Chapter 18

A Blended Approach
to Canadian First
Nations Education:
The SCcyber E-Learning Community

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a research study that investigated how a blended approach to Canadian First Nations education could be used to foster student engagement and success. The study examined the SCcyber E-Learning Community program through the lens of the Seven Principles of Effective Teaching (Chickering & Gamson, 1999). Data was collected via an online survey, interviews, and site visits. The study participants indicated that the deliberate and intentional integration of mentors at local learning centers with online teachers, who provide synchronous tutorials through the use of a Web-based learning management system and conferencing tool, was the key to academic success.

INTRODUCTION

The Sunchild First Nation Reserve is located in the western central part of Alberta, Canada. The reserve has an area of 52.18 square km (Figure 1). As of 2008, this First Nation had a registered population of 1209 people, of whom 732 live on their reserve (Government of Canada, 2008).

In 1999, members of the Sunchild First Nation considered the lack of education in their community and decided alternative methods were needed to reach First Nations students. They discovered that:

Figure 1.
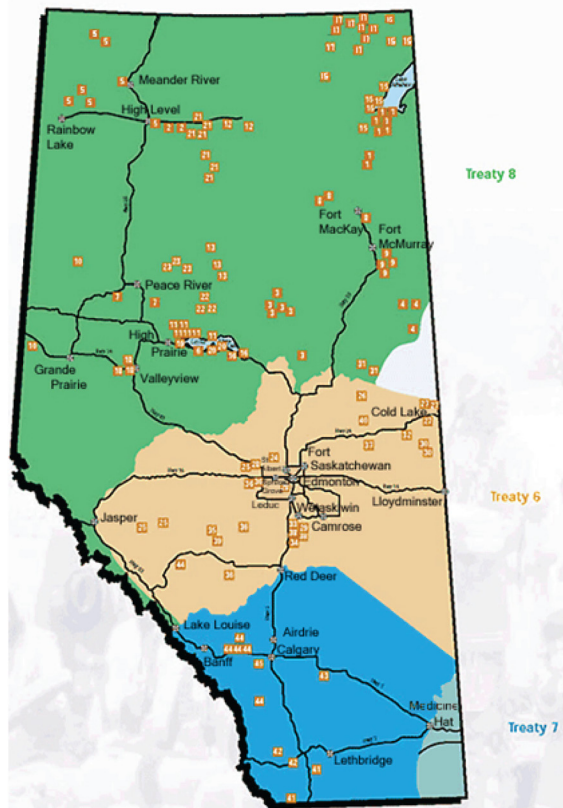
- First Nations students faced unique challenges including family and legal situations, time away from class and relocating to new homes.
- Many First Nations students were adults. These students wanted to upgrade and build a better future while meeting their current schedules and responsibilities (SCcyber E-Learning Community, 2012).

In order to address these challenges the SCcyber E-Learning Community Program was established. This program adopted a blended learning approach for high school courses by combining the use of mentors at 21 local learning centers with online teachers who provide synchronous tutorials through the use of a web-based learning management system and conferencing tool.

The purpose of this research study was to investigate if and how this blended approach to Canadian First Nations education could be used to foster student engagement and success. All students enrolled in the SCcyber E-Learning Community were invited to complete an anonymous online survey in the fall 2011 semester. Online follow-up interviews were conducted with students in the winter 2012 semester as well as online interviews with learning centre mentors, online teachers, and administrators involved in the program. In addition, site visits to learning centers were undertaken. The following three questions were used to guide this study:

1. What are the advantages of a blended approach to Canadian First Nations education?
2. What are the challenges?
3. Recommendations for improving this approach to Canadian First Nations education?

BLENDED LEARNING

The idea of blending different learning experiences has been in existence ever since humans started thinking about teaching (Williams, 2003). What has recently brought this term into the limelight is the infusion of web-based technologies into the learning and teaching process (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Clark, 2003). These technologies have created new opportunities for students to interact with their peers, teachers, and content.

Blended learning is often defined as the combination of face-to-face and online learning (Sharpe et al., 2006; Williams, 2002). Ron Bleed, the former Vice Chancellor of Information Technologies at Maricopa College, argues that this is not a sufficient definition for blended learning as it simply implies "bolting" technology onto a traditional course, using technology as an add-on to teach a difficult concept or adding supplemental information. He suggests that instead, blended learning should be viewed as an opportunity

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