

# THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



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**TO:** Working Group on Cross-Border Collaboration  
Faculty of Education

**FROM:** Stephen Petrina, Professor  
Faculty of Education

**RE:** “Cross-Border Collaboration” and the LT in EPLT

Dear Working Group on Cross-Border Collaboration,

This is the third document following up on the Dean’s invitation to formally participate in the Working Group on Cross-Border Collaboration’s review process. I appreciate the opportunity to have formal input, conversation, and a response. At the 12 November meeting of the Working Group, I was corrected by the Dean and Associate Dean that they were working from opportunities, rather than problems, or spinning gold out of straw so to speak. So now, many of us are *really* asking: toward what opportunity is the “Working Group on Cross-Border Collaboration” an obligation?

Obviously, \$ is one opportunity toward which the Working Group is obliged, and I will explore this point through an analysis of the Office for External Programs and Learning Technologies (EPLT). I submit that this is well within the responsibilities of the Working Group and its Terms of Reference, humbly suggesting that for scholars to “*imagine* infrastructure and governance models that might enable cross-border cooperation and collaboration,” they must *understand* existing “infrastructure and governance models...” Hence, my input here focuses the LT side of EPLT as yet another failed innovation (in addition to CCFI). Specifically, the LT side of EPLT represents an administrative misjudgment of proportions that demand at least a modicum of accountability.

The challenge here is an analysis of innovations in education, a site of contention over failures, successes, change, stability, and evaluation or interpretation. The issue is complicated by innovation with technology in education, with countless policy and practice investments made with little accountability. Not everything regarding media and technology is a good idea, and not every innovation is a relative success. There are many failures along the way. The trick is to discern the difference both analytically and administratively.

### *The LT of EPLT*

What follows is an analysis of the LT in EPLT as an empirical example of “cross-faculty” or “cross-border” initiatives in Education, and of academic programs and research mandates transferred into offices and service units. It’s a good example of failed “infrastructure and governance models.”

In 1987, the Faculty of Education's Field Development Office (established in 1975) became the Distance Education Office (DEO). The DEO was changed to the Office of Continuing Professional Education (OCPE) and expanded to the Office of External Programs and Learning Technologies (EPLT) in January 2003. The expansion to EPLT was part of a larger restructuring of the Faculty that included the change of the CSCI to CCFI (see “Cross-Border Collaboration and the CCFI”). In June 2004, following a reshuffling of Directors, Jim Gaskell was appointed Associate Dean of the Office. The Associate Dean eventually assumed administrative control over Computing and Media Services (CMS), which consolidated Media Services (MS) and Education Computing Services (ECS) in 2003. It was made clear that “EPLT is not an academic department or centre— [the] work is primarily that of facilitation and brokering” (*Snapshots*, 2008, p. 49; also *Faculty Self-Study*, 2005, p. 153).

Perhaps most faculty members take LT for granted or wonder what LT means. Does it refer to tools and instrumentalities? Or does it refer to a discipline? Or both? The phrase “learning technologies” was coined in 1993 when the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) was established in England. The ALT represented a new disciplinary configuration generally as a response to changes in interrelationships between learning and technology, economic imperatives in human resource development (HRD) and the waning currency of “educational technology” (Petrina, et al., 2008). Reflective of changes in England, the Canadian Office of Learning Technologies (OLT) was created in 1996 to centralize affairs relating to HRD and the new technologies— to address "challenges and benefits of technology-based learning and to act as a catalyst for innovation in the area of technology-enabled learning and skills development." Provincial ministries and universities eventually aligned themselves with funding and policy. For example, the UBC Office of Learning Technology (UBC OLT) was established in 2002 and began to centralize resources on campus, including e-portfolio initiatives. Recognizing the politics of this change, UBC’s Faculty of Education fell in line. This can be read as both a top down attempt to centralize policy and bottom up alignment with politics.

Hence, the LT in EPLT was manifested in two directions. The first was the Master of Educational Technology (MET) degree and program, which commenced in September 2002 and derived from faculty members’ initiatives within CUST, EDST, and administrators in UBC’s Distance Education & Technology (DE&T) unit. The second was an innovation called the Director of Digital Learning Projects (DLPs), which included the appointment of the Director on 1 April 2004 and derived from the Dean’s Office (DNSO). The MET program provided a cost-recovery or revenue-generating locus for LT while the Director of DLPs was charged with “initiating, encouraging and showing leadership in digital learning projects that build the professional, research and infrastructure capacity of the Faculty” (Gaskell, 2004).

### ***Master of Educational Technology (MET) program***

In 1997, UBC's DE&T inaugurated a post-graduate certificate (15 credits) program between the Department of Educational Studies (EDST) and Tec de Monterey, and within a few years, began to explore the logistics of a graduate degree program. The initial *Business Plan* for a joint Master of Educational Technology (MET) program between UBC and Tec de Monterey was drafted by DE&T Director Tony Bates and introduced to the Faculty of Education in April 2001. The MET *Business Plan* spelled out details for a 30 credit, course-based master's program. Students would pay tuition of \$12,500 for the program. Within a fully cost-recoverable model, the program, assuming 40 students per course, would yield "a comfortable annual profit of \$220,000 per year, by year 7" (i.e., 58% return on expenditure) (p. 15). Sixty students per course would increase profits to \$440,000 per year (i.e., 94% return on expenditure). The sessional piecemeal wage would be \$220 per student, "with a tutor to student ratio of 1:20, or \$4,400 for a class of 20 students." To centralize control, the program was housed within the OCPE (EPLT in 2003), an office or service unit, rather than within a department or departments within the Faculty.

In effect, the MET program was established as what David Noble called a Digital Diploma Mill (Noble, 2004; Petrina, 2005).<sup>1</sup> Regardless, it does not have to be this way. Currently, with about 150 students per year, the bulk of the program is taught (26 / 32 or more than 80% of ETEC course sections) by sessional instructors earning a few toonies more than the piecemeal per student wage introduced in the *Business Plan*. Despite the fact that the program has paid off its debts and now operates in the black, exploitation of sessionals continues. In 2006, a formal request from the sessionals teaching in the MET program, for an increase in piecemeal wages, was denied by the Associate Dean of EPLT and the MET Finances Committee. A MET sessional has to bear the burden of not just X, but X + Y, numbers of students to feel properly remunerated. After calculating the time that MET sessionals spend in attending to the everyday demands of online courses, wages for teaching MET courses disintegrate into the average national minimum wage (\$7.30 per hour) or worse. The MET Finances Committee has full control over these wages, which are the lowest in Canada for online course instructors.<sup>2</sup>

Appointments are part time, meaning that benefits stop and start, and are often delayed, commonly leaving sessionals teaching without standard benefits. When necessities, such office space, a monthly photocopy allocation, and a phone budget were requested, the Associate Dean of EPLT asserted that these niceties are unnecessary for online courses (Gaskell, 2005). Laptop and workstation requests were similarly denied. Requests to EPLT for office space for or by the MET sessionals continue to be denied to this moment.

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<sup>1</sup> Noble, D. F. (2002). *Digital diploma mills: The automation of higher education*. Toronto: Between The Lines; Petrina, S. (2005). How (and why) digital diploma mills (don't) work: Academic freedom, intellectual property rights and UBC's Master of Educational Technology program. *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*, 7(1), 38-59.

<sup>2</sup> The OLT's online tutor wages and the Public Sector Employer's Council (PSEC) have nothing to do with increasing MET sessional salaries above the minimum scale. PSEC establishes bargaining mandates and provides some guidelines that allow universities to redress compensation problems. In other words, individual departments and faculties can choose to pay sessionals above the minimum scale. This was confirmed by Tammy Brimner (Faculty Relations) in a special feature on sessional salaries and working conditions published on 21 February 2006 in the *Uby:ssey*. When sessional salaries are suppressed to minimum rates, they are suppressed by individual departments and faculties.

Through a series of misdirected, costly MET arbitrations and court appeals between 2002 and 2006, administrators lost their power assumed to circumvent academic freedom and the academic exception in copyright law by centralizing control of the curriculum and unbundling courses in EPLT and removing faculty members who refused to sign contracts for course assignments (see Petrina, 2005). The MET program's curriculum and finances continue to be nevertheless centralized within EPLT's two MET committees. The MET Finance Committee controls financial decisions and the flow of budget information while the MET Advisory Committee operates removed from the Faculty's standing Graduate Curriculum Advisory Committee (GCAC) and from accountability to faculty members teaching and researching in the MET program. Although one of the largest in the Faculty, the MET program has never been represented on, nor is it accountable to, the GCAC of Graduate Advisors / Coordinators. Instead, it is effectively serving as a second GCAC. The administration of MET simply contradicts Jim's reiteration, over and over, that EPLT is "not an academic department or centre— [the] work is primarily that of facilitation and brokering."

Besides CCFI, the MET program is Education's signature, flagship "cross-faculty" or "cross-border" initiative. Evidently, it is rather easy for administrators to paint rosy pictures, as the Associate Dean of EPLT did in his Annual Report dated 25 April 2008. The MET program is now, as of this year, financially successful (debt is paid and it is generating revenue that covers expenses and leaves a positive balance); it has some academic merit as well. But this comes on the backs of sessional labor, disregard for FT faculty, and at an expense of academic accountability. This seems too easy to tolerate within a Faculty that ought to take pride and lead in equity and accountability. Cost-recovery or revenue-generating bases are no excuse, and the program fails on these two criteria. It is no mystery why the MET program has to be administrated separate from and unlike every other program in the Faculty.

### ***Director of Digital Learning Projects (DLPs)***

Although the Dean and Associate Dean of EPLT anticipated responsibility toward "conceptualizing, negotiating and establishing a Digital Learning Research Unit that would be funded by contracts from e-learning businesses and other sources and that would provide a salary for a director and research opportunities for other faculty members and graduate students" (Gaskell, 2004), this never transpired. On the surface, a Director of DLPs looked administratively attractive, but most with expertise in learning technologies knew there was something misleading in the rhetoric. It remains unclear whether this was a faculty or newly minted staff appointment, but most of us assumed faculty and expected disciplinary research, teaching, and service, with basic things such as refereed publications and work with graduate students to follow, as promised. However, after 4+ years and \$458,084+ in salary for the Director of DLPs, the Dean is hard-pressed to point to a single "research opportunity for other faculty members and graduate students" generated by the Director of DLPs. To date, the Director of DLPs has not directed a single digital learning project within the Faculty.<sup>3</sup> Predictably and sadly, the vast majority of faculty members and graduate students in the Faculty do not even know we have a Director of DLPs; nor could they identify the Director or a DLP if necessary. Evidently since 2004, no one had really bothered to ask what a Director of DLPs should be doing, just as few bother with accounting for how little was accomplished or brokered over points in time.

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<sup>3</sup> I am well aware of the Director's Mobile Muse project, which was funded (\$1.6m) in 2004 by Canadian Heritage and Western Economic Diversification, which involves few from UBC. It does fund SFU faculty and students. The Director's commitment to "multisector R&D initiatives" is fair enough, but this has had no bearing on what faculty members were promised upon this appointment.

As indicated, the Director of DLPs is an empirical example of “cross-faculty” or “cross-border” innovation in Education. And as an innovation that was promised to establish “leadership in digital learning projects that build the professional, research and infrastructure capacity of the Faculty,” it is nonetheless a failure. Of course, with a budget crisis certain to intensify and the reduction of FT faculty, most are getting at least slightly annoyed with faculty salary lines extended to administrative innovations with little or no accountability. But this is secondary to concerns that the LT in EPLT is the exemplar or model with which learning technologies programs and research materialize when transferred from departments to offices and service units in the Faculty. Clearly, there are administrative plans to model “cross-faculty” or “cross-border” initiatives on the LT in EPLT, despite the failures.

Personally, I want to be empirical in my own analyses, and anticipate that these patterns would likely hold should the Working Group on Cross-Border Collaboration choose to nominate and endorse certain disciplines for “cross-border collaboration” and “cross-faculty inquiry” (see “WG on CCFI” and “What is the Faculty”). To be sure, the Director of CCFI’s “Talking Points Brief” is inadequately empirical, especially when it comes to existing “cross-faculty” models and innovations for digital learning (e.g., Director of DLPs, the MET program, etc.) and existing departmental curricula and programs (30+ courses in EDCP, Technology Studies program, etc.). The “Talking Points Brief” suggests establishing a “Centre for Digital Media and Learning” without any recognition that this reiterates the Associate Dean of EPLT’s “Digital Learning Research Unit” plan, which did not materialize (or failed) over the past 4+ years within the mandate of the Director of DLPs.

We know that the personal is political and vice versa. It is impossible to analyze administrative innovations or policy without either political or personal dimensions. Certainly in the social sciences one cannot be empirical without implicating the political or personal. I understand this, perhaps imperfectly, as we draw conclusions of accountability.

So please, should you be moved to decide on what will now be “cross-faculty” or “cross-border,” whether for revenue generation or not, first ask yourself whether you would tolerate a Director of projects for your discipline— a Director Literacy Projects, of Counseling Projects, of Mathematics Learning Projects, of A/R/Tography Projects, or Research Methodology Projects— completely removed from or unaccountable to you, your peer specialists, and your home department. And I think it’s a fair question to assess the limits of your tolerance should this be established and maintained in the fashion of DLPs or MET.

Disciplines, often durable or robust, are in other times fragile things. As a scholar in and of educational technology *and* learning technology/ies, I have real concerns with the way these disciplines are administratively handled in that space now called “cross-faculty” or “cross-border” (see “What is the Faculty”). In more ways than one, the administrative handling of these disciplines is irresponsible. We deserve better.

Thank you very kindly for responsively attending to this input. Please make this report available as one of the public documents forwarded. As a friendly reminder, I am still waiting for a response and an invitation to talk with the Working Group...<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> **Note:** This input is specific to the LT of EPLT, and not general to the EP of EPLT. Also, this is far from the first letter I’ve written on problems within EPLT. Since 2003, I am on record with formal correspondence on these types of problems *and* opportunities.