Chapter XXIV
Research and Practice of E-Learning in Canada 2008

Rory McGreal
Athabasca University, Canada

Terry Anderson
Athabasca University, Canada

ABSTRACT

Any view of e-learning in Canada must be informed by the uniquely Canadian feature of provincial jurisdiction over education. Therefore any investigation of e-learning in Canada must focus more on specific provincial initiatives in technologically enhanced learning rather than a Canadian overview. A distinctive “Canadian” model does not exist. The provinciality of Canadian e-learning serves to highlight the inability of Canada to sustain national strategies and focus as in other countries due to the fractious nature of federal/provincial relations in education.

INTRODUCTION

The vast majority of the population of Canada (36 million) lives in the south of the country within 100 kilometres of the U.S. border with scattered, remote, and characteristically small communities spread throughout the vast northern regions. The majority of the population in these remote regions are aboriginal, belonging to numerous diverse First Nations communities. Almost 25% of Canadians speak French as a first language and are mostly resident in the province of Quebec. Canada is an immigrant nation with major pockets of immigrants residing in communities within the major metropolitan areas. Thus, the Canadian context creates geographic and cultural as well as linguistic barriers that make it challenging for people to communicate effectively. These obstacles vary from province to province and in the far northern territories. E-learning technologies and practices are among the most powerful means of overcoming these barriers. However given the
difference contexts, aspirations and resources of the different communities, this requires different e-learning approaches.

A principal characteristic of the Canadian experience with e-learning (and other forms of formal education) is the uniquely Canadian feature of provincial jurisdiction over education. Canada is the only country in the world that does not have a national department/ministry of education. Therefore, any investigation of e-learning in Canada must focus more on specific provincial initiatives in technologically enhanced learning rather than a Canadian overview. In the best sense, Canada’s e-learning programming can be viewed as a patchwork quilt made up of interesting projects, programs and initiatives. In the worst sense it is a set of disparate and uncoordinated activities constantly struggling with and re-inventing solutions to problems solved elsewhere.

In this paper we first very briefly describe the major e-learning research programmes, delivery consortia and professional development programs with the objective of providing an overview of e-learning in Canada. We then extract particular trends we view as having future and ongoing impact on the development and support of e-learning in Canada.

E-LEARNING RESEARCH

High quality professional activity is always informed and inspired by quality research. The importance of research to practice is even more important when the field is under change and adapting to both disruptive and sustaining technological change. In this section we discuss major e-learning research initiatives, postgraduate training centres and research pulp. Interest at the national level in e-learning research is driven mainly through increasing concern over the development of Canada’s “education industry”. CANARIE, Canada’s advanced Internet development organisation, has built and maintains the world’s fastest Internet backbone, CANet4 that spans the country from east to west and includes isolated northern regions. This “supernet” links public and private research institutes, companies involved in research and development in information technology as well as higher education institutions. In order to stimulate use of this network, CANARIE funded both e-learning and ehealth initiatives from 1999 to 2004. The $29 million E-learning Program funded 29 cost shared projects and stimulated both development and testing of e-learning tools and content. One pan-Canadian programme was EduSource, which connected researchers in six provinces to build a prototype learning object repository (McGreal, Anderson, Babin, Downes, Friesen et al. 2006). The now defunct Tele-learning Network of Centres of Excellence (1995 – 2002) was a geographically distributed network of researchers and client communities from across Canada, who collectively researched the development, application, and evaluation of advanced learning technologies.

Most of the funding for academic research in Canada is provided through the National Research Funding Councils. The National Science and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) funded a 5 year pan-Canadian research project known as Lornet, a partnership of six universities across Canada that developed interoperability tools for e-learning based on semantic web tools, IEEE LOM, SCORM, and other standards.

The Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) is responsible for funding educational research projects as one of many disciplines supported. A search of grants provided with e-learning as a major focus, reveals that only $900,000 was awarded by SSHRC for 21 scholarly projects during the past seven years. This compares rather unfavorably with the total of 3,420 projects it funded in all areas of education combined. With the end of the two national projects noted above and the tiny amount of funding provided by the research councils, most Canadian e-researchers are reporting being in the midst of a prolonged funding famine.