

Chapter 4

Current Trends and Perspectives in the K–12 Canadian Blended and Online Classroom

Constance Blomgren
Athabasca University, Canada

ABSTRACT

Canada has a history and geography that has required the use of distance education models and resources, and with its distributed population the potential of blended and online learning to further address K-12 learning needs is presently viewed by government as a means to deliver public education. These commitments have produced numerous responses and concerns regarding technical infrastructure, discussions regarding pedagogy, professional development of teachers, and establishing the means to meet the needs of twenty-first century learners. The following overview provides the Canadian K-12 context and educational trends, issues, and concerns within digital technologies and distance learning. The resulting summary holds significance for jurisdictions that have a vast geography and dispersed rural students, indigenous populations, as well as K-12 urban learners who require flexible access to educational delivery. Additionally, the overview contributes to the emerging understanding and the variety of response to digital technologies as part of the Canadian educational landscape.

INTRODUCTION

Covering over 9,093,507 km² (Statistics Canada, 2005), Canada has a population density of 3.5 persons per square kilometer, one of the lowest in the world (Canada. Natural Resources Canada, 2003). Because of its vast geography, low population density, and a string of small communities variably distributed throughout, equitable access to K-12 education has been and will continue to be a significant concern. Being true to the Iroquois word *kanata*, “a cluster of dwellings...a series of towns” (Rayburn, 2001, pp. 13-14), or as a community of communities, Canada will be marking in 2017 its 150th anniversary

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of nationhood. To support Canadians into the 21st century, the current Federal government has worked to ensure equitable digital access to all reaches of the nation (Canada. Ministry of Industry., 2014). Increasingly, the assumed cost effectiveness of online learning feeds provincial interest (Barbour, 2013). Concomitantly, the history of distance education has been, and will continue to be, intricately tied to the dispersed population and their needs.

To outline precisely the current state of Canadian K – 12 online learning is a difficult task due to the continual shifts of educational policy, provincial budgets, professional hesitancy, and public will in relation to the quick and dramatic changes inherent to digital learning technologies. Despite these challenges, the following summary tracks the trends and issues of the K – 12 blended and online learning environment within the current Canadian context. It touches upon developments in the Maritimes, Quebec, First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI)¹, the prairies and develops in more detail the Canadian leaders of Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta.

DEFINITIONS

From the historical roots of distance education with ties to correspondence print offerings, delayed time and non-shared space, a contemporary, complicated and expanding lexicon has developed. Although various authors have defined distance education, distance learning, online education, e-learning, distributed, blended and digital learning, a brief summary of these delineations provides a common understanding of what is meant within this burgeoning field (Bates, 2008; Lowenthal & Wilson, 2010; Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011). *Distance education* or *distance learning* reconfigures the teaching and learning approach of a traditional classroom with the qualities of a shared space and time, with the synchronous *face-to-face* experience for both the teacher and students (Volery & Lord, 2000). Additionally, according to Bates (2008) distance education may be defined as “less a philosophy and more a method of education. Students can study in their own time, at the place of their choice (home, work or learning centre), and without face-to-face contact with a teacher. Technology is a critical element of distance education” (para 4). The Alberta Distance Learning Centre (ADLC), which provincially dominates Alberta K-12 distance educational delivery, defines distance learning as “teaching and learning when students may not be required to be physically present at specific locations or times. Instead, students communicate remotely with their teachers and complete course work using print and/or electronic materials” (Alberta Distance Learning Centre, 2016, para 1).

The contemporary terms of online learning, virtual learning, and e-learning may be part of a distance education experience that consistently involves the use of computers; such a learning environment may be consistently physically separated or *blended* with periodic face-to-face interactions or supplemented with printed materials or other resource media (Bates, 2008). Through the use of the Internet, online learning allows for the use of new teaching approaches such as collaborative and interactive tools; access to a plethora of learning resources which consistently and constantly expand and increase in quality; and communication possibilities among students, teachers, and individuals and groups throughout the world (Volery & Lord, 2000).

Distributed learning is a “flexible approach to any learning that is purposefully designed to allow teachers, students, and learning and teaching resources in the regular classroom setting or in different, non-centralized locations, to interact while separated by time and/or place for some or all their learning activities” (Alberta. Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 5). Distributed learning may denote not only the

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