

Growth of Online Schooling in Canada

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INTRODUCTION

In Canada, a country of vast landscapes, northern climates and relatively few people, the formal provision of education has always involved alternatives. Records going back to the late 1800s discuss pilot projects that provided education to school-aged children in remote rural areas. Correspondence education, beginning in 1919 and offered by almost all provincial authorities, depended on the post and long-distance haulage to link students and teachers (Haughey, 1990). Each new technology became a part of an educational provision that was of particular importance to secondary school students, who were unable to obtain sufficient courses at their local school to qualify for a high school diploma.

More recently, the advent of computers and the Internet have transformed this alternative form of education. It has changed from one for those unable to attend classroom-based instruction to one that is being chosen by students for its adaptability and flexibility, as well as for the ongoing reasons associated with long distances to schools, unavailable courses, and family and personal circumstances. In this chapter, I review the development and present configurations of online schooling in Canada and discuss trends and issues this new form of provision has raised.

ONLINE SCHOOLING PROVISION

Online or virtual schools are organizations that provide formal school courses through Web-based instruction to registered K-12 students as part or all of their educational requirements. Online school courses were first offered in Alberta in 1995 (St. Gabriel Cyber School, www.albertaonline.ab.ca), and since that time, most provinces now offer online courses to school-aged students. The overall number of students is still very small relative to the enrollments in the 119 United States (U.S.) school programs identified by Clarke (2001). There has not been a similar documentation of offerings in Canada.

Compared to the specialized development in the U.S., Canadian online school programs are usually part of the offerings of the local school jurisdiction. The student may be a senior taking one course to complete a school diploma, or an elementary student whose illness means that the student is best served by an online program that the student accesses from home. In many provinces, the focus is on secondary provision; however, elementary students can take online courses, also.

The two major providers of online education are school jurisdictions and provincial governments. Many provinces have continued to support distance education for students in grades 1 through 12 and are finding fewer elementary students who register for courses or complete programs compared to the increase in numbers of secondary students. School jurisdictions began by offering online courses, and they gradually formed virtual schools that offered complete programs. In some cases, jurisdictions have collaborated to offer course work, so there are a variety of models of virtual schooling across Canada (Haughey, 2000).

A number of reasons have been associated with the growth of online learning. Students traditionally chose distance education because of a lack of required courses, or their need for greater flexibility to allow them to compete in elite sports or arts programs, to travel with their families, or to sustain their schooling despite chronic illness or incarceration. Many parents and students welcomed online programming. For some parents who found home schooling too difficult and demanding for their own competencies, online learning provided an opportunity for their child to work with a certificated teacher but in a home setting. Students bored by the strong print component of conventional correspondence education appreciated the interactivity with peers as well as with the teacher that online schooling brought (Snyder, 1997). The advent of computer networks coincided with demographic factors, which meant that more families had one person at home who could supervise a student's school work. However, these early rationales from home-schooled families have been surpassed in the last three years by the demand for

course options at the secondary level. Resulting from a combination of cutbacks in educational budgets; a continuing migration to urban centres; the decline of primary resource industries such as fishing, forestry and farming; and growth of youth part-time employment; the need for access to specialist courses has surpassed all other demands. In most situations, students attending school-based classes are also taking one or two online courses to complete their requirements.

In Canada, there is no federal department of education; instead, each province and territory is responsible for and funds its own education system. Yet, because of the transiency of the Canadian population (among other factors), there is strong cooperation and similarities among the different provinces and territories. The various regions of Canada moved into online offerings for different reasons and the differing provincial arrangements have given rise to differing emphases in online schooling (Haughey, 2002).

ONLINE SCHOOL INITIATIVES

In British Columbia (B.C.), alternative education has been available only through the nine government-funded distance-learning centres that provided access to distance-learning print courses. In 1995, they began working with the Open School to develop multimedia-based online courses. They subsequently formed a consortium of distance learning schools, CoNNect (www.k12connect.ca), to pilot and then offer these courses. Open School BC (www.openschool.bc.ca), funded in part by the B.C. government and operated by New Westminster school jurisdiction, develops multimedia online courses that these distance-learning centres and other school districts can then offer to students. The Open School's staff includes Web designers and educational specialists, as well as teachers.

Since 2002, the B.C. legislation and funding formulae allow districts to develop their own online programs and provide courses to students from other districts. Immediately, some of the large districts (e.g., Vancouver School Board, <http://www.gvdes.com>) began offering online courses for their students. Most other jurisdictions belong to the COOL school, or Consortium of Online-Learning schools (www.coolschool.bc.ca). Using a collaborative model, the school jurisdictions involved pay a common fee and agree to common course development that their individual online teachers then

use. This has led to a high level of sophistication in Web-based learning designs (Lee, 2003).

In Alberta, there are 19 virtual school programs (www.albertaonline.ab.ca). Funding is per child and parents can choose where to school their child. This can be at home, through a virtual school, through the provincial distance-learning centre or through a combination of these, besides attendance at a charter school or in the public school system. Most virtual school programs are run by individual school jurisdictions (or a combination of these), and most take children from their own jurisdiction only, while some accept registrations from anywhere in the province, nationally or internationally. The largest have about 2000 online students (School of Hope, www.schoolofhope.org); some have 400 to 600 enrollments (St. Paul's Academy, www.redeemer.ab.ca/; Argyll/LearnNet On-Line, <http://argyll.epsb.ca/>; and Cbe-learn, www.cbe.earn.courses.sr.html), but most have fewer than 250. In most cases, the teachers have written their own courses. Students access the materials on the Web through a course management system and interact with their teachers and other students via some combination of synchronous and asynchronous conferencing, e-mail, fax, phone and mail. Some programs have set times when a group of students is online together through a synchronous system such as V-Class or NetMeeting (Haughey & Muirhead, 2004).

In Saskatchewan, the government distance-learning school offers some courses online, although most are still in print. The government has also set up a virtual school, Central I-School (www.centralischool.ca), and has seconded teachers to write and offer high school courses online. Students from anywhere in the province can register for these courses with the permission of their school principal. In 2003, the government formed an E-Learning Branch and is developing a process for transfer of the coordination of the virtual school to this Branch (C. Luciuk, personal correspondence, November 26, 2003). One of the differences about the Saskatchewan initiative is that the multimedia course development is for the provincial network rather than for individual schools. The main reason for the virtual school is to provide better access to courses for students in small high schools. In addition, at least one school district, Saskatoon Catholic Cyber School (www.scs.sk.ca/cyber/home.htm), has its own online offerings for its students (Tunison, 2003).

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