

MANAGING POST-SECONDARY OPEN LEARNING BEYOND TRADITIONAL BOUNDARIES INTO THE NEW MILLENNIUM

J.C. Yerbury, Ph.D.

V. Rossner-Merrill, Ph.D.

L. Teles, Ph.D.

with J. Collinge, Ph.D., and J. Cowan, Ph.D.

Centre for Distance Education

Simon Fraser University

Burnaby, BC, Canada

Introduction

Post-secondary institutions in Canada and elsewhere must rethink and restructure to meet the challenges of a new economic era in which growth will be increasingly based on knowledge production and workers will have to undertake continuous learning to keep pace. In order to expand education and training opportunities to a more diverse population of students, institutional resources will have to be re-deployed. Daniel (1996) has made a number of key observations about issues that arise as a consequence of this change in the student body. He states that fortunately, new interactive technologies and digital media provide options for instruction that can integrate the traditions of distance and place-based learning. The task now is to build integrated instructional systems that ensure that the values of excellence embedded in traditional instructional practices from both distance and place-based modes will be transplanted into the newer, technology-based media for teaching. Conversely, it is important to provide an opportunity for traditional instruction to benefit from the depth of inquiry that is currently being invested in online teaching and learning.

Nowhere is the opportunity to develop new techniques greater than in dual-mode institutions where management of technology strategy must now be designed to embrace the institution as a whole. Institutions that will not only survive but flourish in the new environment are likely to be those that do not move too fast to adopt what may turn out to be expensive, unsustainable cutting-edge technologies or attempt to adapt by offering generic new programs of questionable quality that have been developed by outsiders. In fact, the new leaders are likely to be the established dual-mode institutions whose history of success has been firmly established by the fact that they got their management model right from the beginning.

While this paper acknowledges the achievements of unimodal distance institutions, it focuses on Canadian dual mode institutions and their management models.

Distance Education in British Columbia

In Canada, the provinces, not the federal government, have the responsibility for education. As a result, there is no large autonomous single mode institution at the national level that can be equated with the British Open University or Indira Gandhi National University. We do, however, have unimodal institutions housed within provincial boundaries that service students at the provincial, national, and international levels. The largest of these are Quebec's Télé -université and Athabasca University in the province of Alberta. Each had more than 12,000 students in 1997/98. Athabasca, which has an open admissions policy, has had particularly significant growth in its two master's programs in distance education and business administration. Since its creation in 1972, the Télé -université has developed 24 short programs, 23 certificates, and two bachelor's degrees. It is divided into three primary units of teaching and research (UER): Science and Technology; Business Administration; and Social Sciences, Humanities, and Communications. Each unit has its own teaching and administrative staff and a council that includes tutors and students as well. These institutions aside, the majority are dual mode.

Neither do we have very large consortia comparable to The University of the South Pacific or the University of the West Indies. Both Ontario and British Columbia provide examples of partnerships that have been formed to reduce and discourage duplication of costly programs. Ontario's Contact North/Nord, which has six partners, offers secondary, college, and university level programs to students in 200 isolated communities within the province and beyond. The British Columbia University Consortium, which operated between 1985 and 1997, had as its members the four major institutions offering post-secondary distance education, one single mode institution (Open University) and three dual mode traditional universities (University of British Columbia [UBC], University of Victoria [UVic], and Simon Fraser University [SFU]). The new University of Northern British Columbia also joined the consortium during its latter years.

This consortium arrangement made it possible for students to register for courses offered by partner universities without being admitted to those institutions as regular students. A joint calendar was published, and the Open Learning Agency managed the administrative functions related to student records. The admission procedures of the Open University, like similar universities around the world, eliminate barriers to students by allowing them to register in courses not otherwise accessible to them for reasons of geography, previous academic experience, and so forth.

Over the years, particularly since the mid-1970s, each of the dual mode institutions mentioned above has developed outreach programs that involve distance education delivery methods, some of which include face-to-face courses taught by instructors who fly into northern and interior communities. All of the credit programs provide free telephone contact for students wishing to communicate with tutors and external library services. Most course authors at all three dual-mode institutions are full-time faculty members, whose involvement in distance education is typically not considered part of their regular teaching load. The universities have worked collaboratively to avoid duplication by focusing course development and delivery on each institution's specialized programmatic areas.

Despite these similarities, the universities are far from homogeneous in the number of courses and programs offered, the number of students served, and the management systems they have adopted. At first glance, it might seem that the relative importance each institution attaches to distance education is reflected in the size of the distance education enrolment relative to the entire student body. For some, the distance education programs represent a very small component of their offerings. Others, such as Simon Fraser University, deliver distance education courses to approximately 10 per cent of FTEs. With a total enrolment of 29,481 Full-time student equivalents (FTEs) in 1997/98, UBC was about twice the size of SFU (with 15,381) and UVic (with 13,744). And yet SFU, with half UBC's FTE count, enrolls three times as many students in credit distance education courses as UBC does. A comparison of SFU and UVic, institutions more similar in age and size, shows that SFU's distance education enrolment is about twice that of UVic's.

We believe that different organizational structures established at each university have had an important influence on the growth and stature of the distance units within their respective institutions. After briefly describing these models and noting their institutional strengths, this paper will focus on Simon Fraser's co-ordinated model.

University Of British Columbia

The University of British Columbia has the longest history of involvement in distance education. It originally introduced correspondence courses in 1949 to meet the degree-completion needs of practising teachers. By 1995/96 there were a total of 4,132 enrollees in courses in the Faculties of Arts, Education, Forestry, Science, and the School of Nursing. A recent name change from Access: Guided Independent Study to Distance Education and Technology reflects the new aims of its managers.

While technological change has had considerable impact on UBC's traditional correspondence courses and many of them are now enriched by audio tapes, laboratory kits, books of readings, and, increasingly, by online support, the program still largely depends on a core of print materials.

The management model is one of relative detachment from the academic units it serves. Courses are written by faculty members, but neither they nor their departments have further involvement in the offerings. Until five years ago, students enrolled in on-campus courses could not register for distance courses. In addition, while most UBC courses are year-long (September-April), there are six enrolment periods for independent study courses, and so students are not part of a "class" as they are at UVic and SFU.

UBC has a strong institutional base to work from, but that very strength may cause difficulties for those who want to employ new ideas for restructuring universities. There are many entrenched interests that may cause faculty and administrative resistance related to budgets, collective bargaining agreements, support services, and so forth.

University of Victoria

The University of Victoria offered its first distance education credit programs 1976. By 1995/96, the enrolment had reached 5,977. The university has focused on its programmatic strengths in Nursing, Social Work, Public Administration, Education, and Child Care.

Counselling and general program services are provided by members of the faculty involved, usually by telephone. Most courses produced by regular on-campus faculty have an interactive tutoring component (including videoconferencing). The University has generally supported use of the new communication technologies, but it faces a challenge in trying to improve the capacity, effectiveness, and efficiency and retaining enthusiasm for development from its decentralized base.

Continuing Studies at the University of Victoria co-ordinates the delivery of courses in co-operation with each School and Faculty of the University that is involved in distance education. Although there is a central administrative unit, the management system is closer to models where the authority has devolved to the teaching departments. This approach Matthewson (1998) describes as the “self-destruct model” because units organized this way eventually disappear or retain only a remnant of their former capacity as a result of inadequate financial and intellectual support from the University administration.

Simon Fraser University

The Centre for Distance Education at Simon Fraser University is one of three units in the University’s Continuing Studies. It began offering its first four courses on behalf of academic departments, to 55 students, in 1976. By 1995/96 approximately 120 courses were available for delivery, of which 80 to 90 are offered each trimester. Enrolments during the 1995/96 academic year totalled 12,091.

Faculty from academic departments develop courses in consultation with Centre personnel. Faculty also serve as course supervisors, and tutor and mark along with the graduate students who make up the majority of tutor-markers. Our courses are programmatic, and so most students are working towards a specific goal. Distance Education students also start and finish at the same time as on-campus students; that is, a rather structured approach is taken to guiding students through the semester. This may account, in part, for the high completion rates of 88 to 92 per cent.

Many courses now have online components as well as more traditional materials, and some are offered totally online. The staff of the Centre’s LohnLab for Teaching Technologies trains faculty members in pedagogical approaches to teaching online and provides technical assistance in designing conferencing systems and Web-based courses.

The courses are edited, produced, distributed, and administered through the Centre, and each term’s course offerings are decided in consultation with the departments. All these arrangements—from tutor-marker appointments to the recording of assignment results—are carried out within the Centre. We believe this highly centralized administration is another reason why our completion rate is so much higher than at other institutions.

SFU Case Example

These brief descriptions suggest some of the similarities between the three universities in the ways they develop courses and assist students, but they do not point out the ways the centralization and importance of distance education has been encouraged and promoted at the highest levels at Simon Fraser—by the president and other senior officers. This support gives the Centre for Distance Education the energy to follow its commitment to providing the best possible instructional development and delivery of services. And it means the courses share a parity of esteem with traditional campus courses, a major point in engaging academic champions of the program and helping ensure that they will act not only as authors but also as custodians of quality assurance along with the Centre’s staff.

Faculty members will only be willing to develop distance courses if their programs and courses are not removed from their institutional context. They want to ensure that they have control over the curriculum offered and the courses that bear their names. They also want to be sure the courses express the uniqueness and academic strengths of their institution. Furthermore, at Simon Fraser we prepare our materials one semester at a time. This allows faculty to revise the content of their study guides and other supporting material and to change the textbooks and formats as their discipline changes and/or as they wish to experiment with new delivery methods. This faculty control is a critical method of course quality and instructional standards.

This framework also allows us to replicate the changing process in the development of distance education courseware and instructional delivery models and renew them on a continuing basis. It also ensures that the courses reflect the needs of Simon Fraser students. As a consequence, a distance education course is not a bland, generic, lowest common denominator representation of the subject at hand designed to have a long shelf life and to minimize production costs. Courses, however, are not parochial; we are proud that more than 30 of our print-

based study guides have been produced as commercial textbooks, and that many other institutions have expressed interest in our programs and materials. It is these methods that have enabled us to enlarge our capacity at the same time as we maintain our efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability. Indeed, the most recent figures available (1995/96) show that the cost per student at SFU is about half that at the other three institutions. (SFU \$2,012; UVic,\$4,035; UBC, \$4,268; and OU, \$4,310).

The Centre's courses operate on the same 16-week schedule as face-to-face courses and are equivalent to them. Students have long been able to receive a telephone list of their classmates if they choose so that they may form their own study groups. And in recent years, many instructors have been creating e-mail groups or web-pages as additional components for students with access to them. Students may order research materials not included in the course package directly from the university library using an internet connection. In addition, we already have courses that allow students to take advantage of some of the study options available in hyperlearning, for example, flexible learning settings where the online classroom is open twenty-four hours a day. Some of those that have significant computer requirements will be mentioned below in the discussion of the LohnLab for Teaching Technologies.

We must now begin planning to put policies, procedures, and practices in place to ensure that we will be able to preserve the same academic excellence, quality, and sustainability as are presently enjoyed in the traditional campus setting.

The LohnLab for Teaching Technologies

According to Denning (1997) the development of Internet-based communications technologies and digital media is affecting teaching and learning practices in ways leading to change in both how and what we learn. The staff of the Centre's LohnLab trains faculty members in pedagogical approaches to teaching online and provides technical assistance in designing conferencing systems and Web-based courses. The Lab is also affiliated with Simon Fraser University's Instructional Development Group (IDG), a coalition of units that also includes the Centre for University Teaching, the WAC Bennett Library, the Instructional Media Centre, and Academic Computing Services. The IDG aims to co-ordinate management of technology strategy that must now be designed to embrace the institution as a whole.

Rossner and Stockley (1997) noted key requirements of effective institutional co-operation:

- Support from the senior administrative level of the institution; including long-term base funding and support for research into hardware, software, and models of instruction;
- Commitment to putting in place an easily accessible technology "backbone" and developing support systems for training in educational uses of technology;
- Calling on existing faculty and professional technical personnel having Internet-based expertise to provide on-going pedagogical and technical support for faculty and students;
- Extending current online library facilities and designing a system that allows faculty and students to access any campus-based server containing information relative to their work.

The IDG is an ideal place for the diverse sectors of the educational community to come together to rethink just what we mean by "distance" and "face-to-face" education, especially in the dual-mode institution. In essence, as noted by Daniel (1996), the place-based institution that is expanding or enhancing teaching and learning using interactive technologies is now faced with the need to adopt the methods and practices of distance education. We propose that, conversely, print-based distance education offerings that opt to add interactive components for students and instructors through use of technology-based mediums of instruction need to adopt the methods and practices associated with the face-to-face setting.

The use of asynchronous online conferencing systems to facilitate group work has proven effective in a number of courses (Harasim et al. 1995). One innovative course in Dance (Fine and Performing Arts 229) allows students to create 3-D figures that move through space. Students use the Life Forms computer animation program, which they may purchase at a special rate or use in campus facilities. They then upload or download assignments posted on the class Website so that they can work with the instructor, assigned partners, and the entire class by critiquing each other's animations and combining movements designed by a number of students to create dance themes. The instructor also posts electronic lectures related to course readings (made available in print), and the students respond first to specific questions posed and then to the responses of their classmates. They may also submit questions to the class or the instructor using the system (Teles and Wang, 1998).

Another course that uses a software package, Statistics 101, adds weekly online lectures and assignments to direct students through the relevant portions of an assigned textbook. In this case, students are put into groups of four at the beginning of the term and correspond with each other about group assignments before the rotating moderator posts the group reply to the class. In this way, it is possible for different groups to work on different themes and report their findings to the whole class. The pedagogical design of such courses and understanding the role of the instructor as moderator and commentator are extremely important in keeping the course student-centred and managing the instructor's workload.

These two examples suggest the kinds of courses in which the melding of place-based and distance elements are well advanced. Others require a different balance. Development of courses employing technology must engage faculty and afford them all the professional latitude and prerogatives that they would have had in the campus classroom. After all, that which is produced belongs to the faculty member, not the course development team committee, not the multi-media technician, not the scriptwriter or the editor. It is important to note, that while we have cited two course-specific examples, virtually all course development is programmatic.

How, then, should we begin to devise new management strategies to accommodate this shift from a focus on two distinct realities, distance and place-based education, toward a focus that fosters and promotes a more central view instead on learning outcomes or the products of learning?

We argue that a unit organized and managed like Simon Fraser's Centre for Distance Education has many advantages. Because it is centrally funded, it operates with all faculties, and students can move freely between face-to-face and distance, receiving identical course credit. Moreover, since the distance full-time equivalent students accrue to their core funding, departments have an incentive to support the development and delivery of distance courses. From the Centre's point of view, centralizing the administration and production functions creates a number of efficiencies by reducing the duplication of duties and enhancing the opportunity for cross-fertilization of instructional ideas and developments across all academic units.

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