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# Adult Education In Isolated Communities

## Abstract

*There is a growing interest in the use of technology to supplement the current delivery of support services to adult learners in isolated communities. Educational institutions have adapted to the physical separation of student and institution in a variety of ways. This study will examine creative efforts to support students in remote areas by analyzing adult distance learner requirements, selected Canadian student service operations, and the creative use of technology.*

Adults in isolated communities can more effectively serve their families and their community when they develop new skills and enhance their respect for themselves and their culture. Sometimes they need a little help from a friend or professional who is willing to go an entire mile to serve them. Jack Cram's (1985) research and teacher training program with the Inuit Indians of Northern Quebec entitled *Northern Teachers for Northern Schools* is an example of the power of respect for the dignity of individuals and their way of life. Self sacrifice, hard work, imagination, and a sense of humor and compassion can contribute to extraordinary gains.

While it is not possible to do justice in a few paragraphs to the substantial gains identified in his article, the following serve as a reminder of some of the exciting possibilities that exist if respect and imagination are skillfully intertwined:

- . In 1978, the first eight Inuit teachers received provincial certification.
- . McGill Senate, 1981, approved the McGill Certificate in Native and Northern Education.

. The first six McGill/Northwest Territories certificates were awarded in Frobisher Bay in June 1983. A further 11 were awarded in 1984.

. Besides the B.Ed. program in Frobisher Bay, a unique project for the training of Inuit to work as teacher training instructors has been developed by the Kativik School Board and the McGill program in Arctic Quebec (pages 118-123).

The numbers tell only part of the story. This field based training program, with a philosophy and student support service based on a respect for the culture and heritage of the clients served, made it possible for a northern pioneering group to teach in northern schools in a region where previously both the value and the feasibility of such an undertaking was questioned.

Throughout this study, technology will appear to have magical qualities. While it is true that scientific inventions can be used to free individuals restricted by isolation, it can also be used to enslave groups and individuals. The spirit of Jack Cram's project must permeate all efforts to provide support systems, regardless of the technology used.

Even enthusiastic northern educators recognize the limitations of field based programs. Cram wrote: ". . . but there are times when it seems as if there are not enough qualified instructors, or, indeed, enough money in the world to meet the voracious, yet heartfelt demand for training courses..." (page 126).

What will happen to the students who started the program, but for a host of personal reasons, were unable to complete their teaching certificate? Will they have to go to Montreal to complete their courses? The program received a \$400,000 grant over four years. In a few years, will it be possible to provide trips in Twin Otters that cost \$7,000 a day? In short, while exciting and effective programs are providing a host of new opportunities, creative supplementary alternative methods should be explored. This article examines some of the exciting opportunities and depressing realities in this area by focusing on the needs of adult distance learners, selected case studies of student service operations in Canada, and technology currently used to provide counselling and support services to distance education students.

### **Support Services for Distance Learners**

Many educators have considered counselling and related support services an indispensable part of traditional campus-based post-secondary education. However, in distance education, counselling and student advocacy are only beginning to be recognized as an important part of the educational experience of the learner. Representatives of many distance education

institutions contend that their goal is to promote an attitude of independence. To reach their goal they develop learning packages which enable students to work on their own, with a minimum of contact with the educational institution. Unfortunately, as Dan Coldeway (1982) pointed out, "most students lack the experience to adapt readily to a totally andragogical system" (p.91). Dedicated instructors expend vast amounts of time and energy devising learning packages which will allow students to become completely independent of teachers and other students. They appear to have forgotten the importance of the social aspect of the learning experience. At the university level the pursuit of this ultimate achievement of instructional designers is not only futile, but misdirected. It is vital that the concept of a university as a community of scholars – in distance education, studying as external students – must be maintained. As Smith and Small (1982) stated, "external studies will, by definition, continue to be essentially a form of independent study but should never be a sentence to solitary confinement" (p. 137).

#### *Who are distance learners?*

Let us shift our focus from the challenges relating to the learning system to those relating to the type of learner that typically takes distance education courses. Studies have shown that the majority of distance learners are adults (Paulet, 1985). While it is true that many adults are self-sufficient, many are not. Their most recent educational experiences are typically part of their distant memories. They generally have a greater variety of educational backgrounds which range from less than high school to a university degree. They are not familiar with distance education. Their study skills, if they exist, may be "rusty" or inappropriate. Usually, they are part-time students. Consequently, they are constantly forced to choose between dealing with the demands of their studies and a host of other pressing demands in their environment.

Like all students, they approach educational institutions with a goal or aspiration in mind. Morgan, Taylor and Gibbs (1982) identified three main types of orientation to study (personal, vocational, and academic) which alter the ways students view their studies. Student satisfaction may be greatly affected by their ability to obtain courses and programmes that fulfil their prior expectations.

Students may be plagued with a variety of problems unrelated to course selection. Many are concerned about difficulties with administrative considerations such as examination systems and course content, design, and deadlines.

Having established that the students need a support service that can personalize and humanize the distance teaching system, let us examine

perceptions of the counsellors' role in serving these individuals. This examination will focus on the challenges and opportunities available to flexible professionals establishing their rights and responsibilities in this new medium of service.

### *Counselling distance learners*

Counsellors are aware that the nature of their service is dictated, in part, by the employing institution serving the client. Distance learners require current information relating to opportunities available throughout the entire post-secondary system. For example, the admission requirements (open or selective) may dictate the institutions available for the potential student. The Open Learning Institute only requires that a student be a Canadian citizen. To enter Athabasca University an individual must be eighteen years old and a resident of Canada. Course registration and in-take dates for distance education students vary from continuous to fixed. While the Universities of Acadia and Athabasca operate on a year round continuous registration system, the University of British Columbia and the Open Learning Institute have six in-takes per year. A variety of systems have been developed to deal with final examinations. Students in isolated areas are frequently required to make arrangements for their own examination supervisor or proctor. Indeed, a counsellor must be flexible and well informed to serve distance learners.

Educators continue to disagree on the definition of counselling and the role of the counsellor. There is clearly overlap between advising and counselling both in the skills required of staff who perform these tasks and in the purpose of each function. Both advisors and counsellors help students cope with their environment and to acquire self-understanding. However, there are a number of significant differences and these peculiarities are relevant to the distance learner.

Currently, advisory services are more prevalent in distance education programs than counselling services. Advisors, typically, help students requesting information in such areas as program alternatives, financial aid, and a variety of special services. While an advisor may play a role in acting as a buffer between student and institution by explaining administrative procedure, in general, advisors are more problem-centred than person-centred. Students frequently turn to advisors for help with study strategies, time management, and approaches to writing different types of examinations. However, diagnosing and referring students with particular learning difficulties is usually carried out by someone with more specialized skills.

Counsellors themselves debate the purpose of counselling within an educational setting. Many practitioners would agree with Heffernan (1981)

that "counselling is conceived as a less direct process, one that is aimed at self-discovery, developing confidence and making personal choices" (p. 115).

In general, educational institutions have been reluctant to hire counsellors to work in the distance education setting despite the fact that adult learners face many personal and social problems when they return to education. (Many students have stated that they need help in developing decision making and goal planning skills.) In addition to service evaluation and institutional research, professionally trained counsellors could assist with programme and course development.

### *Varieties of support services*

Although counsellors are rarely hired to work in distance education programs, a number of successful institutions have developed a variety of student support services. The nature of these services frequently depend on funding, organizational structure, and philosophy of the institution. Brief summaries of how selected institutions have developed creative ways of helping students are described in the next section.

A distance teaching institution which is part of the network of the Université du Québec, Télé-université, has developed a unique staff role, the animateur (facilitator). This person organizes workshops for small groups of students to serve a specified region (Caron, 1982). The animateur may also be asked to support students participating in teleconferencing. Unlike a tutor, the animateur is usually a non-academic specialist. Unfortunately, this unique service is used only in Quebec.

Community representatives (peer-counsellors) at the University of Western Ontario provide information and support to off-campus and distance education students. These modestly paid individuals perform the following duties: discuss problems of university courses with students; pass on information concerning the academic channels and contacts on campus; share personal experiences regarding managing university courses or programs with students; help identify strategies for academic planning; give the faculty of part-time and continuing education feedback on issues that relate to off-campus centres; and act as an ombudsman between student and Part-Time Continuing Education.

### **Tutoring, Advising, Teleconferencing**

#### *Unique programs*

Athabasca University, serving over 8000 working adults located in all parts of Canada, has developed an elaborate support system. The Alberta

institution employs about 160 part-time tutors who assist students with course content. They also help students maximize their potential educationally and personally by providing information and support.

The Open Learning Institute (OLI), instituted by the British Columbia government in 1978, serves approximately 15,000 students, but has no counterpart to the Athabasca University counsellor role. The emphasis of the advisor role at OLI is on information-giving, academic advising, liaison and promotion, and administrative activities. About 120 tutors were hired on part-time six-month contracts and eight tutors were retained on part-time 12-month contracts. Working from their homes, they maintain regular contact with students through the mail and by telephone. While they are only required by contract to initiate one introductory telephone call, most tutors make at least three calls during a course. Teleconferencing is used by some tutors to reduce the sense of isolation felt by students.

While Brandon University has been involved in distance education delivery for only three years, it is well recognized for its off-campus teacher training programs in Africa, England, and Canada. Brandon University Northern Teacher Education Program (BUNTEP), with its regional coordinators, has been studied by many universities. The Project for Native Teachers (PENT) program received the most distinguished teacher training award program in North America, in Florida, in 1983. Counselling and support services are available in the well recognized programs in the university and need to be developed for all other distance learners at Brandon University. A student in the BUNTEP can receive counselling on a regular daily basis if necessary as each BUNTEP centre has a specially trained coordinator or centre administrator as well as access to a regional social worker and administrative support staff. The PENT student can also request counselling by phoning their office in Brandon. Other distance learners must be content with asking a secretary to relay a message to their instructor. There have been some problems with the use of the telephone service.

Weekly phone calls from the instructors and regular teleconferencing sessions have proven useful. The student services office has agreed to relay messages and provide some telephone and personal counselling services for students interested in distance learning. There are plans to list the courses in the Brandon University Calendar so that potential students in Northern Manitoba can be aware of available distance education courses through the traditional channels. A recent study (Paulet, 1985) has indicated that students are satisfied with the instruction and the quality of the print and audio-visual packages. They have requested additional local and group telephone counselling sessions. The study also showed that the request for education courses is more than 300% higher than the previous year. One can

only imagine how high this figure would have been with additional support services in place.

### *Use of technology*

The next best thing to being there, is counselling through technology! While there is a growing interest in providing student support services through the use of technology, these services in distance education are delivered primarily through print, telephone, and in-person contacts.

Authors try to make their print materials "user friendly." Students taking OLI's PREP 001 course receive self-administered diagnostic tests and programme planning information on such topics as study skills and examination preparation.

While some institutions use audio-cassettes as a vehicle for communication between the tutor and the student (e.g., Waterloo), most institutions use audio-cassette tapes to supplement and enrich the print-learning package. Feasly (1983) pointed out why they are gaining in popularity. Audio-cassettes have several advantages: they are readily available, relatively inexpensive, portable, and students can stop and replay them at will. On one Athabasca University tape, designed to provide advising and counselling services, four students registered at the university talk about their experiences as adult distance education students.

The telephone is used a great deal in distance education because it provides fast, effective communication links between students, tutors, advisors, administrative staff, and counsellors. However, the effective delivery of tutoring and counselling services by telephone requires excellent communication skills. The following factors, identified by Mikiman (1984), should be remembered by all counsellors working with distance education students:

the counsellor (and tutor) has to rely on auditory cues such as voice tone, tempo, and inflection; voice quality and speech attributes; and language syntax and semantics in order to initiate and enhance communication effectiveness in telephone contact. (p.407)

A number of universities in Canada use audio, video, and computer teleconferencing. Carl (1983) described the Distance University Education via Television (DUET) system at Mount St. Vincent University in Nova Scotia. DUET uses cable television and video teleconferencing to deliver both distance education and to support students by providing the opportunity for interaction amongst students at the receiving centre and

interaction with the instructor at the broadcast classroom. He also pointed out that the broadcast classroom contains speakers for the telephone lines so that the instructor and students on campus can hear and speak with the students at the receiving centres.

### Conclusion

Recent changes in technology and attitudes to adult education will expand the opportunities for student support-service personnel to assist adults taking distance education courses in isolated communities. Professionally trained individuals and volunteers, however, will have to become familiar with a unique delivery system. They will, also, have to remember the example given by Jack Cram in northern Quebec, namely, that the adults to be served, including their culture and heritage, are more important than the technology used to help them.

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