

## Moving Online: Meeting student learning needs through online and hybrid courses at La Cité collégiale

### Opportunity

In 2010, distance education courses and programs offered through Continuing Education at La Cité collégiale in Ottawa were re-designed to be offered online rather than through correspondence so that students would have more flexibility and interaction in their learning.

Continuing Education provides the certificate programs at La Cité through a combination of in-class and distance education, with the two-year diploma programs taught in face-to-face classroom meetings by the various departments at the college.

About 70 credit courses are now online through Continuing Education, in business administration, health, and language courses in both French and English. Many of these are also available in face-to-face classes. Continuing Education does offer two complete diploma programs online, one in Early Childhood Education and the other, Web Master, offered in cooperation with French-language colleges in New Brunswick and Manitoba.



### Innovation

New models for pedagogy, course development, facilitator training, and technological application had to be developed to ensure that the students were provided with learning that takes advantage of the possibilities offered by online delivery.

The pedagogical model developed for the online courses stresses interaction and student involvement rather than the delivery of information by lecture. The web conferencing program Elluminate is used for the real-time interaction, which may consist of four one-and-a-half hour virtual classes during a 14-week, 45-hour course. These sessions are for class discussion, presentations, group work, and other student-driven activities, according to the design of the course and the preferences of the facilitator.

All the course materials are online at the beginning of the semester, divided into weekly modules which may contain learning objectives, course notes, discussion questions, readings, audio and video materials, and other learning tools. The course facilitator posts messages every week, sets up and moderates the discussion groups, help students with their individual challenges and difficulties, and tracks participation and contacts those who are falling behind.

Assessment is completed online for tests and mid-term exams, with the final exam written at La Cité or a proctored site at a cooperating French-language college. The majority of the students are from Ontario; some are from other provinces and countries.

The course development process uses a team approach with a subject matter expert, an instructional designer, and a technical advisor. Having them work together ensures the technological capacity and infrastructure, the levels of interaction and course design, and the learning objectives and content are matched to optimize student learning. The subject matter experts are specialists from outside the college. La Cité retains all rights to the course.

Online training modules were developed for newly hired facilitators and course developers, as well as for those who had previously been teaching the courses by correspondence. The course developers and facilitators are specialists hired from outside the college on part-time contracts. The modules are made available to those applying to facilitate or develop courses and they must complete certain tasks prior to being interviewed. The module explains web conferencing and online learning and allows both the applicant and the college to assess interest in and capacity for online teaching.

Communities of practice using web conferencing are set up for course facilitators with virtual meetings every six weeks or so to discuss themes of common interest such as attendance and plagiarism. Special sessions are also arranged for those teaching in specific areas such as Early Childhood Education and French language.

To ensure familiarity with the technology, tutors are provided with an orientation to Elluminate and the use of web conferencing for learning. A technologist attends the first two virtual classes to ensure that everyone is comfortable with manipulating the technology and that everything functions as it should.

La Cité is currently using an older version of Blackboard as its learning management system (LMS). Options are being considered for a new system to serve the needs of the entire college. All college courses have course outlines on the LMS; online courses make the most use of the LMS for discussion boards, video links, notices, assignment, and marks. Other technologies, such as wikis and blogs, are also used for teaching, learning, and communicating.

## Outcomes and Benefits

The students appreciate the increased interaction, flexibility, and access from wherever they may be available through online learning. They have particularly taken advantage of the opportunities for student-to-student communication and support.

As students become more experienced with the virtual classrooms, they are becoming more active and capable of running discussions and offering multimedia presentations. They progress both as online learners and as sophisticated users of technology for communication, learning, and presentation.

La Cité is able to offer courses with very small enrollments through online learning, as they pay the facilitator per student and not a flat fee for the course. This makes it economically feasible to respond to learner needs, regardless of the size of the class cohort.

## Challenges and Enhancements

The structure of the college, which largely relies on face-to-face classroom lectures, makes change difficult. Many of the college faculty do not understand online learning and there are many misunderstandings – it is like speaking two different languages. Most of the online learning is offered in certificate programs through Continuing Education, which can create an impression of lower standards.

Each new online course is tested for one semester, including gathering student feedback. The most common issues are the inclusion of too much content, unclear directions, and system problems such as broken links.

With the initial move from correspondence and audio delivery to online learning, registrations dropped as students who had taken multiple courses enrolled for only one course to be sure they could learn with the new pedagogy and technology. Enrollment has now increased overall, with students again enrolling in multiple courses and the introduction of new courses.

## Potential

Continuing Education and Distance Education are working together on creating blended courses that would offer face-to-face and virtual class time in alternating weeks. A number of facilitators have volunteered to modify their courses; those to be adapted for hybrid delivery are currently taught both online and in classrooms. The classroom-based students had asked for more flexibility in their learning, but they also wanted to maintain the social and personal connections of the face-to-face class – hybrid is seen as the ideal response. The hybrid courses will stress the importance of student interaction both virtually and in classrooms.

Paulette Bouffard, the Interim Director of Continuing Education and Online Learning, welcomes the opportunity to exchange with colleagues about best practices, models, and structures, and to share what she has learned through leading the change to online learning at La Cité. She is particularly interested in questions of encouraging faculty openness to and involvement in online learning, and how this might be supported through the collective agreement.

## For Further Information

Paulette Bouffard  
Interim Director  
Continuing Education and Online Learning  
La Cité collégiale  
[pbouff@lacitec.on.ca](mailto:pbouff@lacitec.on.ca)

<http://www.lacitevirtuelle.ca/>