digital means to enhance collaborative efforts.

III. RESOURCE SHARING IN A COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENT

This section describes how personal role in a collaborative environment is characterized and shared. A shared resource is a combination of individual personality, collaborative environment, shared task and contribution level. The basis of sharing is that shared resources must be accessible to all (interested) participants at all time. Since each participant in collaborative efforts has something peculiar he can offer, what he is offering can be put into the disposition of the participants. To be able to do that, an accessible workspace (database) of collaboration is set up to permit access and deposit of individual resources. The component of the database integrates the peculiarities of the changing environment, specificities of individual participants and the characteristics of task in collaboration (as shown in Figure 2) The level of collaboration is measured using Blooms taxonomy [2].

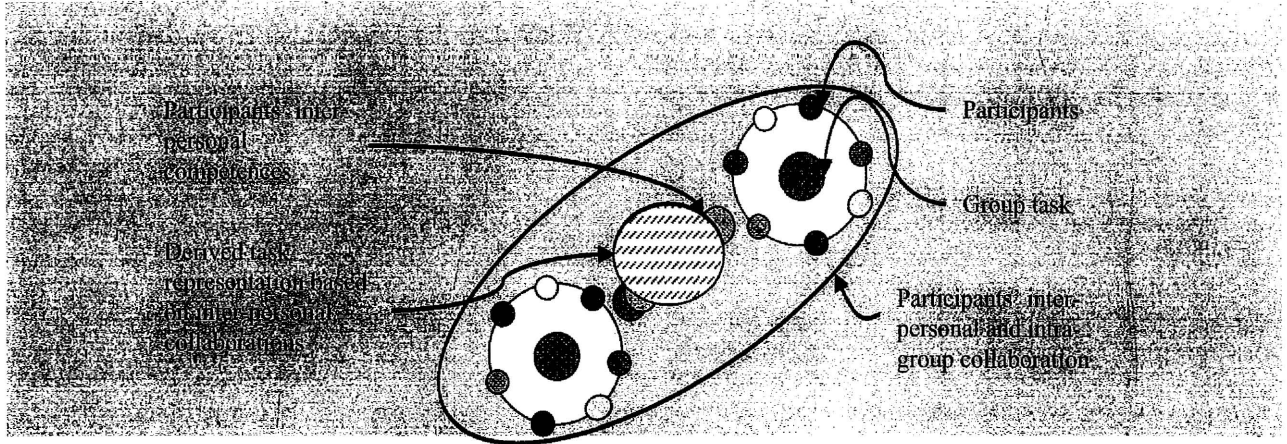


Fig. 3. Interpersonal Competence through Collaboration

Every contribution to collaboration is a function of four parameters of personality, Time of reference, Environment and level of contribution.

$$Ct = \int P(e, p, g) * T(R) * E * Cl$$

Where Ct is contribution, $P(e, p, g)$ is the personality in collaboration, $T(R)$ is time of reference E is environment and Cl is the contribution level. Each of these parameters was considered in detail when a participant contributes his experiences to the shared database.

A participant in a collaborative work sees the global task in a way that not only reflects his personality but his environment. In a second-order collaborative work, the participant also sees the work from the perspective of his group. It is then imperative to say that three version of tasks can be represented (a) central task (b) individual view of the central task (c) group view of the central task. Experience of each participant experience used in contributing to the task can be represented as:

$$\sum Ex.Ct \quad T.x \subseteq \phi$$

Where Ex is the aggregation of personal experiences. Ct is the aggregation of expressed competence of participants. Since experience and competence of participants depend on time (T) and their environment ($\forall x$), T and $\forall x$ were introduced as a factor of collaboration. A set of collaborations is interaction of participants on subject ϕ .

A successful collaboration is a factor of relationship, participants and task. This is represented with an illustration in Figure 3. Though the detail of relationship, sub-division of tasks and refinement of environment is not exhaustive, it underlined the interactions that exist across these components.

Based on these places of interest, a computer environment

was developed to capture individual respects to involvement in second-order collaborations. Though not limited to an academic environment, the importance of this proposition is being evaluated in an academic environment.

IV. RELATED WORK

A project named GAMETH was introduced in [4] to characterize industrial knowledge. The objective was to answer questions related to knowledge localization. The effort was directed at what was called "necessities in knowledge". It identified knowledge in an industrial setup in order to estimate its value, defined identified knowledge and made room for its justification. The question that is difficult to answer included: What is knowledge value? How can value be attributed to knowledge? Whereas this is an attempt on knowledge management, the issue of its "mis en valeur" (put into public use) is totally neglected. In the work of [3], attention was given to relationship between territorial intelligence devices and market system. Concrete examples were not given to buttress the relationships particularly in direction of knowledge management. A related work [8] gave us an overview of how knowledge can be shared. The way the work presented knowledge sharing in a collaborative environment, details of participating parameters were not adequately considered. It is therefore difficult to cross-reference shared knowledge except if it can be re-accessed, reused and reformatted.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVE

The work demonstrated the relationship between leadership and collaboration in a sharing environment. It was based on the fact that most collaborative work is rooted in leadership. It did not attempt to detail leadership role specifically but dwelled on the leadership typology and role. Resource sharing was characterized with leadership profile, task/problems, collaborative environment and contribution level. It characterization was for a computing environment where “detailed” resources can be kept in a sharable environment. Detail analysis of this characterization is in progress. Specific application of this proposal is in learning environment. Other applications (particularly in administration and public spaces) can be made.

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