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ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING FOR FRANCOPHONE TEACHERS AND SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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ABSTRACT

More and more teachers and school principals in French-language minority contexts in Canada enrol in web-based distance learning education programs. Since 2006, students could enrol in the first francophone Professional Masters program (PMP) in Educational Organization and Administration, and Teaching, Learning, and Evaluation offered entirely online and at a distance. This article presents preliminary results obtained from research conducted in June 2009 with francophone teachers and school principals enrolled in online distance learning in the PMP. According to the results of this study, the majority of participants are very satisfied with their courses.

KEY WORDS

Distance learning, school principals, teachers, collaborative work, feedback

1. Introduction

Many studies have evaluated the difference between online distance learning and face to face learning (f2f), Cragg, Dunning and Ellis (2008)[1]. Albeit essential research, we must now evaluate if our online distance courses are actually good and help adult learners to learn and get what they need to do their professional job. We know, despite the importance that has been placed on developing learning technologies, the fact remains that adult learners in particular face difficulties in the area of Web-based Distance Learning (WBDL). In Canada, francophone school principals and teachers in remote parts of the country are being encouraged to enrol in distance learning courses. But how do we teach adult learners to become efficient and effective school principals in their school?

Many institutions of higher learning offer distance learning courses and continue to increase their course offerings. Unfortunately, even with more and more universities establishing Web-based courses, the fact remains that

« [...] real successes are still rare. The course offerings on line are on the increase but their format and marketing are ineffective in most cases as well as their

consolidation within regular programs of the establishment, and more and more people are experiencing this problem. » (*Translation from Lamontagne(2003) [2]*)

However, even if numerous studies show the advantages of online courses, the fact remains that few studies have evaluated important factors in online learning. The goal of our research consists of evaluating the first francophone Professional Masters program (PMP) in Educational Organization and Administration, and Teaching, Learning, and Evaluation offered entirely online and at a distance at the University of Ottawa. This research project aims to provide a better understanding of the issues with the expectation of better responding to the needs of francophone teachers and school principals in their Web-based Distance Learning.

2. The Context of our Research

2.1 The Response to the Request by Francophone Teachers and School Principals

The main challenge of education is to provide learners with all the skills needed to acquire, to take up, assimilate, use, and convey knowledge. In a country like Canada where francophone communities are often located at great distances from large population centres and universities, the quality of Online Distance Learning becomes an important issue. Moreover, within the context of the professional development of francophone teachers and school principals, there is an urgent need to provide better strategies not only to solve day-to-day problems but also to take on more leadership and initiative, for more comprehensive personal development of students and of the entire francophone school community; as a requirement for a more committed cultural identity within Canada. As a result, the Online Distance Learning that the teachers and school principals participate in should allow them to attain a maximum of knowledge in order to establish and maintain their professional network.

2.2 Context of the School, a Place for Cultural and Linguistic Reproduction

Francophone reality in Canada outside of Quebec remains relatively unknown and often misunderstood. Canada is made up of 10 provinces and 3 territories. Of the entire population, only 22% of Canadians speak French (Statistics Canada, 2006) [3]. Quebec is the only province with a higher concentration of French speaking citizens, that is, 80% of the population speak French. As for the other provinces and territories, 33% or less of the population speaks French. Lapointe, Langlois, and Godin (2005) [4] summarize the political relations between Canada's two founding groups, namely French and English, and present a brief explanation of the Canadian context with regards to the constitutional rights of official-language minorities to receive an education in their language. First, francophone communities across Canada have had to survive through periods when French was banned as a language of instruction (e.g., Regulation 17, issued in Ontario, July 1912). Today, francophone schools and school boards are a reality in all provinces and territories. Their language, culture and social rights are protected under section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982).

Within this context, each province presents a different set of possibilities and constraints for its francophone population, including the level of dispersal, size of territory and population mobility. For example, 500,000 French-as-a-first-language speakers represent less than 5% of the population in Ontario, generally living in Anglophone communities spread over an area of more than one million square kilometres. In New Brunswick, 250 000 French-as-a-first language speakers make up 33% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2001) [5]. Francophones form a demographic majority in some communities in Northern New Brunswick whereas in the southern region of the province they are most often a minority with a greater incidence of language transfer to English. In Alberta, where Francophones account for 2.24% of the total population, French-language schools in Edmonton and Calgary are experiencing the greatest population boom of all schools. Indeed, in the fall of 2006, Edmonton's Conseil Scolaire du Centre-Nord saw its student population grow by 402 new students which translates into a 15 to 55% increase per school. In Eastern Canada, schools are experiencing rapid diversification, with many students having immigrated from Africa or Haiti. This rapid diversification has important consequences for the definition of the francophone identity (Dalley, 2004) [6]. Lapointe & Gauthier (2005) [7] and Hallinger (2005) [8] demonstrated to what extent the leadership of school principals can influence the atmosphere in the school and the classroom as well as in students' academic achievements. Where the entire school is concerned, the role of the principal is often considered essential in supporting the implementation of an innovation (Owens, 2004) [9] in facilitating the use of ICT (IsaBelle & Lapointe, 2003) [10] and more

importantly to ensure ethno-linguistic vitality of French-language (Bouchamma 2004) [11].

Gérin-Lajoie (2006) [12] maintains that French-language schools located outside the province of Quebec in Canada have always played a primary role in maintaining the language and culture of the minority. Thus it is important for adult learners to receive training that will help them to become effective school principals or teachers.

2.3 Different Platforms and Technological Tools for Collaborative Work

Educational institutions must offer distance education to meet the needs of a knowledge-based society. The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for teaching is revolutionizing the world of education and continuing education. *WebCT* and *Blackboard* are the most known and used platforms for online course delivery (Lamontagne, 2003) [2]; however, new cost effective options exist (Godwin-Jones, 2003) [13]. A variety of open source tools and software are available that encourage collaborative work, such as forums and chats, blogs and wikis (Paquet, 2002, [14]; Downes 2004, [15] ; Godwin-Jones, 2003[13]).

2.4 Investigating the Factors which can Increase the Sense of Belonging and Retention Rate

One of the main issues with distance education is the high dropout rate Rovai (2002) [16], and Carr (2000) [17] notes that learners registered in distance courses have a dropout rate that is 10% to 20% higher than learners in a conventional classroom setting. Marchand and Losier (2005) [18] report that until recently, statistics for persistence in online distance learning revealed a drop-out rate of 50% to 80%. There are several reasons for this occurrence, such as course content, learner motivation, technical difficulties and lack of time, learners' lack of computer skills and limited competences in the implementation of learning communities.

St-Amant (2002) [19] reported that 40% of respondents wished that the web-based courses would have a face-to-face component, and 70% of them suggested four meetings. His results also showed that 27% wished to meet the professor and the group. More and more researchers suggest that « blended learning » is better suited to meet the expectations and needs of a wider variety of learners (St-Amant, 2002, [19]; Platteaux, et al., 2003, [20]). However, this solution can only partially meet the needs of online learners and is not appropriate for all francophone teachers and school principals across Canada. In light of the problem, several studies have promoted adult professional development by putting into place activities for collaborative work and learning communities during distance training in order to increase their sense of belonging to the community, even increasing retention rates. The next section defines our theoretical framework.

3. Theoretical Framework: Quality of Distance Education

In their article, Millson and Wilemon (2008) [21]) analyse the concepts of dialogue and structure (Rumble, 1986) [22].

3.1 Dialogue or Faculty-Student Communication

Makau and Marty (2001) [23] define dialogue as "...a process of communicating with others - rather than at, to, or for them—and the sharing of a mutual commitment to hear and be heard." Palloff and Pratt (1999) [24] point out that dialogue has several facets that need to be addressed which include: (1) encouraging expansive questioning that stimulates student critical thinking; (2) providing opportunities for student facilitation that affords these students leadership as well as learning experiences and content; and (3) promoting feedback that can involve supportive, positive, and reinforcing comments in addition to corrective and direction-changing suggestions.

3.2 Structure of Course Objectives, Strategies, Content, and Processes

Holmberg (1995) [25] notes that distance learning can easily become "instructor/faculty centered" as opposed to "student centered." For Millson and Wilemon (2008) [21], structure represents the degree to which students believe that the objectives, content, strategies, and processes of graduate management courses meet their educational needs as opposed to the scheduling of classes and the setting of assignments and exams.

Millson and Wilemon (2008) [21] suggest that dialogue, that is the degree of student-faculty communications, is the basis for a quality faculty-student relationship, and can, therefore, be seen as a predictor of quality in graduate management education. For them, dialogue appears to be a central element associated with the quality of graduate management education, and therefore, the degree of educational content structure can be thought of as a controllable mediator that can influence the effectiveness of dialogue (Karns 2005, [26]; Rumble 1986, [22]).

« We can extrapolate from the two prior examples to hypothesize that the quality of graduate management courses, especially from an adult learner's perspective, will come from learning situations in which there is high dialogue and low structure, since students' specific needs and objectives appear best met under these circumstances.

In situations where dialogue is high and structure is low, we suggest that the quality of graduate learning will be the greatest. Conversely, we posit that when dialogue is high and structure is high, a situation exists in which narrowly focused learning occurs and students' needs may not be well aligned with graduate management course objectives. Therefore, students may perceive that quality of learning is lessened. Alternatively, when dialogue is low and structure is

high, there exists the possibility for low quality due to reduced communication and narrow learning experiences, since high structure indicates that students' needs may not be in alignment with management course objectives. Moreover, there is usually little or no feedback from faculty. Finally, the condition in which both dialogue and structure are low appears, unsurprisingly, to lead to low quality from a student's perspective, since communication is nominal and students are given minimal direction. Dialogue can thus be considered the focal point for quality education while the degree of course structure can be employed to meet students' learning needs» (Millson and Wilemon, 2008, p.7) [21].

So how can we know that the degree of dialogue and course structure is appropriate to meet students' learning needs? And hence, what do we know about distance learning teams in online courses? We attempt to answer these questions in the next section.

4. Goal and Questions of this Research Project

In studying online Distance Learning projects, it has become apparent that it is necessary to design a study with the intention of better understanding the issues and in order to better respond to the needs of francophone teachers and school principals in their Online Distance Learning. The goal of our research consists of evaluating the first francophone Professional Masters program (PMP) in Educational Organization and Administration, and Teaching, Learning, and Evaluation offered entirely online and at a distance at University of Ottawa. To evaluate the dialogue and the structure, we tried to answer four questions among others:

- 1) Do the technical staff and professor/tutor provide the necessary support for adult learners to facilitate the learning and the successful completion of their online Distance course?
- 2) Do they like collaborative learning?
- 3) Do they like synchronous meeting times to exchange with the professor/tutor and other students?
- 4) How to they experience Web-based Distance Learning?

5. Methodology

5.1 Participants

Our participants were Franco-Canadian adult learners (teachers and school principals by interim) who were enrolled in the Professional Masters Program at University of Ottawa's Faculty of Education. The first course was offered in the winter of 2006. Currently, the faculty offers 5 to 6 courses a years.

5.2 Measurement Instruments

One measurement instrument was used to evaluate our online distance courses. An online questionnaire was

developed to meet the needs of the study and contained six sections. For the purpose of this paper, only sections of the questionnaire that pertain to the results reported will be presented. The first section involved the identification of the respondent. In the second section of the questionnaire, respondents answered questions related to the characteristics of their choice of the M. Ed on line, the number of courses on line they have taken, etc. The third section included questions which address support, feedback, collaborative learning, meetings and interaction, and their learning.

5.3 Procedure and Participants' Profile

The online questionnaire was administered in June 2009 and to all students who had registered in an online course. In July 2009, a second call to participate was sent out.

6. Results

6.1 Analytical Methods

We examined the quantitative data in light of response frequency distributions. The statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS software.

6.2 Profile of Respondents

The data presented in Table 1 indicate that 31 students enrolled in the online distance learning course had answered our questionnaire.

Table 1: Number of respondents

	Number (n)
Female	24
Male	7
TOTAL	31

The data in Table 2 indicate that 50% (n=9) of respondents knew at least one member of their work group before starting the course. Another 22% (n=4) did not know anyone in their group before starting the course.

Table 2: Number and percentage of students who knew a member of their work group BEFORE starting the course

Members	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
None	4	22.2
1	9	50.0
2	2	11.1
3	3	16.7
TOTAL	18	100

Table 3 presents averages for agreement (on a Likert scale of 1= disagree to 7 = agree) regarding guidance received PRIOR to the beginning of classes. Participants generally agreed that they received guidance and knew how to access the content, knew who to contact when problems regarding access to content arose, were aware of when the course would begin, received guidance on documentation, and were generally satisfied with the guidance received.

Table 3: Guidance received PRIOR to the beginning of classes

	Number	Average
I know where to go to gain access to the content of the on line course	31	5,33
I know who to contact if I have any problems accessing the content of the course on line	31	5,13
I know when the on line course begins	31	5,00
The documentation (guide) sent by the secretariat is clear	31	4,64
In general, I am satisfied with the guidance received PRIOR to the beginning of classes.	31	4,63

With regards to agreement on statements concerning technical support received BEFORE and DURING the course, averages were obtained and are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Technical support received BEFORE and DURING the course

	Number	Average
The answer to my technical questions are clear	31	5,50
The delays in receiving answers are reasonable	31	5,39
In general, I am satisfied with the support received at the technical level	31	5,54

Data from Table 4 indicate agreement for statements related to technical support including, clear answers to technical questions before and during the course, reasonable delays in receiving a response and general satisfaction with the support they received from a technical standpoint. Data also indicates that the delay for receiving an answer to a technical question was generally two days for 84% of respondents (n=26) and between 3 to 5 days for 13% of respondents (n=13). In contrast, respondents indicated that an acceptable delay for receiving a response to a technical question was 24hrs for the majority or 45% (n=14), while 26% indicated 48hrs would be an acceptable delay.

Table 5. Evaluation of pedagogical support received DURING courses

	Number	Average
The hours of availability of the professor are clearly indicated	31	6,32
My particular demands are treated adequately	31	6,00
The interventions are pertinent	31	5,81
The delays of response are reasonable	31	5,71
The answers to my questions are clear	31	5,68
In general, I am satisfied with the pedagogical support received at this level	31	5,71

Data in Table 5 indicate that participants generally agreed (with an average score of 6) that pedagogical support was received during the course, and were satisfied with the support received in general. As well, the average delay for obtaining an answer to a pedagogical questions was 2

days for a majority of participants or 65% (n=20) and between 3 to 5 days for 32% of participants (n=10). A total of 31, 39% (n=12) personally felt that 48hrs was a reasonable delay to receive an answer to pedagogical questions while 35% (n=11) indicated that 24 hrs was reasonable.

Satisfaction with the presentation of the course content ON LINE, in BLACKBOARD, in general averaged 6 on a scale of 1-7 with agreement on the following: course outline and explanations are easy to find, communication tools (forum, chat) are easy to find and content is well structured in Blackboard, I know where I stand regarding the course content in Blackboard and in general, I am satisfied with the presentation of the course content on line. Participants also ranked their top three tools for communicating with the professor and other students during the online course. Results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. The three best tools for communicating in the online course

	to exchange with the professor	to exchange and/or execute projects with the other students
	Number	Number
Blackboard email	25	24
Bridgit (voice and screen sharing)	17	16
Professor's university email	15	-
Blackboard forum	13	8
Bridgit (with voice)	9	7
Bridgit (voice and screen sharing and webcam)	7	5
Skype	5	12
Telephone	4	9
Blackboard chat	3	6
Others: In class	2	2
Student university email	-	8
MSN	-	1
Personal email	-	1

Accordingly, Blackboard email, Bridgit for voice and screen sharing, the professor's university email, the forum in Blackboard as well as Skype were listed among the best communication tools for communication either with the professor or with other students in the context of online courses.

In general, participants also agreed with statements favorably describing characteristics of '*strongly advised*' meetings with the professor and the student groups and generally agreed with the number of meetings, as facilitating the comprehension of projects, as well as content (theory, models, etc), their pertinence, and satisfaction with the intellectual exchange between the professors and students (average score of 6 on a scale of 1 to 7).

In terms of the quality of online courses, participants generally agreed (average score of 6 on a scale of 1 to 7) with statements presented in Table 7, including the degree of coverage of the subject, the depth of theoretical

instruction, the pertinence of assigned readings, and a focus on learning in online courses overall.

Table 7. Average agreement on the quality of online courses in general

	Number	Average
If we compare to the under grad courses, the degree of coverage of the subject is satisfying	31	6,20
The courses provide in depth theoretical instruction in their domain	31	6,16
The suggested readings are pertinent	31	6,06
All of the courses put together encourage learning	31	6,03
The content assigned to the course is respected	31	5,97
The proposed pedagogical activities assigned by the professor favor exchange between students	31	5,97
The assign readings are easy to find and are accessible	31	5,71
The pedagogical approaches favor learning	31	5,71
The pedagogical approaches are sufficiently varied	31	5,65
The pedagogical resources (video, etc.) are varied	31	5,58
The courses transmit practical information	31	5,27
In general, I am satisfied with the online course	31	6.06

With regards to the evaluation of learning in online courses in general, participants agreed (average score of 6 on a scale of 1 to 7) with statements concerning work load, the evaluation of learning linked to course objectives, variation in evaluations and projects, and the level of precision in providing guidelines for projects in online courses.

Table 8 reflects participants' general impressions of online courses, including agreement with statements recommending the course, satisfaction with a program that allows for participation in online courses and the amount of learning that takes place in online courses with weaker agreement (average score of 3) related to reaching personal objectives thanks to the PMP program and participation in online courses.

Table 8. Participants' impressions of the program and online courses

	Number	Average
I would recommend this program because it allows for participation in on line courses	31	6,32
I will reach my objectives thanks to this program that allows for participation in online courses	31	3,29
I am satisfied that the program encourages participation in online courses	31	6,19
I have learned a lot in the online courses that I have participated in	31	6,13

7. Conclusions

In evaluating the first francophone Professional Masters program (PMP) in Educational Organization and Administration, and Teaching, Learning, and Evaluation offered entirely online and at a distance at University of Ottawa, insight has been gained into the importance of guidance prior to beginning an online course, technical support received prior and during the course and acceptable delays in receiving answers to technical and pedagogical questions. In the process, participants also revealed their preference for communication tools such as Blackboard email and forum, Bridgit voice and screen sharing, and Skype for exchanging with other students and executing projects especially. Overall, participants agreed on the overall quality of online courses, including the coverage, depth, relevance of course material, and the impact of pedagogical approaches that favour learning. In general, participants' impressions of the PMP were favourable in terms of recommendations for the program and further opportunities for participating in online courses and learning but weaker in enabling them to reach their own professional objectives. This underscores the need to further explore whether online distance learning in its current form truly allows francophone teachers and school principals to attain a maximum of knowledge, to establish and maintain their professional network while allowing them to reach to own professional objectives.

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