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Structured Virtual Distance Learning for Rural Aboriginal Learners

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Abstract

There are Many Aboriginal communities in British Columbia located in rural, remote locations where access to resources, including education is often limited. Secondary educational requirements are often met through another school and community, or through distance education options. Students who choose to complete their education in a structured classroom setting may have to relocate to another community leaving behind the direct influence and support of their family. Interactive virtual instruction can link classes, instructors and students from all over the province where one instructor can lead many groups. This analysis will examine the needs of one community in particular and how this virtual classroom model can be structured with supports to provide students the option of remaining in community to complete their education.

Structured Virtual Distance Learning for Rural Aboriginal Learners

Many Aboriginal reserves in BC are located in rural or remote areas where children often have to leave their community to complete their secondary school education. There are distributed learning options available for students, but it requires the student to be self-directed and motivated to complete their education. Once students leave the supports and structure of reserve and community, there is a significant chance they will not succeed or complete their secondary school education. The intention of this analysis is to highlight how distributed learning, in particular virtual instruction may be coupled with support employees (facilitators) to construct a structured learning environment that will allow Aboriginal children to stay in their rural communities while reaping the benefits of traditional ways of knowing and being.

The Aboriginal community where I teach and live is comprised of a small, tightly nit group of people who know each other in great depth and ensure each others well being. Social and economic difficulties are not foreign here, but the collective care and resurgence of cultural practices provides a holistic framework to live by. Our school follows the mandated curriculum for BC, but we also intertwine traditional practices and teachings into our curriculum. Led by the wisdom of elders, our school participates in weekly smudging ceremonies, daily circle meetings, and oral teachings. We utilize our environment and community leaders to celebrate and practice traditional ways of knowing and being. Due to the restraints of population size, our school is not able to offer classroom instruction at the secondary school level. What confronts our students is the inevitable reality of leaving this wholesome structure to complete their education at one of the available city centre secondary schools.

Our school district has distributed learning courses offered through LearnNowBC as well as adult learning centres that can serve the children who choose not to leave their communities, but wish to continue their education. Students who choose this option lose the benefits of a structured classroom.   The adult learning centres provide teacher support once or twice a week, but the courses are independently driven and lacking in classroom instruction. LearnNowBC (2008) courses provide support in the mediums of email, learning management systems, virtual whiteboard sessions, phone, and online calendars; however, these courses lack a structured classroom setting. These distance learning options are a viable solution for only those students who are self-motivated and directed to learn.

The majority of our students require a structured classroom learning environment to influence their chances of completing their educational requirements. To receive such a learning environment our students are faced with the inevitable decision of relocating to an urban centre where they can enrol in one of the available secondary schools.   Our students must leave their families, community, and school to a place that is foreign. They often enter the school unnoticed, without a face, and fade into the background without adequate support for success. Many students drop-out, fail, or choose simply not to go.

The decision of how to complete educational requirements is a difficult choice all of our students and families must face. This study is addressing the needs of those learners who may want to stay in their communities to complete their education, but are not self-directed and motivated enough to achieve this success independently. The conversation begins with an analysis of the community based education we provide and how our students might be affected by relocating to an urban centre. This is followed by an outline and description of how virtual

classrooms can be coupled with support staff to create a structured learning environment that would allow our students to complete their education at home.

Community Based Education and Relocation

The community and school I serve are comprised of First Nation's people who have subsisted on this land for thousands of years. Their traditional ways of knowing and being are recognized and entwined within our schools educational pedagogical principles. Every Monday morning our entire school meets outside in circle where we all participate in a traditional sage smudging ceremony. One of the community leaders directs this meeting by smouldering local sagebrush leaves in a seashell while one by one, every participant in the circle uses their hands to wash themselves with the smoke in the mindset of cleansing their spirit while sending out thoughts of thanks and gratitude to all of their ancestors who have walked their land. Our students regularly participate in traditional ecological field trips where they learn about the local flora and fauna that continue to have an impact on their life. As a group we harvest sage, collect tree pitch for medicine, and embark on many outdoor field trips to environments that have always been an integral component of their existence. The fact that our school is near the reserve and adjacent to their environment, eases the infusion of local culture into our school's program. Relocation to an urban centre to complete school requirements would remove the advantage of having traditional land and community leaders directly available for our student's education. While there is some infusion of their own language and culture in the urban schools, there is much less school-practice of traditional activities.

Described by Marie Ann Battiste in First Nations Education in Canada, Aboriginal groups in our nation uphold the value of community based education to a higher degree than that

of even Aboriginal self-government (Battiste & Barman, 1995). Battiste further explains that for at least a century, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) had total control of First Nations education in Canada and worked under the assumption that European methods of knowledge transference were superior to those of Aboriginal groups across Canada. This imposition of European based pedagogy resulted in Aboriginal peoples to be forced, often from their homes and families into a system that was in utter contrast to their worldview and traditional ways of being. Language and cultural activities were not in line with this European system, and as a result youth were prevented from engaging in their traditional way of learning (Battiste & Barmen, 1995). Community based education is an avenue for Aboriginal groups to reclaim their traditional languages and customs by ensuring these traditions are taught to their youth (May, 1999). While our school is within a public system it is still greatly influenced by the surrounding community. Elders and community leaders have a great impact on our culture and language activities.

As described by Robert Shostak in Classroom Teaching Skills (2006), motivating students to learn can be greatly enhanced by presenting an instructional lesson that is relevant to their life. Shostak explains that when a task or classroom activity is recognizable and has meaning to a student's life, they are more likely to engage and feel a sense of accomplishment from the activity. The elementary curriculum for BC, in particular grade 4 has a strong focus on Aboriginal nations of Canada and their cultures. Traditionally many schools and institutions use the Haida and Inuit as group comparisons, but I felt it would be more relevant to analyse our local Aboriginal culture relative to neighbouring native groups. To instruct my class on aspects of their own culture, I invited local community leaders to visit our school and speak on issues so pertinent to their lives. The lessons were presented in a traditional fashion through oral and

demonstrative discourse. The measure to the effectiveness of the presenters was the immediate feedback I received from my students as to how greatly they valued and appreciated such a personal exploration of knowledge by local community leaders.

The regular practice and ease of infusing local traditions into our school's curriculum provides our students with a culturally relevant platform from which to learn. Relevancy is a standard in accepted motivational instructional theory where students have a much greater chance of engaging with the curriculum (Shostak, 2006). While any teacher can make strives to create relevant instructional design, it is done with ease when the benefits of community are accessible and all of your students comprise the same culture. Many Aboriginal groups share this vision of culturally-focused community based curricular design, and one such example is the Alaska Native Knowledge Network (ANKN) (2008).   ANKN advocates for the sharing of Alaskan native ways of knowing and have gone so far as to make culturally relevant curriculum available for teachers that can be altered to suite the interests of different communities (ANKN, 2008).

The prospect of relocating to another community means that our students not only lose out on the benefits of community based education, but have to leave their homes and families. I decided to move to this community when I began my teaching assignment as I wanted to be a part of and learn directly from the community. In a short time I have realized that the community structure on this reserve is tightly nit and nurturing. The reserve community is not void of social and economic problems that have affected many Aboriginal reserves across Canada, but has an aspect of community unlike what I am familiar with in urban cities. People who live in suburban communities often do not even know families that live on the same street.

Everyone knows each other in this community, and no one would go without care and attention if they were in need.

Having our students leave their communities to complete their education brings to mind parallels of Aboriginal residential schools in Canada. During this time, students were often taken from their families and forced into a system of acculturation and abuse (Grant, 1996). These children usually came from nurturing homes where they received the direct care and teachings of parents and community (Grant, 1996). While our students are not being forced from their parents into an abusive environment, they do have to leave the direct influence of family and community if they wish to complete their education in a structured school setting. It is without question that many residential school students felt lonely, afraid, and uncertain of their future. Our students are faced with similar fears as they enter an unfamiliar school and community with often no direct family influence on their choices.

Alternative Graduation Options

Our students who wish to stay in community and complete their graduation requirements have two options currently available to them. One of the programs is an adult learning centre that is run out of our school. The school district provides a certified teacher who visits the school two evenings a week to provide students with course materials, offer instructional support, assess assignments, and manage enrolment. The school is open for students to use during these hours, but it is without structured classroom instruction. The courses are self-paced and students are not given assignment deadlines. While there is a teacher available for support and assessment of work, the student is ultimately in charge of their learning and attendance is not

mandatory. Considering the school is only open two evenings a week for this program, students normally complete much of the work at home.

The other option available to our students to complete their graduation requirements are distributed learning courses provided by LearnNowBC (2008). These course options meet British Columbia graduation requirements, and are provided in a distance learning format from various schools and institutions throughout the province. The course structure varies from more traditional correspondence methods to internet based virtual learning environments. Support for students in these environments includes the mediums of email, learning managements systems, virtual whiteboard sessions, telephone, and online classrooms. The courses are managed by instructors who often have assignment deadlines and various other expectations for successful course completion (LearnNowBC, 2008).

While LearnNowBC courses are equipped with learning supports, students are still expected to be motivated and driven enough to complete their assignments and activities without the benefits of a face-to-face classroom instructor. In her article "Barriers to Learning in Distance Education", Jill Galusha (1997) explains that even adults experience loss of motivation to continue with their studies when they no longer have the advantage of a face-to-face instructor and classmates. She further explains that the loss of face-to-face instruction removes the regular, direct feedback with students, and often results in a lack of ability for students to independently evaluate their progression (Galusha, 1997). Our students wishing to utilize the distance education options provided by LearnNowBC would undoubtedly be faced with the same barriers.

Both of these alternative graduation routes require the student to be independently in charge of their education. While parents can play an integral role in these programs, the student is still without the supportive, structured learning environment provided by a classroom

instructor. When participating in a classroom learning environment the teacher is present to support a students learning, respond to their needs, provide feedback and assessment, and request expectations for course completion. Our community has some success with youth choosing alternative graduation options; in particular the adult learning centre, but these students are motivated independent learners. The majority of the students in our community require the support and structure of a classroom environment to ensure success.

Structured Virtual Learning Environment Model

LearnNowBC (2008) demonstrates how technology can be coupled with distance education to provide a learning environment with supports for students. The early models of distributed learning through correspondence have now been amplified with such supports as email, learning managements systems, virtual whiteboard sessions, and online classrooms. During the Rural Schools Renewal Conference in 2007, the honourable Shirley Bond showcased how one instructor can facilitate interactive lessons with several classes in different locations, including home-based students through live interactive web-casts (BC Ministry of Education, 2007). Students can listen to instruction, view demonstrations, receive assignments and assessments, and participate in discussion. The only essential hardware required is a computer, speaker and microphone. This model of an interactive web-cast classroom has been used by post-secondary institutions in Canada for many years and recently has entered the BC public school system. Schools limited by resources and population are now able to offer their students broader course selections by linking with partnering schools through interactive web-cast instruction (BC Ministry of Education, 2007).

Following a thorough feasibility analysis, this model of a virtual classroom could be adapted and implemented within our school to provide our students with links to partnering schools across the district and province, enabling access to the courses they need to complete their graduation requirements. Our school has the space and technological resources required to implement the courses, and our students are conversant with the technological skills necessary to participate in an interactive virtual classroom. While the instructors can be in many locations throughout the district, or the province for that matter, there is still a need for adult supervision and management of the classroom. Support staff could be hired to fill this position and would be able to provide classroom management, and educational support.

This type of virtual instruction in a structured classroom setting offsets much of the disadvantage of more common forms of distributed learning where students do not have immediate access to their instructor. As indicated by Jill Galusha (1997) students participating in distance educational courses can lose much of their motivation when deprived of classmates (peers) and a face-to-face instructor. While the instructor in this model is not in person, he or she is able to not only facilitate a lesson but provide immediate real-time feedback and guidance. The support employee overseeing management of the classroom and teaching assistance is also providing the students with motivational support. In addition to classroom support, these students would benefit from traditional cultural practices of the school as well as the knowledge provided by elders.

Adopting this model into our school would give our students the option to complete their education in the community within a structured learning environment with adequate support and assistance. The culturally infused curriculum already in place in the school can be easily extended and incorporated into this program. Our community would be able to keep their

children at home for the duration of their grade school education, and directly influence and impact their lives during this time. Students would have more time to prepare for life choices beyond secondary school with the support of family, friends, and community elders.

Conclusion

Without question there are social and economic problems that have plagued Aboriginal communities across Canada, and one does not have to take a trip far back in history to realize the causes. With no power to influence the education of their children, Aboriginal Families were forced by the Canadian government to adopt a new system of knowledge transference that was completely in contrast to their own worldview and philosophy. Youth were often forcibly taken from the direct care of their families into an environment of uncertainty. A holistic, nurturing, ecologically sensitive approach to living was negated and dismissed.

Today, many Aboriginal communities in BC and Canada are reclaiming their traditional ways of knowing and being and there are many communities infusing these traditional ways into their school's curriculum. A reality that is facing many rural Aboriginal youth in Canada is the prospect of leaving their homes, communities, and families to complete their secondary educational requirements in a larger centre. There are distance educational options available for these students such as adult learning centres and distributed learning, but these choices require a student to be an independent, highly motivated learner, and are often without the direct and immediate feedback from an instructor.

This study highlights one possible solution to this problem where a structured virtual learning environment could be established within a specific communities existing school. Utilizing a support staff to assist students in this virtual environment would help students to

receive an education in the nurturing environment of their home community. It would eliminate the isolation faced in an urban centre and it would provide the student with the structure necessary to complete their secondary school education.

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