

Distance Education in Remote Aboriginal Communities:

Barriers, Learning Styles and Best
Practices



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Dedicated to:

Mike Steinhauer
Blue Quills First Nations College

Margaret Fiddler
Sandy Lake First Nation

...and to all people who have devoted their lives to
increasing education opportunities in remote
Aboriginal communities.

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You don't teach distance education
the way you teach face to face...
and you have to take a look at the learners
and what their needs are!

Margaret Fiddler

Learning is a life-long venture...

Mike Steinhauer

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Distance education has the ability to provide education opportunities to students in remote Aboriginal communities. To date, distance education has failed to meet this ability. Why?

Teaching in remote Aboriginal communities in Alberta, Quebec, Saskatchewan and British Columbia for the past decade, we have observed the potential for distance education but have been frustrated by its failure to meet the needs of those distance learning was designed to assist. Boxes of correspondence materials remain unopened in closets and storage rooms in schools and band offices across Canada. Students continuously apply for extensions to distance education courses without ever actually completing the courses. Even with the introduction of a new technology, such as the internet, distance education is rarely effective at meeting the education needs of students in remote Aboriginal communities.

We have been continually told that our students have failed distance education courses. We contend that in many cases distance education courses have consistently failed the student. Too many distance education courses that did not consider the needs of the student or the environment in which the course was delivered have been sold to communities. Barriers to successful distance education courses have not been determined or

overcome prior to course delivery. As well, learning styles of students in remote Aboriginal communities have been assumed based on the culture or the community and not on the students themselves. In addition, the best practices for successful distance

benefits this method of delivery can offer remote Aboriginal communities.

We anticipate that by sharing this information, remote Aboriginal communities will be better prepared to make decisions in partnering and purchasing distance education programmes. This information will also provide academic institutions the information needed to design distance education course design and programme delivery that meet the needs of students and remote communities.

The information and views provided in this book are not exhaustive as each distance education delivery environment has its own history, challenges and successes. Although this research provides an overview of common challenges and reflects best practices among the sites visited, we encourage you to be creative and examine your own barriers and develop your own best practices to meet the needs of your community and students.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Remote Canadian communities are littered with stories of well-meaning educators bringing high school or post secondary courses to students in Aboriginal communities using modern technology - with little or no student success. The lack of success is often attributed to incompatible learning styles, lack of prerequisite knowledge or poorly motivated students. We believe that in such cases the course often failed the student, whether by poor design or by using the wrong choice of delivery methods. Remote Aboriginal communities across Canada have intelligent, resourceful people who, if provided the appropriate courses delivered in a culturally and technologically appropriate manner, will be successful.

Assisting in the education of any group of people brings challenges and responsibilities that must be recognised and accepted by the educator. Every student and community reflects distinct qualities that must be respected and incorporated into the course material and delivery methods. Because of the barriers imposed in remote Aboriginal communities, recognising and incorporating this individuality and cultural context into distance education is even more challenging than in the traditional classroom setting.

Aboriginal peoples include those of Inuit, First Nations and Metis ancestry. Students in remote Aboriginal communities are a group that can benefit from distance education programmes for a variety of personal, financial and cultural reasons. Many students in remote communities are unable or unwilling to leave their communities to attend education programmes in urban centres while numerous students, due to the prohibitive cost of flying instructors into a remote community, have limited access to face-to-face learning. As a result,

Distance education has existed for centuries and involves obtaining knowledge in an environment where the instructor and the student are physically separated. Many educators have debated, with limited agreement, the definition of distance education. Some believe that distance education has revealed that it exists, but it cannot define itself (Shale, 1982) while others relate distance education to the implementation of technology (North, 1993). Still others believe distance education is a unique delivery method and in the future every academic and vocational programme leading to a credential will be available full-time, part-time and through distance learning (Wild, 1994).

Distance education has existed for centuries and the one common defining component that is consistently present is that the teacher and the student are geographically separated (Holmberg, 1977). This definition, of course, does not reflect that many recognised distance education programmes include some face-to-face contact between instructor and students. As we will see, if properly incorporated into the delivery, this personal contact is often necessary for successful distance education programmes as personal contact aids in building a relationship between the instructor and the students.

The other component of defining distance education that is consistently discussed is the use of technology and media in the learning process (Keegan, 1991). This reference to the use of the mail, radio, television, internet or other technology in the delivery of distance education courses is essential to understanding the transfer of information.

In this book, we do not endeavour to introduce a new definition of distance education. However, we believe it is important to present a definition that allowed us to

focus our research on specific programmes. Innovative education programmes exist such as the successful Akitsiraq Law School project in Iqaluit, Nunavut, which have face-to-face delivery administered by a distant university. We had to determine if programmes such as these were true distance education programmes, a form of distance education or simply an adaptation of traditional face-to-face delivery. This distinction is important as the barriers and best practices can be different for each model.

For the purpose of this book, we decided to examine distance education as an evolutionary process of utilising technology to aid the learning process outside traditional face-to-face teaching. We chose to adapt the ideas of experts in the field including Ian Mugridge (1991), Edward Spodick (1995) and Desmond Keegan (1991) to develop the following definition for our purposes:

Distance education is a mode of instruction in which a physical and time separation between instructor and student normally exists and thus one in which the

students to ensure the students truly understand the material – not just remember it until the exam.

Defining the term “remote” was just as challenging.

Chapter 2

DISTANCE EDUCATION CASE STUDIES

The best way to learn about the barriers in distance education in remote Aboriginal communities and

self-government, self-determination and economic self-sufficiency and to assist Band Councils with local control of education.

The philosophy of NNEC recognises that their culture is unique and must be kept alive for future generations. Regardless of the delivery method chosen, education must include knowledge of their language, culture, history, values, heritage, and spiritual beliefs. Where possible, education programmes must be culturally

radio delivery is that people other than registered students listen to the broadcasts. People are able to listen to the broadcast to learn – without having to enrol for credit.

The Ontario Ministry of Education considers Wahsa the

site. The coordinators are hired by the communities and have been successful at taking ownership for the programme delivery and supporting students – essential for the success of the programme.

Wahsa faces many barriers common to other distance delivery programmes but also faces some that are unique to its environment and delivery method. Each of the 20 communities Wahsa serves has its own political, religious, traditional and cultural differences; and often, the curriculum that has been developed for students in large, urban areas of southern Ontario is not relevant to those in the remote north. As a result, teachers have had to be creative and adapt the curriculum to meet the needs and the environment of remote communities.

New changes to curriculum requirements in Ontario are also causing apprehension, as is the recent elimination of Grade 13 by the province. These changes have resulted in adjustment in curriculum. For example, the content of the previous Grade 11 math is now comparable to a Grade 9 math with corresponding changes throughout the system.

The socio-economic environment confronting the communities has also been a barrier to delivery. The teachers and administrators recognise that many of their high school students are parents themselves and have other family and community responsibilities that must be recognized. However, Wahsa has found that by allowing the student flexibility in attendance and completion dates, the school has been able to support students who have faced family, cultural or community responsibilities.

The low literacy skills have been a barrier to course delivery. In most Wahsa communities, English is not

own classroom space rather than more philosophical education and social issues. Another barrier expressed by Doreen and supported by Barry McLoughlin includes the lack of suitable daycare facilities required for parents to study and attend class. The feeling of being torn between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures and the lack of a safe environment for students to study were also common education concerns in the regions.

We found that what is considered a barrier by the education institution or head office is not always recognised in the remote community. To share concerns and successes, Wahsa maintains regular communication between the school and the communities.

Wahsa provides an excellent example of an institution that is determined to empower communities where few education options exist. By supporting independent learning through radio broadcasts, Wahsa is able to provide reliable access to students in remote communities in northwestern Ontario. With the support offered by the distance education coordinators in the communities and the daily access to teachers in Sioux Lookout, students are provided the incentive and support to be successful.

Keewaytinook Internet High School

Northwestern Ontario

<http://www.kihs.knet.ca>

The Keewaytinook Internet High School (KIHS) applies modern technology to the delivery of distance education courses in northwestern Ontario. The school provides an excellent example of and a glimpse into the future of distance education using internet technology.

KIHS is currently offering Grade 9 and 10 courses with the plan to offer Grade 11 and 12 courses in the near future. The minimum age of students is 14 while no maximum enrolment age is set. Total school enrolment for 2002/2003 is 143, up from 79 the previous year and 31 during the first year of operation. Students complete two Ontario Ministry of Education-approved courses per term.

The school year is divided into four blocks of 9 weeks with students required by the Ministry of Education to be in class from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. daily. This schedule allows a student to complete eight courses per year in a short, flexible time frame that encourages success. Students work a half-day on each course, which is led by the on-site teacher or another teacher who has been assigned the course.

A KIHS teacher is located in each community. Teachers, all of whom have Bachelor of Education degrees, come from all over the world and are responsible for teaching one or two courses per year to all students while the remainder of their time is spent as tutors to local students. As the primary course instructors, the teachers are responsible for developing and posting weekly lessons, assignments and tests on the internet, with the local teacher assisting with assignments, mentoring, providing personal and academic support and supervising examinations.

Consequently, a teacher in Deer Lake may be

Natasha Toth, KIHS teacher in North Spirit Lake, was interviewed by us through videoconference and reflected the challenges and the variety of roles she has to undertake for students to be successful. The roles played by the KIHS teachers are numerous and include tutor, mentor, teacher and motivator. The barriers reflect those indicated by professionals in other remote communities. Barriers include the lack of access to reliable technology, the apparent lack of family and community support, limited local employment requiring upgrading of skills, and the challenges of developing some courses, such as sciences, for online delivery.

and to gather as a group and plan curriculum and delivery methods.

Local community support of KIHS is substantial and proven. Communities wishing to be part of the programme enter into agreements with KIHS, provide classroom space for the programme site and accommodation for the teacher, and hire support staff for the programme. As such, the communities invest financially in the programme delivery and become delivery partners. This partnership makes the KIHS programme truly a collaborative effort among many stakeholders who are committed to the success of education.

A final, important feature of KIHS is the effort placed in creating a school culture. One of the difficult tasks in distance education has always been including the distant student into the delivery institution environment. Ensuring the student feels part of the institution has a tremendous impact on the success and motivation of the student. KIHS is devoting a great deal of effort on developing means by which students can interact with the school and feel part of a school culture; such as, placing class photographs on the website and providing interactive school activities.

Although relatively new, Keewaytinook Internet High School in northwestern Ontario has incorporated internet technology to provide another education option to students in the region. At present, KIHS delivers Grade 9 and 10 courses to 13 communities in the region by internet delivery. Each community has a teacher on-site who acts as a mentor, tutor and teacher to their local students. The creativity and dedication of the staff combined with the support provided by the communities has ensured success.

Aurora College

Northwest Territories

www.auroracollege.nt.ca

The Northwest Territories has some of the most isolated communities in Canada. Many are accessible only by air or winter road while the total population for the territory is less than many small cities in the south. Due to this isolation, distance education has the potential to play a major role in the delivery of education in the region.

Aurora College has the responsibility to meet the education needs of adult students in the territory. The college, a department of the territorial government, has a closer relationship with the Department of Education, Culture and Employment than provincial colleges in the south have with their respective education ministries. Employees of Aurora College are government employees rather than college employees and college buildings are directly maintained by the territorial government. This relationship allows faster response to community needs, but the bureaucracy inherent in this model can potentially suppress creativity.

Virtually all communities in the Territories have Community Learning Centres (CLC) operated by Aurora College and maintained by the Department of Public Works and Services. Most centres are new, well designed and are used for a variety of other community purposes in addition to education. Each centre has classrooms, office space, computer labs, and some centres have residences attached for visitors.

In addition, virtually every community in the Northwest Territories has an adult educator residing in the community. Each community is significantly different culturally, economically and socially. This difference, combined with the geographic isolation faced by communities in the Northwest Territories, requires an educator on-site to undertake a variety of student assistance roles.

Maureen Gross, Coordinator of Community Programs for Aurora College in the Sahtu Region of the Northwest Territories, emphasises that to properly support students, the local adult educator must recognise the environment unique to his or her community. Features of the environment include cultural traditions and ceremonies, education levels, access to technology, reading levels, history, available employment, politics, social barriers and other additional features unique to each community. Continued assessment of these features and community needs is essential, as the courses available must reflect the socio-economic and political realities of each community.

Essential for student success are the appropriate delivery technology and the quality of the instructors. Prior to internet-based delivery, Maureen Gross thought the success rate for print-based correspondence courses in the Sahtu Region was essentially zero. By adding the structure provided by internet delivery, the student success rate has improved.

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instructors need to provide feedback to students as soon as possible to ensure students are on track.

Chinook College was chosen as all relevant courses were available online including “Cruising the Information Highway”, a course that introduces students to the internet. Chinook College, a department of the Calgary Board of Education, provides online high school courses using WebCT software. The Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment negotiated the relationship with Chinook College and monitors course delivery through Aurora College.

As noted, prior to the internet-delivery provided by Chinook College, the success of print-based correspondence courses was essentially nonexistent in the Northwest Territories. The existing system was chosen as online learning can provide more external structure, prompt responses to questions and assignments and a sense of community among the students in different communities.

The relationship with Chinook College has been beneficial but challenges exist. As the delivery contract is between Chinook College and the Government of the Northwest Territories, a number of bureaucracies are involved in course delivery including the territorial government, Chinook College, Aurora College and the communities themselves. The organizations appear to work well together, but the multiple levels of bureaucracy has led to local frustration. The primary concerns voiced by students in the remote communities about the relationship between Chinook and the territory relate to course timelines imposed by Chinook College and the general lack of flexibility surrounding course delivery. In addition, if not ordered very early internet passwords often arrive from Chinook College late and books will arrive long after the course has started.

of the Northwest Territories recognised the need to present Adult Basic Education programmes but could not alone provide the solution. As a result, the territorial government, and consequently Aurora College, entered into an agreement with Chinook College in Calgary, Alberta, for the distance delivery of needed courses. These courses are delivered with the support of Aurora College and adult educators who are located in virtually all communities. The support provided by the college and the adult educators has proven essential for student success in the remote communities of Canada's far north and has proven that distance education is a successful delivery method.

Cree School Board and Heritage College

Northern Quebec

The Cree School Board and Heritage College in Hull, Quebec, have delivered a bridging programme to students in remote communities in northern Quebec since 1993. The Cree School Board administers the programme through the Sabtuan Continuing Education in Mistissini. The programme is a preparatory programme for those students who did not pass their high school requirements and offers them a second chance to gain credits students need to allow them to apply and enter a CEGEP or college.

This programme connects Heritage College with seven remote Cree communities located 750 to 1800 kilometres north of Hull, Quebec. When the programme began, the mode of delivery was telephone

conferencing; then in 1997, the delivery method changed to two-way videoconferencing. The reason for using videoconferencing technologies over other distance learning technologies had more to do with learning style preferences than anything else. The belief is that videoconferencing is well suited to the “oral/visual learner” and most appropriate for the students in northern Quebec.

The delivery model used is quite straightforward. The teacher or instructor, located in Hull, dials into a conference bridge on a dedicated telephone line. Each community has a facilitator who connects to that bridge to allow for videoconferencing. Students are assembled in their respective communities in a fashion that allows them to speak directly to their instructor and to send and receive images from a document camera. Tests and assignments are transmitted and returned via fax.

The programme offers courses in effective writing skills, preparing for college success, math and small business administration. Although the specific course content is not modified for this programme, Heritage’s long history with the Cree School Board has allowed them to modify approaches within the delivery methods to accommodate the diverse needs of these remote communities.

Modifying delivery to meet the needs of students is important for the success of any programme. The high cost of video conferencing is one clear barrier in this programme; and because of this barrier, the delivery has had to move from being 100 percent video based to about 50 percent. Participants connect with the instructor for their daily lessons and discussions and

Another shift is presently underway to include a web-based method of delivery. Michael Burnatowski, Co-ordinator of the programme for Heritage College, clearly sees a web-based method as being more cost effective and still meeting the learning styles of the students.

Charles Matoush, Director of Continuing Education for the Cree School Board, indicated other barriers that the programme has confronted. He argues that the Quebec government lags behind in technological innovations and thus lacks the technological support for educational programmes that choose videoconferencing. He also mentioned the initial challenges confronted in building the capacity within the Cree School board to support the videoconferencing format.

One of the most crucial pieces of the delivery method is the on-site facilitator. This person is local and hired by the community. Their official role is to deal with the technical aspects of the video-conferencing, the faxing of materials and overcoming logistical issues on-site. In reality, the facilitator becomes much more and are a major reason for the success of this programme.

The on-site facilitator ensures students recognise their deadlines and hand in assignments on time while also motivating students to attend class. The facilitators also tutor students in subject matter when possible, and the stability of the person in the position is essential. Frank Schreiner, a Heritage College professor, indicates that students at sites where consistency with facilitators have the highest success in the programme. The importance of the facilitator is also illustrated by a comment from Peter MacGibbon of Heritage College who stated that on-site facilitators are absolutely essential for keeping

each local group aware, animated, and involved in a live conference.

The relationship between Heritage College and the Cree School Board has been in existence for a decade and has adapted to the needs and the financial realities of the communities while recognising the available technology and the needs of the students. Through on-going communication between the two organisations, courses that many in urban centres take for granted have been made available in remote Aboriginal communities in northern Quebec.

Headwaters Education Centre

Northern Saskatchewan

www.edcentre.ca

The Headwaters Education Centre is a branch of the Keewatin Career Development Corporation (KCDC), a non-profit partnership of 14 Northern Saskatchewan career and educational service providers. The goal of KCDC is to use information and communication technology for the social and economic benefit of the residents of Northern Saskatchewan as well as First Nations, Metis, rural and remote communities.

The objective of Headwaters is to increase access to career-based sources of information for instructors and students in remote communities. Funding for the project is provided by the Smart Communities Demonstration Initiative of Industry Canada. In 2002, KCDC was also selected as a regional management organisation for Industry Canada's First Nations SchoolNet Programme

to serve First Nations schools in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

Headwaters is responding to the education needs of 46 remote communities through the establishment of Community Access Centres (CACs) across northern Saskatchewan. Students, teachers and the general public use these centres extensively for educational and informational purposes. The plan is for the CACs to become the community foundation for the delivery of a variety of extended services for the community.

The Headwaters Education Centre employs two distance education coordinators. Ted Green and Debbie Mielke are certified teachers who design, test, administer and evaluate distance learning programmes. As coordinators, Ted and Debbie design and test the curriculum and technology required to increase access to relevant education courses in the north. Northern community members are retained to work in the Community Access Centres.

The education programmes delivered by Headwaters are internet based and are developed following extensive research and development with the communities. The focus of Headwaters is to create education courses and related resources at the Kindergarten to Grade 12 level plus some post secondary courses. The coordinators have developed, among others, Native Studies 10, Science 10 and Communication Production Technology 10 courses that are available throughout the north. Headwaters have also created an innovative Fire Fighter Training course in partnership with Saskatchewan Environment that provides the theory requirement needed to become forest firefighting trainees. The diabetes awareness materials, local songs, cultural resources and study material on uranium that are

schools and communities. To be successful, KCDC believe it is essential to research the needs and abilities of the communities before providing a service. Headwaters has been able to research this need and provide necessary education resources to remote communities in northern Saskatchewan.

Northlands College

Northern Saskatchewan

Northlands College is one of eight publicly funded regional colleges in Saskatchewan. Serving the northern half of the province, the college has a population base that is 80 percent Aboriginal distributed across more than 45 small, remote communities. The college has three regional education centres located in La Ronge, Creighton and Buffalo Narrows serving the education needs of the respective regions.

The Buffalo Narrows regional campus serves the community of 1,400 people and the surrounding areas of northwest Saskatchewan. The campus has an inexhaustible Distance Education Coordinator, Ray Walters, on-site to assist students in completing post secondary courses. As with most local coordinators, his roles are many and according to Ray include that of facilitator, technical expert, tutor, mentor and motivator. Ray has daily contact with the students, has lived and was a teacher in the north for many years and provides the environment students need to be successful.

Developing the infrastructure needed to deliver university courses in Buffalo Narrows was a challenge. In a small, remote community such as this, it is difficult

to know what courses or training to offer. Northlands College was required to assess community and student needs to determine what courses were most relevant. This assessment is on-going and is essential to maintain enrolment.

The previous support model used in Buffalo Narrows didn't work as it failed to motivate the students, and students remained in the "upgrading model mentality" of seeing no

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Regional colleges manage SCN learning centres in over 50 communities in the province. In addition, 121 elementary and high schools, four SIAST campuses and more than 15 community centres in Saskatchewan are equipped to receive one-way video and two-way audio live, interactive programming by satellite. Students at Northlands College in Buffalo Narrows are able to view live classes from the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina with students from other communities throughout the province.

Communities wanting to access post secondary education programming are required to seek approval from their regional college. The college then ensures counselling and student support services are in place before authorizing a new post-secondary receiving site. Each site is subsequently responsible for purchasing the necessary hardware at cost from SCN.

In spite of the advanced technology available, access continues to be a challenge. The Buffalo Narrows campus has limited access to the internet as it shares computer labs with other programmes on campus. As the Northlands College campus is the only SCN delivery site in the community, the equipment is often required by other community groups during class time thus restricting student access.

The SCN delivery model is innovative and reflects a political decision by the Government of Saskatchewan to support the learning needs of remote communities. This model also recognises the declining availability of qualified instructors in rural and remote areas and ensures consistency of instruction among communities. Although colleges and communities close to urban centres have the same access to distance education courses, urban colleges are less likely to introduce and

adapt to new technologies since securing face-to-face access for students is easier to achieve. This situation leads to an apparent difference in technology skills between remote students and their counterparts closer to cities. Students in remote communities are more comfortable with technology than students closer to urban centres.

Several students enrolled in the university courses in Buffalo Narrows live more than a 100 kilometres from the campus. Since these students are able to watch SCN at the band office or school in their own communities where video conferencing already exists for students in Grades 9 through 12, Northlands College has arranged for these students to watch the video conferencing in their communities and travel to Buffalo Narrows only twice per week to meet with the coordinator.

Students in Buffalo Narrows are becoming more independent with this delivery model than with the traditional print-based correspondence model. According to Ray Walters, Distance Education Coordinator for the college in Buffalo Narrows, the videoconference model is successful because the model is flexible and meets the needs and lifestyles of the students. To ensure this flexibility, Ray needs to be aware of what is happening in his students' lives and must make regular changes to the support procedures and the course delivery.

As promising and successful as this delivery model appears, barriers are still experienced. A noticeable barrier was the time necessary for Northlands College staff to gain the trust of and build relationships with the Aboriginal students. Depending on the individual chosen for the job of distance education coordinator, this goal takes time and is not solely the responsibility of the

on-site coordinator. In the Buffalo Narrows delivery, Glenys Plunz, University Coordinator for Northlands College in La Ronge, was also regularly involved with the students. Northlands College believes that for the delivery to be successful, support must be built in at all levels of the institution.

Once trust between college staff and the student was established, the relationship flourished. Ray Walters gained this trust by consistently being available to the students and by immediately addressing social, emotional, academic and technical problems. This relationship pays off. Depending on the course, the student withdrawal rate is only 0 percent to 7 percent with the use of this delivery model.

Another challenge facing Northlands College was to find relevant courses available online. Courses that were made available by the universities in the south did not always meet the needs or education plans of the students. This lack of choice resulted in several students having to select unwanted courses to ensure their full-time student status was maintained.

The idea that face-to-face teaching is still more effective than distance education delivery is a barrier that continues to restrict the introduction of distance learning courses in remote communities. Distance education students in Buffalo Narrows argue that with proper student support in place, distance education can be just as successful as face-to-face delivery. To date, the Buffalo Narrows campus has had no withdrawals from their distance education delivery model, and ten students are entering their fourth semester of university courses. Northlands College in La Ronge has graduates who have completed their entire university degrees using a similar model. Glenys Plunz argues that a good reputation and

relationship between the college and the extension department of the universities is essential to ensure both institutions provide student support and encouragement.

Receiving instructor feedback is also a challenge for the students in Buffalo Narrows as a month can pass before assignments are graded and returned to the student. In some cases, students can complete three or more assignments before receiving any feedback from the instructor. This delay makes it difficult for students to know if they accurately comprehend the material and are progressing. Also, the feedback students do receive is often from university teaching assistants who were not part of the videoconference. Not being able to establish a relationship with the instructor limits the student's confidence in challenging perceived unfair grades or comments.

With SCN, the remote communities have no control over any part of the delivery apart from on-site support. Choice and supervision of instructors, curriculum and student evaluation is out of the control of Northlands College, which can be a problem as we personally observed professors in Regina and Saskatoon focus on the students in their classroom and appear to forget there are students learning by distance. Exams, assignments, and due dates set by the delivery institutions are rarely flexible and do not always reflect local needs.

However, local needs are reflected in the role of the distance education facilitator and the learning environment. Ray Walters believes that his role is one of technician for the SCN equipment, tutor, mentor, proof reader, motivator, exam supervisor, learner, and coffee maker. Having a degree or experience in the subject matter and teaching experience is beneficial to the position but dedication that goes beyond collective

agreements and job descriptions are needed to ensure student success. Ray often works long hours; and like adult educators in many remote communities, he is available to assist students what appears to be 24 hours per day seven days per week.

To encourage success, the students in Buffalo Narrows are subject to mandatory study skills tutorials while the La Ronge students have voluntary tutorials. Both sites use a feeder system and ladder students through adult upgrading courses into university transfer or credit classes.

Each SCN university broadcast is taped by the distance education coordinator and kept for three weeks to allow a student to watch the videoconference again. As with

takes to make the telephone calls results in the student missing new content.

College of New Caledonia would not approve any of the local school teachers to instruct the college-level courses. As such, the college was unable to deliver the courses by the traditional face-to-face model due to the expense of conventional delivery in a remote community. An alternative delivery method was found by acquiring the courses in a unique partnership with British Columbia Open University (BCOU) in the lower mainland.

Students in Fort Ware registered with BCOU and completed work as a traditional print-based distance education students. Course material and textbooks were mailed to the students and assignments and exams were mailed back to a single BCOU tutor in the south. To encourage success, an on-site tutor was hired by the College of New Caledonia. This tutor was hired from within the local school teaching staff and added structure, technical and personal support to the course delivery. The on-site tutors, Alison Kuzio and Tara Devlin, provided scheduled class times, mentoring, exam supervision and other necessary personal and education supports. The on-site College of New Caledonia tutor also maintained contact with the BCOU tutor to discuss issues or student questions.

The barriers confronting this programme were many and reflected those of other programmes across Canada. The challenges were geographic, institutional, social and technological. The great distance between Fort Ware and an urban centre had definite cost implications. As one of the most remote communities in British Columbia, the community is accessible only by an expensive flight or a long drive on an often treacherous logging road. The community's distance from an urban centre resulted in cost implications but also made it

As in most remote Aboriginal communities, text-based correspondence learning has not been successful in Fort Ware. As the traditional format of print-based correspondence learning was not flexible and was not a preferred way of learning in Fort Ware, incorporating print-based BCOU material in this project was a concern. The impact turned out to be minimal as this programme utilised an on-site tutor from the community. Although the Fort Ware students were very capable and in fact were in the top 5 percent of all BCOU students on their assignments, without this on-site tutor, it was apparent that many students would have withdrawn from the courses prior to completion as all students had extensive social, family and community responsibilities.

Technological barriers also existed in the programme delivery in Fort Ware. Programme and administrative tasks, which are primarily performed over the internet, are disrupted when the internet system does not work. Early in the school year, one such lack of service lasted four weeks, and had the students relied on internet

Nation. Also, the College of New Caledonia's effort to create an environment where students in this programme considered themselves part of the college by providing identification cards, access to bursaries, sharing of information and ensuring regular face-to-face contact between students and college staff add to the self esteem and success of the students.

Through the creativity and willingness of Blaine Wiggins to find solutions and reduce internal institutional barriers, the addition of BCOU into the relationship between Fort Ware and the College of New Caledonia was successful. The impact of Blaine taking the time to drive to Fort Ware to visit the students was positive and the administrative barriers Blaine and his assistant, Kara Cunningham, overcame were essential to the success of the students.

The recent elimination of the First Nations liaison officer position at BCOU is detrimental to student success in remote Aboriginal communities in British Columbia. However, this elimination of the liaison officer position may provide a market for other innovative distance delivery institutions such as Athabasca University, Maskwachees Cultural College or Blue Quills First Nations College to meet community need.

The College of New Caledonia decision to hire local teachers as on-site tutors ensured necessary and continuing support for the students. The support that the Kwadacha Nation provided in the form of maintaining wages while the students were in class, assuring wage increases and confirmed employment for students who successfully completed the programme all reflect community support for the programme and the delivery.

As with all of the case studies, the students were the best practice of the Kwadacha delivery. All the students had full time jobs and family responsibilities yet were still successful in their studies. Without the dedication of the students, the educators and the communities, the distance delivery courses would have little chance of success.

Chapter 3

BARRIERS TO DISTANCE EDUCATION

Assisting in the education of any group of people brings with it a challenge and a responsibility that must be recognised and accepted by the educator. Every student and each community reflects distinct qualities that must

barriers, educators will be more likely to develop strategies to overcome the barriers and increase the probability of student success.

Politics

Barbara Spronk (1995), who worked at Athabasca University for 22 years and then moved to Cambridge, England where for six years she was Executive Director of the International Extension College, suggested that the primary influence on programme planning with Aboriginal students is politics. In our view, politics does not necessarily involve only provincial politicians or Chiefs, but incorporates the influences of bureaucracies and the needs and requests of groups that have controlling interests in education.

Jim Teskey, Education Advisor for Keewaytinook Okimakanak in Balmertown, Ontario, working in Aboriginal education for 20 years, 9 of which were within Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, contends that the bureaucratic model of the federal government department can stifle creativity and erode the successes of distance education programmes. Although many individuals within the department have good intentions, the regulations, routine, red tape and the lack of adequate and inspired funding models for innovative delivery makes distance learning in remote Aboriginal communities a challenge.

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) does provide Post Secondary Education (PSE) support to eligible First Nations and Inuit students (although not to

cost of tuition fees, books, travel, and living allowances, when eligible. Support is also provided to post-secondary institutions for the development and delivery of special programmes through the Indian Studies Support Program (ISSP). The PSE Program is funded as a matter of social policy by the Canadian government and has evolved as a result of government policy. As of 2002-2003, regional core budgets of the programme

Curriculum and Delivery Models

The search by remote Aboriginal students for the benefits of western education, while maintaining their culture, traditional learning and language leads to conflicting motivation as the focus of the two approaches can be very different. The interaction between the western and Aboriginal learning approaches can lead to a dilemma for course designers and must be recognised and questioned by delivery institutions and the communities.

Is distance education merely a means of dispensing western education (Arger, 1987)? Is it a continued consequence of colonisation? International research by Guy (1991) found that students in the Bachelor of

complete without leaving their communities. Now, in partnership with Athabasca University and the University of Alberta, Blue Quills is offering the Iyiniw Kiskinohamatowin programme that allows students to complete the final two years of the programme at Blue Quills where the programme respects Aboriginal culture and the specific needs of the students.

Geography also affects the design of distance education curriculum. In every community we visited, concern was raised by administrators and students about the lack of a remote and northern perspective to the curriculum. Whether the curriculum was developed in Toronto or Calgary, students in remote Aboriginal communities could not always relate to the subways, shopping malls, urban and non-Aboriginal concepts incorporated into the curriculum. To ensure courses are relevant to students, course curriculum needs to be flexible and must allow instructors to incorporate northern images and perceptions into course design and delivery. Confirming relevancy for Aboriginal learners in remote communities ensures students are not only able to acquire information, but also be able to apply it!

Curriculum that is not flexible in its design and delivery opposes success in remote Aboriginal communities. By providing student access to British Columbia Open University tutors only during certain hours of the week and where this schedule does not fit the needs of students in Fort Ware, the students are essentially denied access to their instructors. Or, adhering to strict course delivery schedules that do not allow for community ceremonies such as funerals and cultural events does not allow for the dynamics of remote Aboriginal communities. KIHS builds extra weeks into every course delivery while Wahsa has its instructors available to students every night of the week. This flexibility

ensures the curriculum and delivery model are designed to meet the needs of students.

Perception of Distance Education

The success of distance education programmes has been laden by a misconception of the quality and motives of institutions offering such programmes. Private companies continue to offer “accredited” distance education courses on matchbook covers, on internet “pop-ups” and on late night infomercials. As such, the mistaken image of distance education as a producer of second-rate programmes continues to be a barrier.

Much of the research into distance education has focused on only limited aspects of the discipline, such as the student drop-out rate compared to traditional classroom instruction, rather than focussing on the larger picture (McIlroy & Walker, 1993). Less than 40 years ago, only South Africa and the USSR had distance teaching universities (Keegan, 1991). With the formation of The Open University in the United Kingdom in 1969 and Canada’s Athabasca University in 1970, as well as new and traditional institutions offering distance education programmes throughout the developed and developing world, the image of distance education as second-rate should no longer be entertained.

The Open University is Britain’s largest university with over 200,000 people taking courses each year. To date, over two million people have studied at the Open University with students’ ages ranging from 17 to 94! Athabasca University courses are fully accredited and transferable to other education institutions in Alberta and throughout Canada. Athabasca University has also developed innovative partnerships with remote

Aboriginal communities to ensure students have access

proposals by outside institutions that failed to research the environment. The institutions claimed that the courses had been successful in urban centres and the technology utilised was current and provided an excellent opportunity to increase access for local students. Blue Quills staff were suspicious, as although modern technology was incorporated on Blue Quill's campus, many of the students in the region lacked easy access to telephones let alone computers with internet connections.

Technology has become an integral part of distance learning and the incorporation of the appropriate method has a direct impact on the success of the delivery. While distance education is the only practical means of reaching some target groups, the medium has traditionally consisted of print-based material. These traditional methods were not always able to provide the accessibility, interaction and support necessary for Aboriginal student success. With the introduction of new technologies, student access has increased but unfortunately many of the other barriers to student success remained.

Researching the needs of the student and adapting curriculum and technology to meet these needs, it is possible to correctly incorporate the appropriate technology. We have examples in this book of successful radio, videoconferencing, text-based correspondence and internet delivery of courses to remote Aboriginal communities. Each model was successful because it researched the best technology and designed the delivery to meet local needs.

The debate over computer-based learning versus computer-mediated learning continues. Our research indicates that computer-based learning is not effective as

a teaching tool as it only provides pre-composed materials consisting of exercises and activities designed to be completed with minimal or no personal interaction or feedback. Computer-based learning, as with unsupported text-based correspondence material, is seldom successful as Aboriginal students are unable to build a relationship with textbooks or technology. As such, this model does not respect the cultural or social needs of Aboriginal students.

Computer mediated learning includes synchronous (same time) and asynchronous (different time) interaction between the students and the instructor. This model is more effective since Aboriginal learning is traditionally based on story telling, relationships and experiential activities and is not a text-based classroom environment. As learning is traditionally obtained through these relationships and experiences; computer-mediated communication can be effective if opportunities for experiential learning and relationship building are incorporated into the course design and delivery.

Access to appropriate technology can be affected by a number of factors; including, demographics, standardisation, institutional policies, and the definition of the target group (Bates, 1997). Access to technology is also limited by costs. Many new technologies require large capital investments to purchase hardware or software and require the student and the institution to be trained how to use the technology. Failure to provide this financial commitment and technical support will eliminate any advantage the technology provides.

The latest technology is not necessarily the best option. Communities and institutions need to be aware of student access to different technologies to determine the

best option available to ensure technology is a motivator, not a barrier.

student independence is an important feature, developing a distance education course that encourages social contact for Aboriginal students may be as important. This required social interaction can be achieved by ensuring the instructor and the students have opportunities to build relationships. Through the design of the course, students should also be able to interact and build relationships with other students in their class. Aboriginal students in remote communities should be provided with deadlines, but these dates must be somewhat flexible to reflect the students' environment. With proper student support structures in place, the deadlines will encourage success for the majority of students.

Cost

A major challenge facing distance education that is especially evident across Canada today is the reduction of government financial support to education. Without the required financial support for distance education, the other barriers become irrelevant.

In an admirable effort to reduce deficits, provincial governments have reduced funding to school boards and post-secondary institutions. Consequently, education institutions have had to increase tuition, increase class enrolment and reduce the number of courses made available by innovative means of delivery. The education institutions have also had to reduce their capacity to introduce new technology.

If the full cost of education is examined, the financial commitment needed for distance delivery is often comparable to the traditional face-to-face approach. A study by Gruber and Coldevin (1994) examined the need for properly trained Inuit people to manage the new

territory of Nunavut. The study examined the high cost and vast distances involved in education delivery in Canada's north and compared the cost of moving students to urban centres to complete their studies versus the incorporation of distance education. Due to the high cost of travel and other expenses, the research found that the cost of distance education methods for students in Nunavut was comparable to and, in fact, was less expensive than the alternative.

In addition to the cost savings and the benefits of having the training delivered on-site and allowing the student to

without funding, quality is difficult to achieve. With the reality of reduced government funding, institutions need to examine the costs and benefits of any education programme. Although the benefits of distance education programmes in remote Aboriginal communities far outweigh the economic costs, we, as educators, must attempt to retain quality in spite of today's reduced budgets.

Cost effectiveness of a distance education programme must be explored by examining both quantity and quality (Rumble, 1987) and the most cost efficient means are not necessarily the most cost effective. If insufficient funding is available and the quality of the delivery is correspondingly low, the number of students

private, for-profit institutions offering their courses by distance. In business it is easy to define revenue and expenses to determine profit margin. In distance education the financial costs can be examined but the true outcomes and successes are both tangible and intangible. Governments need to be lobbied to recognise that, if assistance is provided to education institutions for the development of distance education courses, learning can occur at a far lower cost than having students from remote Aboriginal communities move to urban centres and attend traditional delivery institutions.

Even if a student in a remote Aboriginal community

government to cut funding to education, it is

that continually failed. Depending on the technology chosen and its reliability, technology can be a barrier to successful delivery. The most appropriate technology needs to be chosen and the necessary supports incorporated. Using the newest technology is not always the answer.

- Student Independence: Although adults want to be independent, distance education courses have traditionally provided too much independence

Chapter 4

LEARNING STYLES

The concept of learning styles is highly contentious within Aboriginal education. Most of this debate revolves around the fact that studies on learning styles lead to the implied assumptions of differences in cognitive abilities among races. If it is agreed that cognitive processes are a result of cultural, social and

Traditional Aboriginal Learning Styles

The oral tradition is common among all Aboriginal people. Historically, legends and stories were passed down through the generations with a special role given the Elders. It was, and is, within these stories that the values and skills of a people are passed along to a new generation (Tafoya, 1982). The details of these stories allowed for very different teachings for listeners at various stages in their lives. Rich in symbolism and metaphors, the same story heard as a young child teaches different lessons to an adult.

Within this oral form of communication, non-verbal cues like eye contact and silence are important learning tools with Aboriginal people. These signs are often foreign and uncomfortable for the non-Aboriginal instructor or course developer who will not recognise or include these behaviours in their course.

The modelling tradition, or “Watch-then-Do,” was the primary means of acquiring and perfecting skills (More, 1986). This tradition means that before a task was performed, it was observed until such time as the student believed she or he could complete the task. In a society

Through this diversity writers, such as Dr. Clare Brant and Rupert Ross, have synthesized five core beliefs, or ethics, which appear to be central to most First Nation's cultures. (Ross 1992) These five core ethics have a profound effect on instructional methodology, classroom management and student assessment.

For the educator in an Aboriginal community, awareness of these ethics is crucial. Often things happen in an educational setting that, as educators, we seek out answers as to why these things occurred. Knowing these

3. The ethic respecting praise and gratitude: Appreciation is shown by asking that person to continue. Educational implications of this ethic suggest that praise and gratitude put undue pressure on an individual and could make one reluctant to attempt new endeavours unless success is assured.
4. The conservation-withdrawal tactic: This ethic clearly coming from a need to conserve effort, energy and resources suggests that new ideas be practised mentally before the feat is actually attempted. This ethic has an implication in education as the instructor may view the student as not knowing the answer. Rather, the student may be practising the idea mentally before applying.
5. The notion that the time must be right. To perform at an optimal level with maximum results, the time must be right for that individual. Whether preparing oneself emotionally and spiritually for a course of action or seeking guidance in the natural elements, conscious steps are taken to determine the timing of actions.

These five ethics are manifested in different ways in different communities. In other words, understanding the list of five is one thing but recognising and incorporating the ethics at the community level is the challenge. All successful distance educators, whether they know it or not, have incorporated these ethics into their courses.

Aboriginal communities are family centred with Elders holding a paramount role in teaching. As a social reality, successful programmes should include Elders in

the design and delivery of distance education courses. Inviting Elders helps curb the negative legacy of residential schools and outside educators, which have had enormous social implications in native communities.

The loss of parenting skills is one of the greatest negative effects inflicted on Aboriginal communities by the attempts to assimilate the people into the non-Aboriginal culture. With modelling being so important in Aboriginal learning, little chance exists for youngsters educated in residential schools to see parenting role models in an institutionalized setting. Lack of these role models resulted in Aboriginal children having no teachers to reflect traditional means of learning. Involving an Elder in the delivery of distance education courses respects the traditional approach to learning while adding legitimacy to the courses.

The socio-economic factors that have affected learning styles focus on poor economic conditions, which precipitate health problems as well as historical economic displacements. Many Aboriginal peoples were not sedentary. The imposed shift from nomadic life to sedentary life by forcing Aboriginal people onto reserves and settlements has had a disproportionately negative effect on male populations.

In a traditional hunting and gathering Aboriginal society, the role of the male was very well defined. The shift into villages and reserves has left males with undefined roles that unfortunately have 2(es)-15(1)-aes lle

developed that deliver practical, employment-related skills to males in remote Aboriginal communities.

All these cultural, social and economic factors impact on the learning styles an Aboriginal student brings to the distance education environment. Whether negative or positive, these factors created the strength of the individual student to various degrees and tell us, as

complexities of imagery coding within traditional oral culture.

3. Concrete versus Abstract: A person will be more successful by developing initial concepts with concrete examples as opposed to introducing a concept as an abstract rule. This has implications in the relevance of material used.
4. Trial-Error-Feedback versus Reflective: One of the learning strengths of Aboriginal students is their reflective abilities. This counters the dominant way of teaching, which involves attempting a skill, having an error then receiving feedback, and trying again until the skill is

created by their personality and their environments. Understanding Aboriginal culture, however, can be beneficial to recognise learning strengths and appropriate course administration.

Historically, Aboriginal students learned by watching and by listening to stories told by the elders. These students did not learn from a textbook while sitting in an

Chapter 5

BEST PRACTICES

In spite of the many challenges facing distance education in remote Aboriginal communities throughout Canada, a great deal of success has been achieved. Each of the programmes we visited had barriers to face, but the programmes were successful by incorporating strategies and procedures that supported success. By sharing these best practices with others, we hope to assist other remote Aboriginal communities and provide useful assistance to education institutions interested in developing and delivering successful distance education programmes.

On-Site Support

The most important and the most common best practice we observed was the availability of education support staff in the community. Each remote community we visited had an adult educator, teacher, distance education coordinator or another person in the community that motivated students and provided local administration of distance education courses and programmes. In each of the communities we visited throughout Canada, the on-site support staff played an integral role in the learning process and the support position was invaluable to student success.

The role of the support staff was varied and complicated. Each distance education coordinator, adult educator and teacher had to be dedicated to the students since his or her duties were complex and often required the person to provide support beyond traditional classroom times. In most cases, the credentials or experience of the on-site support person was not important. However, the commitment and dedication of the support staff to student success were essential.

From Deline to Buffalo Narrows to North Spirit Lake, each one of these dedicated individuals demonstrated responsibilities that are beyond any traditional job description. Located in a remote community, the on-site support person had to be all things to all students - tutor, instructor, mentor, role model, administrator, technician, social worker, truant officer - while also being able to make good coffee.

In addition to the on-site support person, instructors and administrative staff need to appreciate and be comfortable in remote Aboriginal communities. In many communities, a feeling exists that southern, urban educators do not understand life in a remote, northern community and that these educators rarely accommodate the culture and the environment in the curriculum or the delivery of distance education courses. The successful courses and programmes had strong ties between the education institution and the community with frequent visits conducted by institution instructors and staff.

In many cases, years of living and teaching in remote communities are needed to appreciate the learning environment to the point where appropriate curriculum and delivery methods are developed. It is therefore vital that educators without the experience in remote communities obtain the input of local staff and develop

strategies to incorporate local knowledge into course design and delivery while working towards the induction of Aboriginal instructors in course design and delivery. Empowering local staff in remote communities will lead to student successes that will ultimately result to a need for more instructors and additional innovative programmes.

The most successful distance education institutions researched for this book used instructors and staff who were either from the remote communities or who have worked in and understand remote Aboriginal communities. Many people believe they understand the issues and the environments faced by students in remote Aboriginal communities; but it is only by living and working closely with the people that this knowledge is truly gained.

Incorporation of Culture and Environment

Each of the distance education programmes we visited successfully included local culture and the socio-economic environment in the design and delivery of their programme. Supporting our research, evidence from international programmes such as the Remote Area Teacher Education Programme (RATEP) for Aboriginal students in northern Australia (Henderson and Putt, 1993) and distance education programmes in Papua New Guinea (Guy, 1991) confirm that incorporation of culture and the local environment is necessary to achieve success in the design and delivery of distance education programmes.

One of the goals of distance education is to increase access to education for students living in isolated areas. In many cases, the use of traditional, text-based correspondence material failed to achieve this goal. To

require an Aboriginal student to sit alone in a room and read a textbook written by a stranger in a language other than the student's own first language is creating a conflict between traditional learning methods and the need to apply non-Aboriginal methods of learning required to obtain the training and knowledge required to achieve employment in the non-Aboriginal world.

Text-based correspondence material did not eliminate but often sustained student isolation by limiting or removing the social contact with other students and the instructor. In effective distance education programmes, student isolation was reduced through the introduction of study centres, telephone contact between students and instructors, on-site support staff and other initiatives that linked the student to the instructor and the education institution. These links reduced the feeling of isolation and increased the chances of building relationships – thus respecting Aboriginal learning needs and supporting student success.

The culture of any society includes characteristics that define its special identity, its structure and its stability. The culture is also defined by its social values, myths, religious beliefs and decision-making processes. Recognising the different elements that comprise the local culture will assist the community and the educator in the preparation and delivery of culturally appropriate material using relevant technology. As noted earlier, completion of needs assessments prior to the selection of curriculum and technology will improve the chance that appropriate material is delivered using accessible technology.

Educators have to know who their students are. Many Aboriginal people view the world differently from non-Aboriginal people and an educator working in a cultural

environment other than his or her own must realise the different views to effectively provide learning opportunities to students. Through conversation with Elders and experts on colonisation, Dr. Leona Makokis, President of Blue Quills First Nations College and Diana Steinhauer, past Education Director for Saddle Lake First Nation, provided observations in Chart No. 1. The content examines the different values placed on learning and on existence between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures. The observations are not intended

their formative years and to encourage life-long learning (Rumble, 1989). The few who attempt to incorporate culture and the local environment in distance education will be rewarded with successes.

We have known for almost 40 years what is needed to improve a student's access to education. Certain prerequisites must be present for distance education programmes to be successful (Edstrom, 1966). These prerequisites can be related to distance education in remote Aboriginal communities the by recognising the following:

- **Good Mass Communication:** Although improving, communication is still an issue in some remote Aboriginal communities where many students still do not have reliable access to technology and where the mail service is often irregular.
- **Good Home Environment:** Many students in remote Aboriginal communities lack the support of their spouses or families and do not have access to a quiet study space. The social problems facing many people in remote communities also impact the quality of their learning.
- **Language Fluency:** Although English is the first language for many Aboriginal students, others have their native language as their first language. Fluency and comprehension of English can be a challenge for these students. In addition, many schools in remote communities offer classes only to the Grade 9 level. Rather than leave their communities, many students quit school at this point thus limiting their English language skills.

Successful distance education courses in remote Aboriginal communities have recognised the challenges and have incorporated strategies to minimize the impact of these obstacles. Through recognition and incorporation of culture and the local socio-economic environment into the curriculum and the course delivery, successful programmes have supported student success.

Prompt Feedback

Two types of timely feedback are necessary for the success of distance education courses. Course feedback provides information on curriculum and delivery outcomes and reviews details of what is working and what is not. Student feedback provides answers to student questions and timely, detailed responses to student assignments and tests. Both types of feedback are essential to the success of distance education programmes in remote Aboriginal communities.

Derek Rowntree (1995), Professor of Educational Development at the Open University, argues that feedback regarding the acceptability and effectiveness of course materials could be the most crucial task of distance education planning. The evaluation of any distance education course will ultimately lead to programme improvement and will also provide an effective marketing tool for offering the programme in other communities. Formative evaluation, assessments that occur during the course, should take place regularly and will assist in overcoming the existing faults while the course is still being delivered, rather than waiting until the course is over and the students have finished. Summative evaluation, assessments that occur at the end of the course or programme, should be more thorough and should be used to improve the next course offering.

In addition to the course evaluation, feedback to students must be prompt, relevant and comprehensive. The distance education students we interviewed indicated that the comments provided by the instructor on assignments and exams were often more important than the marks themselves. The comments provided feedback that allowed the students to learn from their work rather than just receiving grades with no explanations and no comments on which to base future assignments or to prepare for future examinations.

It was also interesting to note that the speed with which the comments and grades were returned was also essential. In many remote communities we visited, the distance education students completed three or four assignments before instructor feedback was received on the first assignment. As such, students did not know if they were accurately understanding the material and progressing appropriately.

Without daily personal contact with the students, distance education instructors should promptly comment on the students' work. With current technology there is no excuse for delayed feedback. Using email, fax or telephone, an instructor can provide timely feedback before the comments are returned by mail. Communities and education institutions need to ensure the technology and instructor availability is present to provide timely responses to student requests and assignments.

Building Relationships with Students

Consideration of the culture and history of communities and knowing the students is essential for distance education course success. As indicated, relationships are a strong component of Aboriginal culture. Contact

between the instructor and the student, especially face-to-face or through the use of technology, allows students the opportunity to build a relationship with a person – something difficult to build with a computer monitor!

There are many ways to build personal relationships within courses. One means is to have the instructor and institution staff visit the students in person prior to or during course delivery to establish relationships. Although effective, this approach can be very expensive based on the geographic separation of instructors and students. Another approach is to have the instructor

communities want to know non-professional things about the instructor. Aboriginal students want to know who the instructor is – rather than what the instructor knows.

A relationship will not be formed between the student and the instructor through one video message, written autobiography or conversation. Building this relationship with students in remote Aboriginal communities is complicated and will take time to develop. Ensuring consistency in instructional and support staff will confirm the relationship between the community and the institution is developed and maintained.

Tom Wall, a teacher for Tsleil-Waututh Nation in North Vancouver, British Columbia, believes that building a relationship with students is essential but also a

Through the development of personal relationships with the communities, the educator can gain the personal trust and better understand the culture and values that are vital to ensure an effective partnership (Moran and Mugridge, 1993). Examples from our research are extensive and one only needs to look at the relationship that exists between the College of New Caledonia and Kwadacha Nation; or that of Heritage College and remote communities in northern Quebec; or the relationship between Chinook College and distance students in the Northwest Territories to embrace the concept. An education institution that fails to establish and maintain these relationships will have a short-lived experience delivering distance education courses to students in remote Aboriginal communities.

Flexible Delivery

Another key to the successful delivery of distance education programmes in remote Aboriginal communities is to allow for flexibility in the curriculum design and course delivery. In situations where students are given some flexibility with assignment dates and topic selection, students will be more successful.

Flexibility allows for the changing environmental, cultural and social dynamics of the communities and the students. For example, in many Aboriginal communities a death results in a wake that can last for days. The timing of annual hunting, trapping and fishing trips does not always reflect the school calendar. For other communities, the need for political and/or social activities often takes priority over school courses. These activities can be of great importance to the student and community, and family pressure on the student to participate can be great. Failure to allow for these activities will reduce student enrolment and success.

A variety of technologies have been successfully used in distance education programmes in remote Aboriginal communities across Canada including the internet, radio, telephone and text-based correspondence materials. Each delivery method can be successful if utilized properly and if the method is easily and reliably accessible by the students. The community must assess its access to technology and ensure the delivery is made available to the widest audience possible.

The technologies chosen by the delivery sites we visited reflected the best option for their respective communities. Each of the successful sites also has technology support built in. Whether the Adult educators in Tulita or Fort Severn become the technology experts in the community or whether the computer experts in Inuvik or Sioux Lookout are easily available to both students and institution staff, each delivery institution must build in technology support for students, staff and communities for the courses to be successful.

Ensuring Students Feel Part of the School

Remote students need to feel part of the delivery institution. This feeling allows students to consider themselves “regular” college or high school students and can have an effect not only with the students but also on the entire community. If a student in a remote community considers themselves a college student, he or she will act like one and will take pride in their work. Reflecting the self-confidence and pride shown by the

and will recognise that there is an education opportunity for them other than dropping out of school at Grade 9!

Making a student feel like part of the institution is actually quite easy. Students will consider themselves part of the college, university or school if the institution provides casual, supportive telephone calls to the students. The institution can also provide student identification cards.

Through our own personal experiences and the observations made by students, staff and administrators in the communities we visited, a number of procedures that can enhance the probability of success were presented. The best practices of distance education in remote Aboriginal communities include:

- **On-Site Support:** The most significant best practice is to provide on-site support staff in the communities. Distance education coordinators, adult educators or teachers in the communities must assume a number of roles to motivate and support distance education students while monitoring the personal, social, cultural and political environment of the communities served. Programmes where on-site support staff are present are more successful than courses in communities without a support person designated to assist local students.
- **Incorporation of Culture and Environment:** Curriculum and delivery methods must respect and reflect the culture and environment of the students the course is designed to assist. Curriculum designers and course instructors need to know who the potential and actual students are and attempt to understand the environment in which the students live. Curriculum and delivery must also be flexible to allow for differences among numerous communities. Local Elders and resource people should be involved in all stages of course design and delivery.
- **Prompt Feedback:** Distance education courses need to undergo formative and summative evaluations to ensure the courses and programmes meet the needs of the students.

Students also need to have easy and regular access to their instructors and the institution. Prompt, comprehensive feedback to assignments, questions and exam results from instructors ensures students have understood the concepts before progressing in the course.

- **Building Relationships with Students:** Students need to know who their instructor is and who else is in the course. This knowledge aids in the building of relationships between students and their teachers - an essential learning component in Aboriginal culture. Students also need to build relationships with other students in their class and the delivery institution. To open the relationship building experience instructors should meet the students in person or by some other means of communication before the course starts. The building of relationships can take time. As such, institutions are encouraged to maintain consistency with administrative staff and instructors to support the relationship building process.
- **Flexible Delivery:** Course delivery must reflect the dynamics of remote Aboriginal communities.

students and communities to determine what technology will be most accessible and reliable. If students struggle with the operation of the technology or do not have reliable access, the newest technology is not necessarily the best.

- **Ensuring Students Feel Part of the School:** Students are more likely to be successful if considered part of the delivery institution. The impression also has an impact on the entire community as children witness the positive impact of the older students' learning and reflect this self-assurance in their own studies. Youth also recognise that educational opportunities exist after Grade 9 without having to leave the community. Distance education students should receive student ID cards from the education institution, be made aware of and be eligible for institution bursaries and receive regular information on the institution and other students.
- **Government Support:** Government support encourages innovation and success. With band, provincial and federal government support, whether financial or other, communities and education institutions are encouraged to provide the commitment needed to ensure the proper design and delivery of distance education courses.

Each institution we visited developed best practices that ensured students obtained distance education courses that were properly designed and delivered using relevant, accessible technology. Our hope is that other people across Canada will use these practices to improve the opportunities for all students in all communities.

Chapter 6

SUMMARY

Aboriginal people across Canada want control of their destiny. First Nations, Metis and Inuit people want to direct their own future and deserve distance education

students must be understood, and examining the best practices of other distance delivery models will ensure new programmes are properly prepared and will offer the best service to students.

The first step in implementing a new programme is to determine the programme's barriers to success. These barriers can be common among all communities or institutions or the barrier may be unique to each situation based on the socio-economic, geographic, political and other variables of the education institution, the students and/or the community. To determine the barriers faced by distance education in remote Aboriginal communities across Canada, we examined successful and failed ventures and interviewed students, administrators, staff and community members.

The barriers (or challenges as Margaret Fiddler calls them) we encountered to successful distance education programmes were many and none should be underestimated. Common barriers included the deficient support for distance education by local, federal and provincial governments and the corresponding lack of funding for innovative education programmes. Political barriers also include the imposition of bureaucratic structures that reduce effectiveness and frustrate students and educators. Curriculum and delivery models were also a challenge as most curriculum and delivery designers are from the south and do not recognise or support the adaptation of courses to students living in remote communities. Although improving, distance education is still faced with the challenge of being perceived by some students, funders and communities as a poor alternative to traditional face-to-face education.

Another challenge facing the successful implementation of distance education programmes is the lack of student

access to reliable and appropriate technology. The

acknowledged learning styles of their students, and has implemented practices to encourage student success.

The most important practice to encourage student success is to make available on-site support staff to motivate, monitor and assist students. The communities that have distance education coordinators, adult educators or teachers on site achieve greater student success. The on-site support staff are a dedicated group of people who provide a wide range of services for distance education students; including, assistance with course selection, ensuring student access to technology, monitoring the completion of assignments, invigilating examinations, motivating students and observing the social, economic and political climate of the community to determine education needs.

The incorporation of culture and the environment experienced by students in remote Aboriginal communities in the curriculum and delivery of courses is also essential for student success. Recognising the qualities of the culture and ensuring the curriculum incorporates the use of Elders, includes the opportunity to build relationships and respects the traditions and beliefs of Aboriginal students will encourage student success. Also, prompt feedback to questions, assignments and exams is a best practice evident in the successful delivery institutions. The feedback must be timely and also needs to be comprehensive.

To respect Aboriginal learning values, instructors and institutions need to build relationships with the students and provide the opportunity for students to build relationships with other students in the class. Relationships can be built through personal visits and the inclusion of instructor biographies in pre-course materials. Another best practice is the need for

flexibility of distance education course delivery. Although certain structure in course delivery is needed for Aboriginal students, allowing flexibility for the social, economic and cultural activities of students is also important. Access to reliable technology is an

increasing the social and economic impact of learning on the entire community. Consequently, the self-esteem and independence of the community grows while youth have access to options that they would not otherwise have.

Through proper research and effective strategies to determine and overcome the challenges to successful distance education programmes and the implementation of best practices, distance education will provide appropriate education opportunities to students in remote Aboriginal communities. If designed and delivered well, distance education can, and will, have a positive impact on the social, political and economic future of our first peoples.

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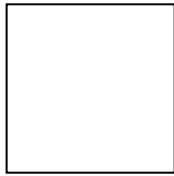
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Back Cover

Students living in remote Aboriginal communities can benefit from distance education – yet distance education has often failed to live up to its potential and has failed students.

Through the examination of existing distance education ventures in remote Aboriginal communities across Canada, this book examines the real and perceived barriers facing those wanting to establish distance education programmes. The book also examines learning styles of Aboriginal students in remote communities and will explore the best practices of existing programmes.



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