

# Contact North | Contact Nord's 5 Wishes for the Next Stage of Online Learning

2013

**Contact North | Contact Nord**

Ontario's Distance Education & Training Network  
Le réseau d'éducation et de formation à distance de l'Ontario

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Since it began in 1994, online learning has had a cautious development. While there were many early adopters, its acceptance in the eyes of employers, conventional educational providers, and those who fund education was always cautious.

Several jurisdictions embraced online programs and developed focused infrastructure for deployment and delivery, but generally did not see online learning as a strategic engine for transforming the post-secondary system. Until, that is, 2012 – the year online learning reached a tipping point. The following factors help to explain why:

### **The Arrival of MOOC's**

The first is the arrival of a number of new private sector and non-profit players who, in partnership with public educational institutions around the world, saw an opportunity to rethink the role courses and accreditation played in the life of a learner. They also saw a growing market in online learners who did not want credit.

Companies like Udacity, Coursera, edX, Udemy and others offered Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), first developed in Canada at Athabasca University, to a global audience. Over 1.7 million signed up to courses offered by Coursera and paid nothing for their learning. While many completed the course and passed through a number of assessment “gates” to do so, most simply wanted to study the material and be more curious learners, not interested in assessment or credit.

To give one example, the Stanford Machine Learning MOOC course secured 104,000 initial subscribers. 46,000 of these submitted one or more of the assignments for this course and 13,000 successfully completed the course. Normally, the annual number of successful students in this one course would be around 35. While some are concerned about this attrition rates, another way of understanding this is that this one Stanford offering secured the equivalent of over three hundred and fifty years of “normal” class completions – all at no cost to the student.

### **New Approaches to Credit Recognition**

Several developments in 2012 affected how credit can be obtained and recognized.

The first is the move by the Kentucky Community Technical and College System (KCTCS) to offer “on demand” learning for modular credits (.25, .3, .5 of a credit) which can be accumulated to secure a three credit, transferable course to any university in the State of Kentucky. Students can enroll in a modular course at anytime, 365 days a year and complete within two to three weeks (open admission, closed exit) and build their course portfolio incrementally.

The second example of the new approach to credit is the decision of the American Council on Education (ACE) to award credit, provided certain criteria are met, to individuals who successfully completed a MOOC. While this is currently a pilot project, supported by the

Gates Foundation, it already looks promising. The University of Washington is also intending to follow the ACE example. Colorado State University and Excelsior College are granting credit for MOOCs to those who complete a proctored challenge examination and pay a fee of between \$85 and \$95.

The third development with respect to credit is the increasing use of competency assessments and outcome-based learning portfolios for prior learning assessment. Students complete a comprehensive competency assessment on the basis of which credit is awarded without the need for an extensive review of a learning portfolio.

The fourth development, extensive in Britain but also growing in North America, is the use of work-based learning agreements (WBL) as a basis for learning. Thompson Rivers University in British Columbia has WBL agreements with a number of employers which seek to recognize courses and programs offered as part of their own program of professional or management development activities as directly transferrable into certificate and degree programs. Middlesex University in the UK permits up to 80% of a Master's degree or applied doctoral degree to be earned in this way and many other universities are following this trend, especially in Europe<sup>1</sup>.

### **Private Sector Engagement**

Another major trend in 2012 was the significant arrival of the private sector as a major player in higher education and online learning. With Pearson purchasing Embanet-Compass for \$650 million, \$100 million invested in MOOCs and additional capital going to Desire2Learn (\$80 million), this has been a "bumper year" for private sector capital flowing into online learning developments. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has also invested \$3 million in the development of MOOCs, focusing on both credit recognition and the expansion of MOOCs into the college and trades sector.

Forbes Magazine saw online learning as a "trillion dollar opportunity," suggesting that educational systems (K-12 in particular, but also higher education) are amongst the most inefficient in the world. They saw online learning, and the use of technology generally, as transformative and cite developments such as MOOCs, the systematic use of analytics and the Khan Academy approach to learning as examples of 2012 developments which attracted capital.

These developments mark 2012 as an important year for online learning, especially when coupled with the developments in technology which also occurred, most notably with respect to adaptive learning systems which adapt content to the learners own assessment and learning styles, permitting personalized learning. Learning analytics also emerged as an important development for online learning, permitting detailed analysis of student activities, performance and interactions.

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/research/wbl\\_illuminating.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/research/wbl_illuminating.pdf) for a status of WBL in 2006 in the UK.

## What is Next?

The end of year speculation about the next steps and the future for online learning are always numerous. Some see online learning as a vehicle for transforming post-secondary education, especially now that some seven million plus students in North America take one or more course online as part of their post-secondary studies. Others see the personalization of learning – students able to navigate their way through their studies using a variety of providers, credit transfer and credit assessment to enable their “learning passports” to lead to their chosen outcomes. Yet others see online learning as enabling the fast track completion of post-secondary education at a lower cost, especially if credit transfer and credit recognition systems become more ubiquitous and efficient.

Rather than speculate on the specific future, here are five wishes for the future:

### First Wish: The Focus Will be on Pedagogy

The challenge for online learning is no longer around acceptance and efficacy. A substantial body of research<sup>2</sup> supports the view that the outcomes of online learning show no significant difference from the outcome of classroom studies. In fact, the most recent student satisfaction data<sup>3</sup> suggests that students are very satisfied with online learning, with a growing number preferring it to face-to-face. Employers hire students with appropriate qualifications and are engaged in a global war for talent – they are not overly concerned with the face-to-face versus online debate if the qualification of the learner has been awarded by an accredited college or university.

But the issue for many faculty and students is the quality of the learning experience, more specifically the degree of student engagement. As we now see more and more learners taking online learning, there needs to be a strong focus on how they experience this learning. Pedagogy is the big challenge for online learning – how do we design and deliver learning experiences which are powerful, memorable, engaging and inspiring? What use can be made of simulations, gaming, peer and social networks, networks of experts and crowd-sourced ideas to truly engage learners in an experience which will leave them wanting to study more of the subject and communicate with some passion about their virtual learning?

A lot of emphasis is being given to video-based learning linked to assessment – it is the pedagogy underlying MOOCs and the Khan Academy. Some have suggested that adaptive technologies, which can adjust the learning resources made available to each individual according to their assessment profile, will improve pedagogy and create a more personalized program. But this is very linear and very pedantic approach to learning – learning as “mastery.” In higher education, especially university graduate programs, the focus for learning is more on discovery and exploration. A relentless focus on assessment will make learning more like an “Asperger-like pedagogy” – restrictive, repetitive, low levels of social interaction and very literal. What we need is a more creative and innovative pedagogy which challenges,

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<sup>2</sup> Documented at [www.nosignificantdifference.org](http://www.nosignificantdifference.org)

<sup>3</sup> See the Sloan Consortium student satisfaction data in Going The Distance – Online Learning in the United States available at [http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/going\\_distance\\_2011](http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/going_distance_2011)

encourages exploration, and demands more of the learner, connecting them in powerful way to others and to knowledge.

### **Second Wish : Service Standards**

Watch learners with their smart phones and tablets. They are looking for responsive and fast reactions to their ideas and quick response to email. Yet in several recent interviews students report slow turn-around on assignments, with some not getting their assignment feedback before completing their final examinations. Others report slow response to emails focused on academic issues and a lack of engagement in threaded conversations by faculty members. While help-desks are expected to expedite technical issues in real time, academic time appears, at least in some cases, to be untouched by the fast culture of the internet.

In other jurisdictions, such as the United Kingdom and Australia, academic units are required to publish and be accountable for their service standards. These include reasonable turn-around times for assignments (three to five working days), response to academic queries online (next working day), a statement of “office hours” for online students and clear expectations of the role of the academic in online discussions and dialogue made explicit at the start of the course. Such standards are subject to external audit and many institutions have an Ombudsman in place to respond to complaints by learners.

A strong wish for 2013 is that all post-secondary institutions in Canada would produce and commit to supporting and maintaining academic service standards for all students, including online students.

### **Third Wish : A Strong Focus on “Gateway” Courses**

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation \$3 million investment in MOOCs is, in part, focused on increasing access to and success in college and university “gateway” courses – first and second year courses common to a great many college and university programs, such as Development Mathematics, English Composition, Introduction to Psychology, Foundations of Science and so on. The strategy supported by the foundation is to make such courses widely available at no cost and then to create effective mechanisms for credit recognition (competency-based, proctored challenge examinations).

Imagine a North America-wide opportunity to secure the first two years of a university program (or all of the general education component of a college Certificate, Diploma or Associate Degree) at a cost of no more than \$90 for each three credit course. Imagine taking these courses on demand, anywhere at any time and that they were transferable to any post-secondary institution in North America. This would be game changing.

It is not going to happen in 2013, but a movement towards just this will begin in 2013 with colleges joining in the MOOC development and offering gateway courses and providing mechanisms for credit recognition.

## **Fourth Wish : The Widespread Development of e-Apprenticeship Courses and Programs**

The Canberra Institute of Technology in Australia, responding to the need to accelerate the speed at which individuals complete their trades education and training, is making extensive use of e-learning and remote proctorship using video technologies<sup>4</sup>, including video glasses which record the apprentice undertaking trades work in real time. Other jurisdictions make extensive use of competency-based learning online to support apprenticeship and trades education and have shown higher completion rates and graduation rates since they have begun to do so. Organizations like City and Guilds (UK) offer online courses world-wide for trades education. The Kentucky Community Technical and College System (KCTCS) has developed short, modular (two to three) week courses which learners can enroll in on any day of the year and accumulate credits towards a trades or para-professional qualification.

Canada's demography is such that we will experience significant labour shortages, especially in trades, as baby boomers retire and the economy continues to expand. Conservative estimates of the skills deficit<sup>5</sup> suggest that Canada will need to significantly increase immigration so as to meet the challenge. In one sector alone – construction – some 260,000 new hires will be needed across Canada between 2013 and 2021. Some 300,000 positions remain vacant for three months or more in Canadian small businesses and enterprises because there is a lack of skilled individuals to fill them. Ontario is expected to face a shortage of 364,000 skilled workers by 2025.

Doing what we have always done and expecting different results is unlikely to significantly impact the completion and graduation rates and speed of completion for the trades persons we need to support the economy. New thinking about how we educate for trades, how we supervise trades trainees and how we build on a trades education for additional life-long learning are needed for Canada to be successful in the battle for talent. It is time for innovation and e-learning is a component of that innovation.

## **Fifth Wish : Analytics, Data and Evidence**

A key development over the last two to three years in education has been the emergence of powerful analytic tools. Such tools enable us to track patterns of student activity and interactivity, assess student mastery, track the impact of different learning resources and enable more active intervention by faculty in the learning of individual students. With adaptive learning technologies, analytics are also enabling the personalization of learning resources in terms of knowledge and skills and learning styles.

At the institutional level, analytics are enabling the rapid analysis of recruitment and retention strategies and their impact on learner behaviour, the pattern of enquiries by geography, demography and areas of interest as well as a variety of other aspects of enquirer, learner and faculty behaviour.

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<sup>4</sup> For more, see [http://cit.edu.au/study/cit\\_tv/trade\\_apprenticeships](http://cit.edu.au/study/cit_tv/trade_apprenticeships) and especially the first video at this site (also at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=OJGII7G1O18](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=OJGII7G1O18))

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.chamber.ca/images/uploads/Reports/2012/120923Skills.pdf>

Yet we cannot get an accurate and up-to-date snap shot of the current state of online learning in Canada. Provinces do not track online learning developments in any significant and consistent way and our estimates of the scale of activity, completion rates, student satisfaction and strategic impact of online learning are largely “guesswork.” In a world of complex and sophisticated analytics, simple and reliable data is not available for reasonable policy and strategic review and analysis.

A strong wish for 2013 is that such data would be commonplace, easily accessible and used for policy making and decisions, both at the institutional level and provincially.

### **The Future will be collaboration**

There are lots of other wishes one could make, but the five listed here are both highly desirable and very possible in 2013.

A sound New Year resolution may well be, “be careful what you wish for.” Several of the wishes listed above could have significant impact on colleges and universities and may be seen to be challenging.

Key to the future will be collaboration – the DNA of the knowledge economy. Collaboration between colleges, between universities, between colleges and universities and between the public system and private providers will be the hallmark of the next decade.

One lesson of 2012 is it has been the private sector, working in partnership with public institutions, that has created a changed dynamic with respect to online learning. [Coursera](#), which is offering over 200 MOOCs, and [Pearson’s e-college](#) and their partnerships with a great many public and private institutions, are providing logistic and market support for innovative approaches to learning. The hallmark of the next five years will be partnerships of this kind.

So, a time of change and opportunity. It is also a time for reflection. As each institution looks to the New Year it may well reflect on the part innovative approaches to learning will play. New opportunities will emerge in 2013 to build on the transformative year of 2012. What will you wish for?