International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning

IRRODL — THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF RESEARCH IN OPEN AND DISTRIBUTED LEARNING

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Cite this article

Article abstract

Canada's postsecondary institutions are becoming increasingly involved with technology enhanced learning, generally under the rubric of distance education. Growth and activity in distance education stems from rapid developments in communication and information technologies such as videoconferencing and the Internet. This case study focuses on the use of new technologies, primarily within the context of higher education institutions operating in Canada's English speaking provinces. Capitalising on the interactive capabilities of "new" learning technologies, some distance education providers are starting to behave more like conventional educational institutions in terms of forming study groups and student cohorts. Conversely, new telecommunications technologies are having a reverse impact on traditional classroom settings, and as a result conventional universities are beginning to establish administrative structures reflective of those used by distance education providers. When viewed in tandem, these trends reflect growing convergence between conventional and distance learning modes, leading to the hybridisation of higher education in Canada.

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Abstract

Canada's postsecondary institutions are becoming increasingly involved with technology enhanced learning, generally under the rubric of distance education. Growth and activity in distance education stems from rapid developments in communication and information technologies such as video-conferencing and the Internet. This case study focuses on the use of new technologies, primarily within the context of higher education institutions operating in Canada's English speaking provinces. Capitalising on the interactive capabilities of "new" learning technologies, some distance education providers are starting to behave more like conventional educational institutions in terms of forming study groups and student cohorts. Conversely, new telecommunications technologies are having a reverse impact on traditional classroom settings, and as a result conventional universities are beginning to establish administrative structures reflective of those used by distance education providers. When viewed in tandem, these trends reflect growing convergence between conventional and distance learning modes, leading to the hybridisation of higher education in Canada.

More and more postsecondary institutions in Canada have become involved with technology enhanced learning, generally under the rubric of distance education. Undoubtedly, a major reason for the growth of interest and activity in distance education is a result of rapid developments in what Agre (2000, pg 5) calls "radically improved technologies of information" – essentially computer based telecommunications technologies (in particular, the Web/ Internet and to a lesser extent, interactive video-conferencing).

In the case of the Web /Internet, the appeal of the technology is its ubiquity, affordability, ease of use and vast capacity for accessing and facilitating the flow of information. In the case of interactive video-conferencing, the apparent similarity to the traditional lecture format undoubtedly facilitates the involvement of teaching faculty (Shale and Kirek, 1997). In addition to extending access to geographically or circumstantially isolated students, the real-time interactive capabilities of the new technologies allow for increased interaction between teachers and students – a widely recognised limitation to the older distance delivery modes, such as correspondence.

Interestingly, capitalising effectively on this kind of inter-active capability in the "new" learning technologies is leading some distance education providers

to behave more like conventional educational institutions. For example, the three newest universities in British Columbia have incorporated mechanisms for creating cohorts of students to act as study groups – and for ensuring that group inter-action can indeed occur. This implies set start and completion times for assignments, as well as for the course. Sometimes the group learning activity occurs through online sessions that occur at set times. However, such social aspects of learning will often take the form of some kind of face-to-face contact on a campus. This, of course, is contrary to the early philosophy of open learning systems that sought, *inter alia*, to minimise constraints of time and place.

The capabilities of the new telecommunications technologies to support multi-mediated learning are also having a reverse impact on classroom instruction (Newman and Scurry, 2001). Traditional approaches to using traditional forms of multi-media in classrooms often required specialised skills in the various technologies and specialised, expensive equipment. They were also generally so labour intensive that the time and effort required to use them, limited their use. It is comparatively much easier to use the Web/ Internet and the related software that supports word processing, desktop publishing and so on – and to make the results available to students. Moreover, classrooms are increasingly being equipped to support multi-mediated displays and Internet based information resources.

So, one aspect of the hybridisation of conventional institutions of higher education has been an increase in distance education programming (Shale, 1999). Another aspect is the developmental convergence of face-to-face instructional methods (through multi-mediated delivery) and computer based interactive delivery technologies (through the Web, interactive video-conferencing and so on) (Newman and Scurry, 2001). As one result of these developments, higher education institutions also have to develop new structures in budgeting, instructional support, governance, and organisation – features which are analogous to what one finds in dedicated distance education providers.

However, there are other ways in which the conventional higher education institutions are responding to the open learning ethos created by distance education. One of these is through participation in virtual universities. Although the concept of the virtual university has often been quite vague, in many instances it involves a coming together of providers of distance education courses and programs for purposes of leveraging the "offering power" of any single provider through an association of some sort with the others.

Generally this banding together provides a sort of portal effect (in the Web sense) where students can access a full range of educational programs provided by the institutions in aggregate – whereas any given institution would be constrained by the range of distance education programming each does. To the extent that the virtual university umbrella works in this way, a given conventional institution stands to become a more active and effective participant in distance education. The Open University Consortium of British Columbia (Open

University Planning Council, 1995) has been an example of this kind of approach. More recently we have the example of the Canadian Virtual University (http://www.cvu-uvc.ca/english.html.).

However, in other instances there have been concerted attempts to develop "shared" programming in the sense of facilitated transfer of course credits and formalised articulation of programs – especially to bridge the college/technical institute and university gap. The Canadian "open universities", Athabasca University, the Open Learning Agency, and the Tele-universite have long had mechanisms in place to support this kind of activity. The University of Northern British Columbia, although essentially campus based, regionally as well as centrally, is an example of the conventional style of distance education provision derived from on-campus operations, but with strategic efforts to facilitate the transfer of previously earned credits and to articulate programs with colleges in the northern British Columbia region.

Finally, it needs to be said that there is a strong current of reactionary bandwagonism and financial opportunism that explicitly and implicitly underlay the interest of higher education institutions in alternative delivery methods. One apocalyptic view has the conventional institutions on the road to obsolescence and put out of business by the "new" technologically based educational enterprises. For example, Katz, 1999, pg 15, states, "Some colleges and universities might disappear. Some might actually acquire other institutions. One might even imagine a Darwinian process emerging with some institutions devouring their competition in hostile takeovers."

There are many reasons to regard this kind of rhetoric as far-fetched, even self-serving. However, this particular quote was taken up verbatim in the report of The Advisory Committee for Online Learning, a joint creation of the Consortium on Public Expectations for Postsecondary Education of the Ministers of Education, Canada, (CMEC) and Industry Canada. The position of the Advisory Committee is not atypical and resonance of their position can be heard in the recent (March, 2000) Report from the Task Force on Learning Technologies, which was an initiative of the Council of Ontario Universities.

Others take the view that there is money to be made from the unbounded markets that purportedly are opened up by the remote delivery technologies. As we will see in a later section of the article, these sorts of expectations have lead to some interesting "unintended consequences" for institutions attempting to capitalize on these perceived benefits.

The discussion presented here assumes a pedagogic view of the hybridisation of higher education. It should, perhaps, be acknowledged that technology is also substantially affecting the administrative and student support functions available to distant and on-campus students. For example, online access to course and program calendars, course descriptions, online registration, online library/ information services, and so on, are features valued whatever the modality of

instructional delivery.

The Societal and Institutional Context

The Canadian constitution assigns responsibility for educational matters to the provinces – and, in the case of higher education, the institutions (within the context of their statutory missions) are free to choose how they will discharge their educational mandates. The federal government of Canada has only an indirect influence on educational matters through grants and the transfer of tax points – as well as by supporting a number of research granting agencies and some student financial support (although the provinces also do this). Funding is provided by each respective provincial government to the postsecondary institutions through the bureaucracy established by each province.

In turn, the educational institutions are autonomous with respect to how they fulfill their statutory mandates. Each respective institution through the particular governance and budgetary processes they have put in place, determines priorities within each institution and their associated budget allocations. With some exceptions, these processes are bicameral in nature, with financial matters the responsibility of a Board of Governors, many of whom are appointees drawn from the general public – and academic matters, responsibility for which is vested in a committee comprised of ex-officio administration representatives and members elected from the wider academic community.

Historically, universities have essentially been differentiated from other kinds of postsecondary institutions by virtue of their statutory authority to grant degrees. However, there has been a recent trend for provincial governments to authorise colleges and technical institutes to offer what are usually referred to as "applied degrees." In addition, a number of colleges, particularly (but not exclusively) in British Columbia, have been designated as "university colleges," which allows them to grant some baccalaureate degrees equivalent to those granted by the respective provincial universities.

Most postsecondary institutions in Canada are publicly funded and are accountable through duly constituted boards. As a result, postsecondary programming is of a uniform good quality and there has been no need for the kind of accreditation process and associated bodies that one sees in the United States. However, several provinces are now permitting private institutions (largely faith-based institutions) and business enterprises (such as DeVry) to offer similar kinds of programs and credentials. Generally there is some kind of licensing review (which may involve a form of quality appraisal) to ensure that there is some credibility to the programs offered and to provide some guarantee that students will receive what they pay for.

Historically, the long established universities have chosen to address their public

service responsibilities for outreach through extension services. Distance education courses and programs were typically added later and on an ad hoc basis. Some distance education initiatives did relatively well and have come to be well known (for example, at Queens University and the University of Waterloo). Although it is difficult to say conclusively, it would seem that in no case did distance education emerge as a part of a strategic institutional initiative within the longer standing higher education institutions.

This ad hoc approach has generally resulted in an awkward fitting of distance education within conventional institutional organisational frameworks – and especially within the universities. Academic regulations and approvals have been restrictive, funding and staffing commitment (i.e., teaching faculty) was problematic, often tenuous. As a result any concerted distance education enterprise of the sort mounted by, say, Simon Fraser University and Waterloo, has relied on some form of protective organisational and budgeting mechanisms to support their development and continuation. Some institutions were better or more fortunate in how they set up such arrangements. As a result, some have developed more extensive and longer-lived distance education operations than have others. In any event, hybridisation in this context was an almost subversive activity. It was an "add-on" to the traditional institutional mandates and existed as a function separate from the core institutional business of on-campus teaching.

Hybrids With A Difference

Of course, the statutory missions of any postsecondary institution over a decade or so old, would have been formulated in the absence of a full appreciation of the capabilities of the "new" computer based telecommunications technologies. In the relatively recent past, however, four new universities have come on the scene in Canada that have deliberately shaped their mandates to incorporate technology supported delivery of education. Interestingly their strategic views of technology-supported learning are quite different. As a collective, they represent quite different faces of the hybridisation of higher education.

Perhaps the most unique of these is the Technical University of British Columbia (TechBC). There are many aspects to this uniqueness – all of them related to Tech BC's strategic view of technology-supported learning. One of these is the unicameral governance structure adopted by Tech BC. Another is its use of term definite appointments in lieu of tenured academic appointments. Tech BC is also unique in its pedagogic philosophy, which takes the view that technology should be used in those teaching/learning circumstances where it is warranted. This view does not force a distinction between distance education and traditional on-campus education. If the pedagogic requirement is compatible with technologically supported delivery, then that is the determining consideration. If there is a pedagogic requirement for students to work collectively (either supported

by technology or face to face meetings), then that requirement is addressed through the instructional design of the course and students accommodate to it. Notwithstanding this epistemological seamless-ness, Tech BC applies a guideline that fifty per cent of each course be available on the Web.

In a sense, at the other end of the continuum is the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC). Technology supported learning is a strategic consideration for UNBC, but within their over-arching mandate of educational delivery to the northern British Columbia region (UNBC, Planning for Growth, 1997). Distance education is just one of the means they use to reach their geographically dispersed target population – but within a pedagogical view that face-to-face instruction is the preferred instructional format. As a result, distance education at UNBC is quite similar to the external studies format so commonplace in conventional institutions. Notwithstanding UNBC's institutional commitment through its mandate to distance delivery, UNBC experiences the same kinds of tensions that can be observed in the classical "external studies" style of distance delivery. In particular, there is the usual competition that naturally arises when there are the two educational delivery modalities to support. Historically, the institutional politics and budgetary structures of bi-modal institutions have resulted in a systemic biasing to the conventional on-campus operations – and a concomitant organisational mechanism to address this imbalance of emphasis and power.

The third institution in British Columbia is Royal Roads University, which is also distinctive in a variety of ways. It, too, has adopted a unicameral governance structure and largely term definite academic appointments (i.e., no tenure). Moreover, the university is meant to be self-sufficient with respect to funding. Programmatically, Royal Roads University "specializes in degree programs aimed at mid-career professionals who want to advance their careers, while balancing the commitments of work and family" (*www.royalroads.ca*). Royal Roads uses distance delivery in different ways and to different extents depending on the program involved. Some programs require students to be on-site for instruction – other programs are essentially web delivered. At the Masters level, all programs require some "residencies" to be spent on-campus.

Canada's newest university, The Ontario Institute of Technology, is still starting up and has yet to take on an operational persona. However, the language around its establishment speaks of being "on the leading edge of e-learning" through "the most advanced learning technology solutions in the country." Exactly what this implies is yet to be made clear. On the basis of the stated expectations, it would sound as though The Ontario Institute of Technology is positioned to be like the Technical University of British Columbia.

Intended and Unintended Consequences

Intentions and perceived consequences are very much in the eyes of the beholder – and it is usually very difficult to identify a beholder in the bureaucratic world of educational institutions. If one can imagine a collectivity of administrators or a Board of Governors being the beholder, then there are different kinds of responses that one sees. Any amount of distance education can be touted as a success – but often the public affairs effect is amplified if the effort can be viewed as collaborative – as, for example, would be the case if a course were team taught as a way of sharing expertise among different institutions (or if a program was jointly delivered with one institution providing some courses and another institution providing others thus making up a full program). However, when the expectations have been inclined towards rhetoric of "transforming" the educational experience, "opening new markets of learners," making money from distance education and teaching more students more cheaply – then the experience over-all to date has been a substantial disappointment.

Other, associated unintended consequences have been: a covert and overt resistance to any attempts to force the implementation of technology-based learning in support of making education cheaper while solving the dilemma of growing demand, and as a money making proposition. The *cause celeb* in this regard has been the case of York University, where the faculty negotiated a provision in their contract with the university that faculty members would not be forced to teach through the mediation of technology. This has been an issue elsewhere (i.e., Acadia University), so it is more than just a local idiosyncratic development. An issue somewhat related to this is the matter of intellectual ownership/copyright of courses and associated materials – particularly in the context of making a business out of distance education. Distance education is proving to be far more expensive and labour intensive than most people imagined and this has had substantial implications for what programming is offered and for whatever cost recoveries are aimed for.

From the point of view of the teaching faculty, the informal consensus has been: (1) It is a much more effective mode of teaching and learning than most instructors would have acknowledged before becoming involved – to the extent that many become active advocates of distance education. (2) Distance teaching requires far more work and advance planning than classroom lecturing. (3) The ease of interaction supported by computers and telecommunications technologies and the apparent immediacy of communication has resulted in a volume of email difficult to cope with and expectations with respect to responding that simply cannot be met in practice. (4) Individual instructors interested in "doing" distance education are finding it difficult to obtain requisite infrastructure support from their institutions, whether it be computers, software or high speed internet access – moreover, services such as instructional design, media production, and technical support are typically not made available to teaching faculty.

Perhaps the most surprising unintended consequence – if only because it is typically felt to be so mundane and even boring – has been the matter of copyright and intellectual ownership. Although this fire has always smoldered in the background, the prospect of making money from courseware has fuelled the fire. A large part of the debate concerns the legitimacy of the concept of commercialisation in higher education and its subverting effects. In addition, there is the matter of who gets paid what for courses and material developed by faculty members.

Implications

As with consequences, implications depend on the lens through which one views the situation. If we are to believe the futurists, then the implications of not becoming hybridised quickly enough, is that the conventional higher education institutions as we know them will become "obsolete" – their functions having been taken over and discharged more responsively and effectively by those institutions that have adopted technological bases for teaching and learning. Effectively virtual universities would supplant conventional campus based institutions. Millions, if not billions, of dollars are to be made, and are being made by proprietary operations such as the University of Phoenix – the unstated implication being, again, that these kinds of enterprises will eventually put the conventional institutions out of business.

As the bandwagon of technologically based teaching learning has rolled along, it has become apparent that there is an important niche market for distance education – and the successful enterprises are effectively creaming this off – the University of Phoenix operation is an organisational example. One can also regard the burgeoning of moneymaking Executive MBA programs as another manifestation. However, it seems more than a little hyperbolic to claim that conventional higher education institutions will cease to exist or will be so transformed as not to be recognizable. Certainly there is no evidence of this in the current state of affairs – and the "dot.com" transformational view has been touted for at least the past half decade.

At the level of the teacher and student, the new technologies can only improve the prospects of both distance delivered teaching and on-campus teaching – distance delivery because of the enhancement of the quality of interaction between teacher and student and among students, on-campus teaching because a multi-mediated, systematic approach can only improve classroom teaching (and some would argue that the facilitation of electronic interaction among on-campus students also makes instruction more effective).

However, the conventional institutions are going to have to change the way they currently organise themselves to deliver distance education, the way the

function is budgeted, the quality of the infrastructure support provided, the advisory and instructional support made available, the reward structures offered to faculty – as well as resolving the very substantial issues of technology adoption and intellectual property rights. Historically, this has proven to be very difficult because, as noted above, the governance and budgeting structures (as well as faculty reward systems) in conventional institutions are stacked against alternative delivery. To some degree Tech BC and Royal Roads University have attempted to address this tension through their particular approaches to statutory authority and governance structures.

Another aspect to the organisational challenges faced by conventional institutions is the administrative framework needed to contend with the kind of integration required by technology-based teaching. In dedicated distance providers one finds subsystems dealing with: courses and course production; students; a regulatory subsystem; a logistical subsystem (which remains critical even though more material is being put online and distributed electronically. All of this is this is a substantial problem for the conventional institutions – especially if they do not have a strategic view of the use of technology in education, as is the case for almost all of them – because without an appropriate supporting technological framework, the institutions and their faculty will be substantially constrained in the extent to which they can implement seamless multi-mediated instruction or even stand alone distance delivered programs.

The issue of intellectual ownership is difficult and many faceted. In almost every issue of the Canadian Association of University Teachers Bulletin and The Chronicle of Higher Education there are one or more items pertaining to this matter. Where unionised or union-like associations are involved in terms and conditions of employment, ownership of intellectual property can be negotiated. To the extent that ownership is wholly or partly vested in the faculty member, the institution is potentially highly constrained in the extent to which it can offer technology-based education. For example, revision of course materials would require permission of the original author – failing this permission, a course would have to developed *de novo* based on a different faculty member but with the same prospect to follow after that. This is a very difficult basis on which to build an abiding program – let alone one that would be cost effective or a revenue generator.

Limitations to Hybridisation?

One could argue that the logical extension of the kind of hybridisation mentioned here would be a complete merging of the two worlds of distance delivered and on-campus education – in essence, a "goodbye distance education, hello distributed learning." This may be possible in carefully configured environments like that created by Tech BC. However, it would take an entirely unrealistic amount of

change (whether attitudinal, organisational, strategic, financial or whatever) to fully convert a traditionally styled institution. What seems more likely is that we will see more of the same kind of adaptation that we have had to date. Some institutions will continue to have good reason to offer conventionally configured distance education – even though technology may be used more often and more effectively in the delivery. In other cases, we will see more examples of certain programs and/ or courses that are fully hybridised.

Moreover, the issue of intellectual ownership of courses and programs, as noted above, has the potential for being the ultimate limiting condition.

Finally, change of all kinds and all levels is almost always of an incremental type. Very few innovations of any kind have resulted in fundamental, revolutionary change. There are those proponents who would maintain that in fact, the advent of the telecommunications based technologies is having a revolutionary impact on society. Perhaps in some sense that is true. However, the educational process remains much as it has been for centuries. The easy access to "all the information in the world" should not be confused with a general advancement of individuals' education. As Katz (2001) argues, we should not confuse a tool for technology for a goal. As useful as the technology can be, institutions of higher education must realise that their critical role is to provide for the basic things that all learners need: "access to communities where information can be shared and knowledge created, resources for access to local and distance communities, and widely accepted system for warranting the learner" (Brown and Duguid, 2000). At the end of it all, education is a social activity and not just a matter of information and its manipulation.

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