A Vision for E-Learning in the Faculty of Education

at Vancouver Island University

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ETEC 520 - Dr. Tatiana Bourlova, Professor

February 12th, 2012

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Institutional Context

What is known today as Vancouver Island University (VIU) began as a Community College in 1969, became a university-college in 1989, received independent degree-granting status in 1995, and in 2000 was accredited by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. In 2008 Malaspina University-College earned full university status and was renamed Vancouver Island University. The main campus is located in Nanaimo BC and has 908,500 square feet of built space on a 92-acre campus (VIU Website, 2012).

The Faculty of Education has seven degree programs linked to teacher education which include a Bachelor of Education, two Post Baccalaureate Bachelor of Education degrees in Elementary and Secondary Education, a Post Degree Diploma in Special Education, a Master of Education in Leadership, a Master of Education with an International Focus, and a Master of Education in Special Education. Each degree program is closely affiliated with the university library, curriculum labs, teaching and learning center, and the technology resource center.

It is a known fact that today's students are technologically savvy, well-versed in social media and collaborative technologies, and are well positioned for the use of e-learning in their studies. The dean wants to expand course enrollment by using the power of e-learning in order to be more progressive, responsive and efficient in course and program delivery.

Since its inception in 1995 the Faculty of Education has continued to grow and expand in course and program offerings. In the last three years there has been steady growth in the number of students from 450 to 610 FTE. At present the Faculty's seven degree programs provide courses to over 800 undergraduate and 90 graduate students.

In addition to serving Canadian students, VIU's International Education program attracted 1,687 students in 2010/11 with the majority being from China, Saudi Arabia, and Japan. VIU also enrolled 2000 Aboriginal students from the local region and beyond, which is one of the largest populations of Aboriginal students at a public post-secondary institution in BC. That said, there are no international students and very few Aboriginal students enrolled in the seven degree programs in the Faculty of Education at the university.

VIU is one of the primary employers in the mid-Vancouver Island region, with over 2,300 permanent employees. As of April 2011, the permanent staff complement consisted of 454 instructional faculty and 99 non-instructional faculty members, 242 support staff, and 109 administrative/excluded staff. More specifically, the Faculty of Education is comprised of 31 full-time professors, 50 full- and part-time sessional instructors, 56 field experience supervisors and 3 clerical support staff.

An analysis of permanent employees by age in 2010/11 indicated that 36% of administrators, 39% of professors, and 33% of support staff were 55 years of age or older and approaching retirement.

Part II: Environmental Scan

An environmental scan revealed a number of factors that play a significant role in technological development in the areas of teaching and learning within the Faculty of Education. There are two groups of considerations, the external and internal factors, which must be taken into account when developing an e-learning vision. The first group of considerations, the external factors, includes student demographics, prospective students, governance, and economics as the main external drivers impacting technological change.

For the past five years the faculty's student enrollment has been growing. According to Walsh (2009) this growing demand for post-secondary education can be separated into two main trends; first, the need for expanded access to post-secondary education, and secondly, the need for more diversified and flexible types of post-secondary education, including e-learning.

These two trends alone are leading VIU to an increasingly mixed student profile. The traditional post-secondary student population, aged 18-24, is expected to remain constant; however, they will continue to arrive with greater expectations in terms of availability of technology, multi-media and varied methods of course delivery. More adults, both mid-career and career-change, will be entering with a different set of skills and expectations and many of these students will be working and studying at the same time. E-learning can be used to further increase student enrollment from under-represented populations such as First Nations students, public and private K–12 educators, K-12 public and private school administrators, and contract organizations who desire to purchase post-secondary specialty classes/courses. In addition, there will be a group of students who are not prepared for on-line learning because they are not technologically savvy, and these students will have the potential to become a negative factor on other students and faculty (Levy, 2003). Therefore, the Faculty of Education must focus on offering more flexible types of courses and programs that aim to meet diverse student needs and support them throughout their studies (Bates & Sangrà, 2011 p. 218-219).

Governance includes a complex array of interactions, structures and regulatory mechanisms above the level of VIU local governance and includes such factors as federal and provincial government priorities and constraints, private and philanthropic funding, and policies among others leading to rising costs of tuition. Because provincial funding to VIU is not static from year to year the Faculty of Education will have to find other ways to fund the increasing costs of their educational programs. The dean is concerned that costs will continue to increase

due to global economic conditions, economic uncertainty both nationally and globally, labour

market skill shortages and unrest, and the rising cost of living. In addition, an ever-increasing

number of on-line colleges and universities are presenting fierce competition as students search

for lower educational costs with greater flexibility in program and course delivery. And last, but

not least, faculty have become increasingly more anxious about copyright infringement because

it is well documented in literature that as e-learning develops and grows there is an increased

need for policy regarding intellectual property and copyright (Levy, 2003; World Intellectual

Property Organization, n.d.; Lide, 1999).

The second group of considerations, the external factors, includes institutional

governance, physical infrastructure, human resources, and technology. The dean will have many

challenges as he judiciously funds and implements new programs that incorporate technology;

however, his major challenge will be the cultural change for professors (Bates & Sangrà, 2011,

p. 237). Cultural change is a means to an end requiring the dean to work with faculty to envision

a future in which technology supports and enhances education; not a future in which education is

replaced by technology. Bates and Sangrà (2011) stated that technology infrastructure requires

an initial investment and ongoing care to keep it current and secure (p. 105).

The Faculty of Education is fortunate to occupy an eight year old building that was

designed in anticipation of future technology needs and requirements. In addition, open-access

wireless network has recently been added providing Internet access from anywhere in the

building. The education building has over 200 computers placed primarily in four computer labs

with others placed in learning centers. The computer labs must be booked by professors but have

regularly scheduled times for student use. Two of the labs contain older computers that are

satisfactory for word processing and email but are not suited to demanding multimedia tasks.

There is a significant cost associated with the upgrade of the two older labs due to infrastructure,

hardware and software. The other two labs contain new multi-media technology with video editing and web-based authoring capabilities; however, much of this technology is under-utilized by both staff and students.

In 2010, an e-learning committee was established to provide the dean with input on priorities for educational technology within the faculty. The committee was comprised of faculty and staff representatives from all seven degree programs and, as an end result, they endorsed Moodle as the vehicle for e-learning within the faculty. A framework was created to outline some e-learning strategies focusing on a continuum of offerings similar to the eMatrix outlined by Kelly (2007). However, a strategic plan was not developed and Moodle and/or e-learning are no longer agenda items at faculty meeting. All is not lost however, as professors continue to experiment with Moodle as a learning management system but it is not used throughout the faculty and it is not used to its full potential. Fifty percent of faculty professors state that e-learning and the Internet are no substitute for what they can offer in-class; but the dichotomy exists for the students who cannot afford the time, expense, and relocation to attend the traditional classroom and therefore they leave in search of e-learning opportunities and flexible program delivery so they can continue to work and multi-task their lives.

The faculty's more senior members are in their mid to late 50s and the majority of them have not stayed abreast of current learning technologies. Ongoing professional development for faculty will be necessary over the next five years because it is not just that they will need to learn new skills, they will also need to decide which tools will best suit a particular teaching approach in their courses (Bates & Sangrà, 2011, p. 46; Bullen & Janes, 2007, p. 36). Bullen and Janes (2007) suggest a shift in the professor's role from that of an instructor to that of a facilitator which is only possible if they get the proper skills training and support; otherwise, they will continue using the same educator-centered model. The impact of technology on how students

learn, how professors teach and how administrators manage the faculty is a very complex issue. Levy (2003) suggests that professors are anxious about the perceived amount of time it takes to develop and deliver online courses, online course effectiveness, and that they are struggling with the new directions proposed by their dean. Bates and Sangrà (2011) determined that evaluation and research would help with this and should be on-going to provide a valuable check on course and program quality once the courses have been offered (p. 135).

In summary, the integration of technology is a process that needs to be embraced and understood in different stages so professors are able to cope with the necessary shifts and changes. If a strong vision and strategic plan are *not* put into place the faculty must prepare to fade away in the face of technological progress (Bates 2004).

Part III: The Vision

The vision for the Faculty of Education at VIU is to have the necessary technology and skill-set to actively engage the digital generation, improve and expand their learning opportunities, spark innovation, enhance professor's digital pedagogy, and get the most from the faculty's e-learning investment. The vision represents a focus on re-orienting existing faculty structures and processes around students paying particular attention to their varied learning needs (Bullen & Janes, 2007, p. 293).

Within a five-year period, this e-learning vision will have transitioned university teaching from the traditional face-to-face lecture methods to digital methods that are meaningful, engaging and connected. The challenge will lie in shifting from teaching and learning about educational technology to teaching and learning with and through educational technology (Bullen & Janes, 2007).

This vision promotes a blended model of e-learning containing a balance between virtual and face-to-face delivery. The proportion of each course delivery within the faculty will vary

significantly and is linked to the role of faculty in facilitating learning; however, e-learning will

not be confined to independent study or remote learning as it will be an important component

within all degree programs within the Faculty. Through this e-learning vision, learning centers

will be extended through technological innovations to alternate locations such as shopping

centers, coffee shops, libraries, businesses, resorts, branch campuses, and senior assisted living

centres (Sinclair, McClaren, & Griffin, 2006).

The foundation for this vision for e-learning will be built on a strong digital pedagogy

which includes digital content and an e-learning framework (Kelly, 2007). Together, these

components will create an environment for learning that connects all aspects of a students'

world. Key to the vision is the belief and philosophy that building professor capacity is key for

faculty-wide implementation and the *raising of the bar* with regard to the way in which faculty

members work, teach and learn with educational technology.

Students in this faculty five years from now will experience professors who possess

strong technical skills, pedagogical practices and an understanding of curriculum design

appropriate for digital learners (Queensland Government, 2008). As secondary students enter

these teacher-training programs they will continue to enjoy the social aspects that the faculty has

to offer together with an increasing number of online course and program activities, many of

which will be completely on-line or have on-line components. As the faculty looks to increase its

revenue generating activities, all new courses will be developed and focused in this way.

The vision features personalized approaches, intellectual rigor and engagement,

connectedness to global contexts, supportive and collaborative classroom environments and a

clear alignment of curriculum, assessment and reporting to improve outcomes for students.

Students will be using Moodle as the main platform for every course.

As some professors in the faculty use Moodle now, there will be increased use as their skills improve and they become more aware of what Moodle can do for them and their students. Students will be able to access all class materials and interact with classmates in synchronous and asynchronous ways. The use of on-line discussion forums will replace some classroom discussions thereby allowing students an opportunity to prepare and respond from a distance. Voice chat tools will replace physical group meetings that are often difficult to arrange and students will collaborate on coursework through wikis, blogs and other social software and network tools where information sharing can be both independent and/or facilitated (Sinclair, et al., 2006, p. 5). More specifically, student collaboration will focus on constructing knowledge as the role of the professor will change and the trend will be toward facilitating and embracing a student-centered approach to delivery. Most importantly, students will be offered personal, technological and academic online support to facilitate access to, and understanding of their coursework.

Pre-service teacher education courses will continue to be important; however, students will be required to demonstrate their skill in using technology while faculty will supervise various online knowledge-building projects and/or problem-based activities. Course focus will move away from "content regurgitation" because online supports and facilitation will be focused on skill development. Students within the faculty will be able to identify others with common interests, participate in live chats and threaded discussions, exchange books and study materials, locate study partners, access career resources, and/or join an online study group (The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000). A key factor in this vision is a focus on improving students' digital literacy as it is vital for them to become confident, creative and productive in the digital world in order to use the technology with their students in the classrooms of the future.

Students will develop an e-portfolio in order to synthesize and showcase their learning and reflect on their learning experiences (Sinclair et al., 2006). The e-portfolio will be completed through a newly developed course or through the re-design of a course that is currently offered. All courses will have at least one activity or project designed to be included in the e-portfolio.

In summary, Moodle will be utilized to support both individual and group instruction through both face-to-face and virtual classrooms. Moodle will enable 24/7 safe and secure access to learning activities, learning and social forums, calendars, course materials, drop boxes, and assessment tools.

Implications of this Vision on the Faculty of Education

The Faculty of Education will need to work hard to retain and acquire students from a population that is being lured away as a result of the internal and external factors mentioned earlier. Therefore, growth, retention, access and flexibility must become the faculty's immediate goals for e-learning. In the short-term, faculty will need to infuse e-learning activities within existing courses and programs that will in turn improve the quality of teaching and learning. In the longer-term the faculty will need to provide students with improved course availability and flexibility, and deliver courses and programs that are not available at other institutions in the same way.

Due to the fact that many students work part time to sustain their post-secondary education, e-learning would allow them the opportunity to continue working and studying as they work to reach their goals. E-learning will offer new chances to those who were not able to benefit from traditional education and training and to those who were not able to perform in the traditional classroom; e-learning will allow them to plug-in and successfully try again (Punie, 2007). Therefore, providing services to such a diverse student population will require faculty to

utilize appropriate digital pedagogy delivered through innovative digital content and methods (Queensland Government, 2008).

The development of a sound strategic plan will be necessary in order to systematically enhance course development and bring administration, professors, support staff and students together in the pursuit of common e-learning goals. A strategic plan would provide a response to the needs of faculty, staff, and administration and include the needs of current and prospective students. E-learning will therefore be seen as a strategic investment that has the potential to create a competitive advantage and the potential to generate revenue (Mendling, Neumann, Simon, & Pinterits, 2005). However, this will not be an easy task as it comes on the heels of a recent labour dispute and may be interpreted as yet another way administration is attempting to reduce expenditures and force unwanted change.

The strategic plan will address professors' perceived lack of time, incentives and sufficient technology to assist with developing their e-learning literacy. In addition, due to faculty concern about intellectual property rights when developing and providing e-content, policy will need to be created to guide them in their work.

Because the Faculty of Education is relatively small, the few who have the skills cannot be expected to do all the online teaching; therefore, some activities may need to be contracted out or done in partnership with other faculties. The design of on-line course materials will require the skills of various technical professionals and the faculty would be wise, when developing e-curriculum, to design learning modules that can be individually shared with other faculties within the university and thereby improving efficiency and collaboration.

The Faculty of Education will need to embark upon a process through which to develop and promote their image as having expertise with educational technology. Establishing a framework similar to that developed by Kelly (2007) would be a thoughtful first step; but the

faculty will need to consistently demonstrate and promote the effectiveness of educational technology and add to the evidence-base necessary for changing current practice.

The need for professional development has been widely acknowledged as professors need to be empowered and given the time necessary to develop and practice new skills with learning technologies (Nugent, Reardon, Rhodes, Smith, Carter & Bangdel, 2008). The cost of this professional development in terms of time and money could become a serious implication to this vision.

E-learning can provide a model through which students will become self-directed independent learners and may even assist them in becoming *life-long learners* who will consequently become excellent classroom teachers. For professors, e-learning will initiate unwanted changes in work patterns and changes to their professional role, but it can also provide them with new opportunities to engage students in developing their own e-pedagogy and teaching strategies so they will be better able to meet the diverse needs of their future students. In the end, the role of the professor will remain crucial in the successful delivery of e-learning initiatives within the faculty as they have the influence to empower and encourage students to interact and construct knowledge with one another.

Finally, a viable option to lure students back to the Faculty of Education may be to utilize e-learning tools to develop and implement a "course recovery" program for students who, due to extenuating circumstances, didn't complete parts of courses or programs.

Conclusion

It is believed that the Faculty of Education at VIU could incorporate e-learning successfully by developing and implementing a clear vision of e-learning leading to a collaboratively developed strategic plan with realistic and measurable goals. The strategic plan would need to be aimed at addressing identified external and internal factors thereby increasing

the potential for greater student enrollment. As Hepp, Hinostroza, Laval, and Rehbein (2004)

suggest, once the faculty knows and understands its goals and purpose, it can begin to define

itself in both the short and long term (p. 49).

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