

CHAPTER 3

A VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITY OF CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES

*Innovation in Digital Education: the experience of
The Virtual Learning Community of the Catholic
Universities Network – CVA-Ricesu*

*Eliane Schlemmer
Antonio Simão Neto
Francisco Botelho*

3.1 The CVA-Ricesu Network

The Virtual Learning Community of the Catholic Universities Network — CVA-Ricesu (Figure 3.1) links sixteen higher education institutions of different catholic orders and from different regions of Brazil (Figure 3.2), forming an innovative learning community which develops its actions using the methodology of projects.

This network, favoring learning and human development through interaction via digital technologies, shares resources, produces knowledge, facilitates communication, defines spaces suited for interaction, cooperation and collaboration, creates opportunities for continuing education, develops collective actions and fosters networked initiatives, in order to sustain and push forward good practices in teaching and learning being carried on by the partner universities.

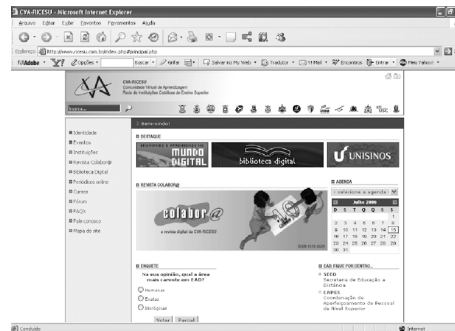


Figure 3.1 CVA-Ricesu



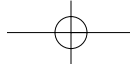
Figure 3.2 Map of localization of the Catholics Institutions of higher education who integrate the CVA-Ricesu

The overall goal of CVA-Ricesu is to share and develop human capacities and material assets of the institutions joining the network, in such way as to foster educational change in the age of digital education.

Higher education networks traditionally reproduce the organizational model of the comprising universities. Most set up highly hierarchic structures, centrally controlled, with rigid planning and slow responsibility to outside pressures. Distance education actions tend to be an extension of the face-to-face practices based on courses, disciplines and credits, with almost no space for innovation. What we see then is a big university composed of smaller ones, not a living, dynamic, synergic network.

Our network, which takes the form of a Virtual Community, aims to facilitate the emergence of micro-networks and support their articulation, sharing existing learning spaces and developing new ones, mediated by digital technologies.

In this direction, innovation is seen not as a goal in itself, but rather as a means to transform educational practices and promote creativity, critical thinking, solidarity, cooperation and autonomy. To transform is to re-shape, to re-arrange our institutional assets as well as to develop new common ones, aiming to better prepare our universities to face the great social, economic, cultural and educational challenges of the new millennium. CVA-Ricesu members share the idea that educational networks have an important role to play in such transformation.



3.2 The Network as a Virtual Learning Community

The CVA-Ricesu network is organized as a virtual community and employs project-based methodology and a collegiate management model in order to be malleable and adaptable to the challenges brought about by a dynamic society (Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3 shows the network as a system composed by cooperation cycles, forming micro-networks (sub-systems) in interaction with other micro-networks. This representation indicates that the system (the network) is constituted by the subsystems (micro-networks) and the relationships between them. Movement and transformation are not liabilities, but rather assets in a dynamic organization.

Thus synergy becomes a fundamental component of CVA-Ricesu's dynamics and is an expression of a systemic view in which knowledge is seen as a whole bigger than the sum of the parts that generated it.

Synergic educational micro-communities are built upon a basis of common interests and goals, complementary competences and cooperative practices. They are the environment where interaction among educational agents occur and is fostered, nourished and supported, aiming to construct knowledge and strengthen desirable values.

This universe of connected micro-communities of learners embodies an interactionist-constructivist-systemic framework, as it acknowledges that subject and object are active, open, living organisms in constant exchange with the environment through interactive processes that shape them and are shaped by them. Knowledge, then, is not a fixed, static body of information to be delivered to the students, but rather a continuing movement of construction and re-construction by learners in interaction.

As a virtual learning community, CVA-Ricesu is organized around common interests and shared goals, but it can and shall hold and welcome a diversity of motivations, values and visions. The expression and negotiation of conflicts, due to this diversity, are part of its dynamics and account for its flexibility and versatility.

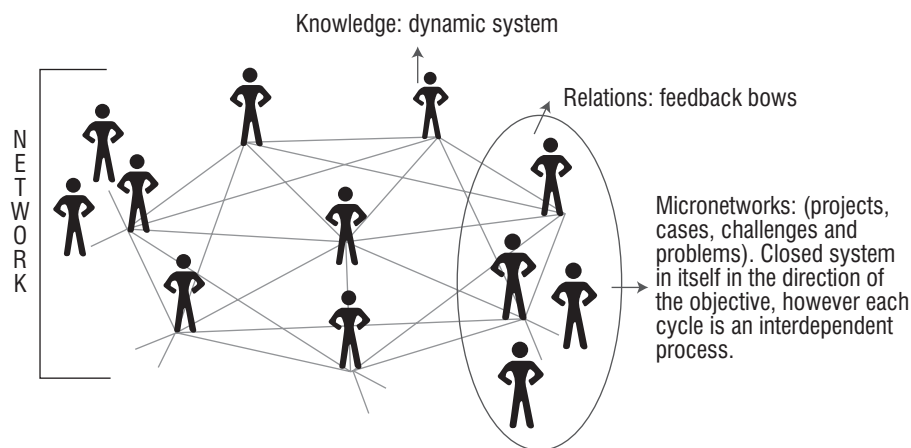
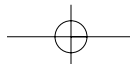


Figure 3.3 Network organized as a community – Network in a systemic vision (adapted from SCHLEMMER, 2002, p. 323 and QUINN, ANDERSON AND FINKELSTEIN, 2000, p. 193)



According to Lévy (1999) and Palloff and Pratt (1999), virtual communities are formed through a collaborative process of sharing visions, values, knowledge, projects and common goals. Piaget (1973) sees cooperation as a active process of co-operating – operating together – in which different points of view and autonomous conduct co-exist under the rules of mutual respect, willingness to collaborate and solidarity. Cooperation requires identification, sharing and conservation of a set of common values as well as engagement and reciprocity in interactions. Healthy communities feed on free flowing of information, collaboration, cooperation and open exchange of ideas: CVA-Ricesu is committed to this vision, since its foundation in August 7th, 2001.

3.3 Work Group Portfolio

A large proportion of CVA-Ricesu's work is carried on through Working Groups (WGs) and their guiding Projects. WGs rely heavily on digital communication and interaction in virtual environments, helped by face-to-face meetings whenever necessary. Members join working groups according to their capacities, interests, affinities and competencies, thus constituting non-formal, flexible micro-communities of practice. A WG has its own organization, rules and dynamics, and operates in a continuous, highly interactive way, always aiming to reach the objectives and goals established in the project that originated each work group.

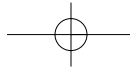
Any participant institution can suggest and propose new Projects through its representative in the Management Board, at any time. Proposals may be examined, discussed and voted either in the face-to-face MB meetings or via discussion lists and forums in a members-only area in CVA-Ricesu's website.

Institutions are free to join (or not) any active WG, according to their own interests, motivation, plans, availability of human and material resources and other criteria they may adopt.

The portfolio of ongoing Projects and Work Groups (2006) includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- CVA-Ricesu Digital Library;
- Colabor@, the network's online reference journal;
- CIQUEAD, the international congress on quality in distance education;
- BOA, the library of learning objects and digital teaching resources;
- Digital Education, a series of videoconference events and distance education online modules developed by inter-university partnerships;
- Amazonia Legal, implementing tele-centers for distance education in the Amazon Legal Region.
- Market Research, investigating and updating data on distance education offer and demand in 15 Brazilian cities.

CVA-Ricesu also aims to foster and support network collaborative actions, establishing synergy among institutions to connect individual initiatives through thematic work-



groups. Examples of such micronetworks, which set up their own objectives and action plans in a grounded, bottom-up manner:

- Managerial Sciences
- Digital Inclusion
- Health Sciences
- Tele-Medicine
- Mobile Learning
- Tele-Collaboration

Work Group actions are very enriching and stimulating experiences, with inspiring results for the individual institutions and the network. They demonstrate that cooperation and networked action can be important forms of collective production of knowledge, as well as effective ways of collaborative development and delivery of products and services.

3.4 Management and Decision Making Policies

CVA-Ricesu is managed through a Management Board, which regularly meets face-to-face for strategic planning and policy making, sharing of views, discussion of proposals, follow-up and evaluation of projects and WG actions, identification of opportunities for new projects and other cooperative work.

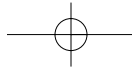
The Management Board is comprised by representatives of all the institutions forming the network. Each university has one member in the Management Board, nominated directly by the Dean of his/her institution.

Elections for Coordinator, Vice-Coordinator and Information Manager are held every two years, through single, direct vote of MB members. This small committee is responsible for the general, day-to-day management of the network, including funds management and accounting, official representation, human resources supervision, meetings and events organization, and so on.

Strategic planning and decisions, however, are taken by the whole of the Management Board, in face-to-face or virtual meetings, after discussions in which consensus is always sought for. Direct vote is taken only for issues in relation to which a consensual position was not reached.

Every face-to-face board meeting hosts a Thematic Forum aiming to update key issues concerning the main objectives of the network, as the MB also acts as a qualified consulting board for the partner institutions in distance education and related fields. These meetings are held once in each university on a rotating basis, as they help to keep up the feeling of belonging to an active network and provide the MB members with an on site view of day-to-day life of each university hosting them.

Work Groups management is done by the WG itself. Whenever a new WG obtains the Management Board approval to start its activities, a MB member is appointed as the WG's manager, who will act as a permanent link between the MB and the WG. The group's Coordinator is chosen by the WG itself.



Learning how to work cooperatively and collaboratively is one the main challenges CVA-Ricesu faces in its effort to develop relevant projects and actions, which need to be significant to the partner universities. Other issues such as funding, sharing assets and managing common resources effectively are also on the top of the agenda in board meetings and online discussions.

The management model adopted is helping the network to face these issues, being based, as it is, upon shared values, true collaboration, consensual decisions and respect for diversity.

Management Board and Work Group actions are closely followed by the Deans of the partner universities and the Brazilian Association of Higher Education Catholic Institutions, the broader entity to which CVA-Ricesu is affiliated.

3.5 Final Considerations

From day one our network has been sharing resources, producing knowledge, bridging communication gaps, opening up spaces for human development, fostering collective actions and networked activities which support and amplify teaching and learning processes.

It is taking the shape of a community with solid ethics and humanist spirit, committed to the respect of diversity and plurality of ideas. We believe that our innovative way of networking have helped us greatly in our successful trajectory and that the hierarchic organization traditionally sustained by educational networks could not favor or facilitate the universe of micro-communities and integrated projects we cherish and foster.

CVA-Ricesu is keeping up and improving its pace since its beginning: starting with a technological and scientific cooperation agreement, it progressed towards the self-organized community it is today – a large network comprising sixteen major Brazilian catholic universities – and is steadily growing in scope, reach and effectiveness. This initiative demonstrates that innovation in teaching and learning in the age of digital education should include new forms of organization of higher education institutions, *in sync* with the social, cultural, economic and technological changes we are experiencing in our “network society”.

3.6 References

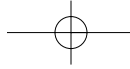
PALLOFF, Rena M.; PRATT, Keith. *Construindo comunidades de aprendizagem no ciberespaço*. Estratégias eficientes para salas de aula on-line. Rio de Janeiro: Artmed, 2002.

PIAGET, Jean. *Estudos Sociológicos*. Rio de Janeiro: Companhia Editora Forense, 1973.

SCHLEMMER, Eliane et al. “Princípios e pressupostos norteadores para a construção de uma nova graduação”. São Leopoldo: Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos (Unisinos), 2002.

_____. *AVA: Um ambiente virtual de convivência interacionista sistêmico para comunidades virtuais na cultura da aprendizagem*. 2002. 370f. Tese – Programa de Pós-Graduação em Informática na Educação, UFRS, Porto Alegre.





_____. "Ambiente virtual de aprendizagem (AVA): uma proposta para a sociedade em rede na cultura da aprendizagem". In: VALENTINI, Carla Beatris; SOARES, Eliana Maria do Sacramento (org.). *Aprendizagem em ambientes virtuais: compartilhando idéias e construindo cenários*. Caxias do Sul: Educus, 2005.

SENGE, Peter M. *A quinta disciplina: arte e prática da organização que aprende*. São Paulo: BestSeller, 1998.

SÍLVIO, José. *La virtualización de la universidad: ¿cómo podemos transformar la educación superior con la tecnología?* Caracas: Instituto Internacional de Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe (IESALC), 2000.

SIMÃO NETO, Antonio. "Comunicação e interação em ambientes de aprendizagem virtuais e presenciais". In: GOMES, P. e MATOS, E. (eds.) *Eureka. Uma experiência de virtualização da universidade*. Curitiba: Champanhat, 2002.

_____. "From task to process: in search of a strategy to foster collaboration in virtual learning environments". In: *Proceedings EDMEDIA 2004*. Lugano: American Association for Computers in Education, 2004.

Francisco Villa Ulhôa Botelho

E-mail: fbotelho@ucb.br

Site: www.ucb.br

Eliane Schlemmer

E-mail: elianes@unisinob.br

Site: www.ricesu.com.br

Antonio Simão Neto

E-mail: 4simao@terra.com.br

Site: <http://www.ricesu.com.br/>