

VEBA: A Virtual Experience-Based Approach for Graduate Study in eLearning

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Abstract

An innovative instructional system called VEBA (Virtual Experience-Based Approach) is a type of experiential learning system designed and developed for student-centered teaching and learning process via eLearning for eLearning graduate students, both Master and Doctoral degrees, at the College of Internet Distance Education, Assumption University. VEBA makes use of Project Casework Approach (PCW) to create VEBA packages comprising a virtual scenario, technical and academic information, rules and regulations, and seminar manuals. In the seminar, graduate students study the provided virtual scenario and perform the assigned tasks along seven steps: (1) Analyze the situation by studying the provided virtual scenario created in advance to render real life experiences to graduate students based on the Project Casework Approach (PCW); (2) Set objectives of what they are assigned to accomplish, i.e. one of the eight competencies illustrated above, such as Develop an education system or an HRD system; (3) Determine two-three alternatives or options toward accomplishing the assignment; (4) Compare the alternatives or options using relevant techniques such as SWOT, Costs, Return on Investment (ROI), Break Even Point (BEP), Payback Period,

and cash flows; (5) Select and justify the best alternative or option; (6) Write the action plan in the form of the Project with details as set forth in the objectives; and Step (7) Implement and evaluate the Project. However, in order to use VEBA, a set of VEBA-PCW packages needs to be developed along eight logical steps for VEBA packages production.

In July 2006, the College of Internet Distance Education, Assumption University of Thailand, launched a new Graduate program in eLearning Methodology to provide the opportunity for ICT personnel involving with management, production, delivery, and evaluation of eLearning services in both public and private sectors to pursue their graduate degree in eLearning science. The CIDE Graduate program offers an innovative, experience-based distance education approach through virtual environment called Virtual Experience-Based Approach based on a Project Casework Approach (PCW) to provide a virtual venue for its Graduate research students to experience a various steps of close-to-real life experience. The PCW was designed and developed in 1983 by Dr. Guenter Tharun, former Director of CDG-SEAPO in Bangkok. VEBA approach is offered through a series of graduate seminars using a blended mode of eLearning.

VEBA was developed on a set of philosophy, learning principles, and student-centered approaches to provide close-to-real life experiences through a scenario using a systematic plan of actions to create appropriate virtual environment to CIDE graduate students.

1. Philosophy

VEBA adheres to two schools of philosophy: existentialism and progressivism. Existentialism believes the students should learn according to their need for education through the process of making their own objectives, selecting the knowledge and experiences they need to learn, and manage their own learning through a natural process similar to real life situation.

2. Learning Principles

VEBA employs sets of two learning theories to be embedded throughout the experience encountering process.

There are two groups of learning principles applied to distance learning: S-R Theories and Field Theories.

According to S-R Theories, learning occurs when an appropriate stimulus (S) is given, the student responses (R) appropriately to the stimulus, and the student receives appropriate reinforcement (Re). The students, consequently, must be taught a topic of content in well-thought logical orders, steps by steps, with appropriate, well designed content presentation through an effective multi-media package. Each student gets involved in the learning process through active learning, and complete the works assigned by the instructor who, in turn, checks the outcomes (assignments, reports, activities) and provide comments as feedback to help him/her improve his/her learning and assignments.

Field theories on the other hand assert that learning takes place when the students have the need to learn and engage in active learning. Most important of all, learning must take place in an appropriate environment, physical, psychological and social.

VEBA makes use of the integrated applications of the two sets of learning psychologies for the production of virtual environment by providing the four conditions to facilitate learning and make sure that appropriate organizers are applied in the courseware.

The four conditions needed for facilitating effective learning are active participation, immediate feedback, success experiences, and gradual approximation.

Active participation - During VEBA activities, students are programmed to get actively involved in the learning process by discussing, performing and completing all activities and assignments provided in the course. In this case, the students read the provided virtual scenario and perform the tasks through group process, problem solving, case studies, and actively discussion and work out according to the PCW steps.

Immediate feedback - After completing the VEBA activities assigned for each step, the results of their performance are provided for improvement as feedback, either immediate or delayed, through comments by members of other groups and by the instructor or resource persons.

Success experiences - The feedback given to the students gives the student the feeling of success. It becomes reinforcement to encourage the students to further their studies. Comments help students correct their mistakes and improve their work while praises or admiration drive them further to more success in learning.

Gradual approximation - In the process of peer-directed learning, the students are gradually directed to progress along bits of knowledge and experience, well analysed in

advance in the form of PCW packages, through the process of approximation or thorough thinking along the logical step-by-step approach.

An organizer helps the students to be aware of what knowledge or experience they are expected to encounter, in what manner, through what means and process, for what outcomes, and in what situation the learning outcome should be transferred.

There are three learning organizers to be integrated in the courseware production process: advance organizers, concurrent organizers, and post organizers.

Advance organizers - An advance organizer provides the learning plan to the students at the beginning of a lesson to let them know the topics, concepts or main ideas, objectives, learning activities, instruction media, learning resources, and evaluation process.

Concurrent organizers - A concurrent organizer is a tool to help the students acquire the knowledge, read the require subject matter or know-how, get hand-on experiences, perform the assigned tasks, and check the results of their work.

Post organizers - A post organizer provides generalization or conclusion of what the students learn and how they should apply what they learning in different situations.

3. Need Competencies

In the Graduate eLearning Program, it is expected that after their graduation, eLearning Graduate holders should be able to participate and perform eight (8) areas of tasks. The following competencies are needed:

- (1) Participate in Developing Educational System/HRD/Training Systems of the eLearning or ICT organization;

- (2) Develop eLearning Systems or ICT Systems for eLearning or ICT organization;
- (3) Restructure or establish eLearning agencies (Offices, Centers, Units) within the Organization;
- (4) Develop eLearning Management Plans of eLearning agencies established in the Organization;
- (5) Develop eLearning or ICT Master Plans to be incorporated into the Organization's Master Plan ;
- (6) Develop eLearning Operation Plans for the Organization;
- (7) Implement or produce eLearning systems: LMS, CMS, SMS, and TMS as required by the Organization;
- (8) Conduct research and studies in the eLearning both academic research and institutional research.

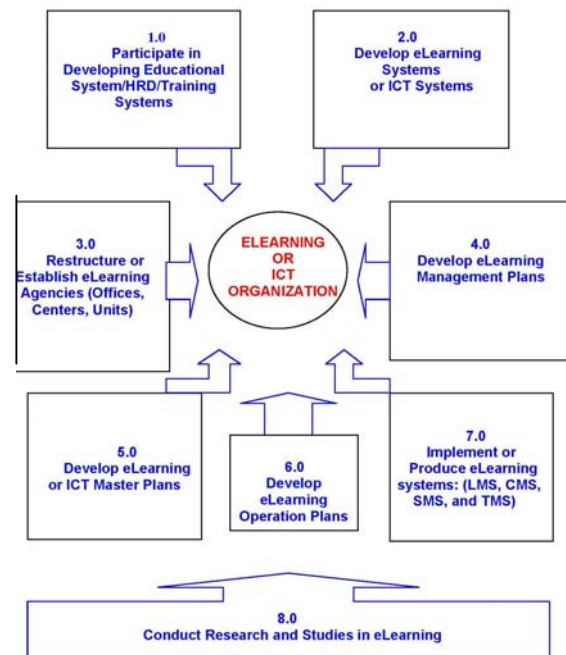


Fig. 1 Flowchart Showing Expected Competencies Needed by ELearning Ph.D. Holders

4. VEBA Instructional Process

According to the VEBA, eLearning graduate students participate in a series of Graduate Seminars, face-to-face or on-line via video conferences:

(1) Academic Seminars: 2-4 per semester (First year)

(2) Research Seminars: 2-4 per semester (Second year and onward);

The themes of the eLearning Graduate Seminars are based on expected competencies of graduate students after their graduation transferable to real life working experiences.

During each graduate seminar, the graduate students go through the following steps:

Step I Analyse the situation by studying the provided virtual scenario created in advance to render real life experiences to graduate students based on the Project Casework Approach (PCW);

Step II Set objectives of what they are assigned to accomplish, i.e. one of the eight competencies illustrated above, such as Develop an education system or an HRD system.

Step III Determine two-three alternatives or options toward accomplishing the assignment;

Step IV Compare the alternatives or options using relevant techniques such as SWOT, Costs, Return on Investment (ROI), Break Even Point (BEP), Payback Period, and cash flows.

Step V Select and justify the best alternative or option

Step VI Write the action plan in the form of the Project with details as set forth in the objectives.

Step VII Implement and evaluate the Project

For each task or assignment, a period of 3-5 days is needed for traditional face-to-face seminar. Through eLearning approach, certain activities, Steps 1-3 might be carried out individually; thus a period of two days may be sufficient for face-to-face seminar workshop to carry out Steps 4-6. Step 7 may be actually implemented but should contain tentatively guidelines or suggestions for

actual implementation, evaluation, and monitoring.

The evaluation of each seminar workshop is based upon the PCR model, i.e. participation, contributions, and results of the group work.

5. Components of VEBA Packages

VEBA is possible only after a set of well-developed packages are produced. The most effective type of seminar packages are developed through the PCW approach comprising six components:

5.1 Scenario of an eLearning Organization

An eLearning organization with fictitious name such as “The CIDEL Company” is created with the following information:

- (1) Background Information on the Country (such as Sarakhan) and the Province or City (such as Watana Nakorn) in which the Company is located;
- (2) The Company Profile: Philosophy, Vision, Mission, Policies, History, Planning, Organizing, Staffing, Directing Controlling, Communicating (Coordinating and Collaborating), Allocating Resources, Reporting, and Evaluating, Nature of Products and Services, Problems and future plans.
- (3) PCW Technical and Ac Information: Technical papers, best practiced, principles and theories, and case studies of eLearning
- (4) Laws, based on the themes of the Graduate Seminars; Rules and Regulations on eLearning: Domestic and International;
- (5) Forms and Documentations: official and institutional;
- (6) The Source Book/Knowledge Center on eLearning.

5.2 Seminar Manual/Training Guide

Seminar Manual and Training Guide are guidelines for conducting both types of graduate seminars throughout the Graduate study program.

6. Plan of Actions:

The plan of actions for the production of VEBA-PCW packages and the implementation of graduate seminars are to be undertaken cooperatively by both students and academic staff:

The six steps for VEBA-PCW package production model are as follows:

- 1) Develop a set of PCW packages representing a virtual eLearning organization. All graduate students are virtually members of the established virtual organization. Cases, problems, working situations are based on real life situations so that graduate students can have hand-on experiences in the simulated situation;
- 2) Prepare a Seminar Manual for all sessions of the eLearning Graduate Seminars;
- 3) Plan the details of academic and research seminar;
- 4) Conduct academic seminars;
- 5) Conduct research seminars;
- 6) Evaluate and monitor the outcomes of academic and research seminars.

See the flow chart in Fig.2

7. Seminar Manuals

Seminar manuals (SM) provide the know-how for conducting VEBA instructional process. Each SM should contain the steps on how to study in each session presented in logical orders. Normally, an SM comprises Preface, Table

of Contents, Instructions on How to Use the Manual, Learning Route, Pre-tests, Seminar Programs, Session Plans, Appendices, Forms, and Post-tests.

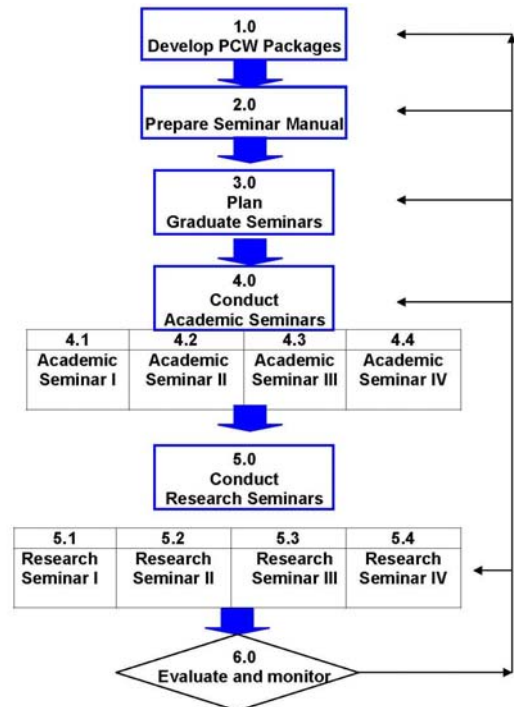


Fig. 2 Flow-chart showing Plan of Actions for VEBA Graduate Seminar Series in eLearning Methodology

8. Advantages of VEBA

Four advantages are foreseen from out of the VEBA instructional system:

- 1) Graduate students will be able encounter virtual experiences in various areas of eLearning planning, production, delivery, and evaluation from the pre-program virtual realities;
- 2) This is an innovative, experience-based Graduate teaching and learning approach giving an emphasis on participatory methods for the Graduate students and by the graduate students;
- 3) The innovative VEBA-PCW learning environment will be created to help track the Graduate students' progress and success. Otherwise, if not well disciplined, some Graduate students

may not be able to keep abreast with their study plans; thus, times and efforts may be wasted.

- 4) The established virtual eLearning organization, as a living and learning organization, will grow and remain to be the platforms for encountering professional experience of future eLearning graduate students for many years to come.

9. Conclusion

VEBA is an innovative graduate study technique developed to support student-centered virtual environments to be a platform for graduate students to practice the various aspects of competencies to make them ready to work in the real life after their graduation. It applies a set of philosophy, learning principles, logical steps in VEBA packages learning and production base on PCW approach for the creation of virtual scenario and necessary information needed for group work to carry out the assignments during the specific period of 2-5 days.