

Synchronous, Interactive, and Individual – Online learning opportunities for adults at Confederation College

Opportunity

Confederation College in Thunder Bay serves students spread across a vast territory of over 550,000 square kilometres in northwestern Ontario. In 2004, only two of Confederation College's nine campuses were offering Literacy and Basic Skills programs, leaving many people in communities and townships without access to essential training for continuing their education and career development.

An online Literacy and Basic Skills Tool Box was created and offered in a few communities as a pilot project to assess its effectiveness as a delivery and instructional approach. The pilot project demonstrated both that need was there and that online delivery could work with the College's learners. Over the past ten years, the Tool Box has been replaced by the use of Saba Centra and a Blackboard Learning Management System.

Innovation

The Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) and Academic and Career Entrance (ACE) Distance Learning programs are offered using Contact North | Contact Nord's Saba Centra, online classroom software that provides a virtual learning environment combining web conferencing and social networking using low bandwidth. Confederation College's Blackboard Learning Management System provides curriculum support materials.

The Academic Upgrading courses, as well as ACE Communications and Math, are offered as continuous intake, blended, synchronous courses for students who come to Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centres throughout northwestern Ontario. Students with computers and adequate bandwidth can take the courses from home, but are encouraged to attend the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centres so that they can easily access technical supports.

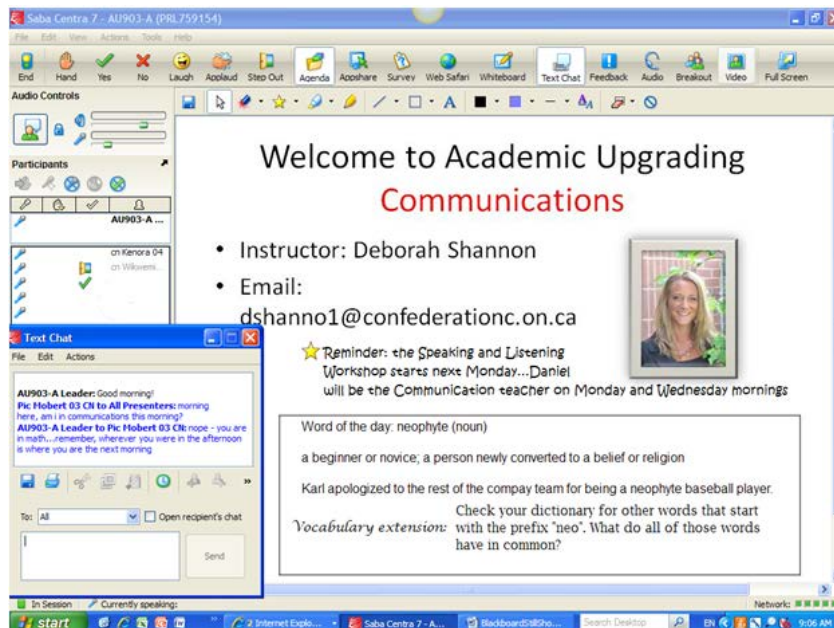
For the Math and Communications courses, online instructors act as learning facilitators as students work at their own pace in full-time daytime classes (from 9AM to 3PM Monday through Thursday) or part-time evening classes (from 6PM to 9PM two evenings a week). While the students are working independently at various levels, the instructors are present online to support each student with their individual questions and challenges.

The pedagogy, curriculum materials, and technology are designed to support students throughout their learning.

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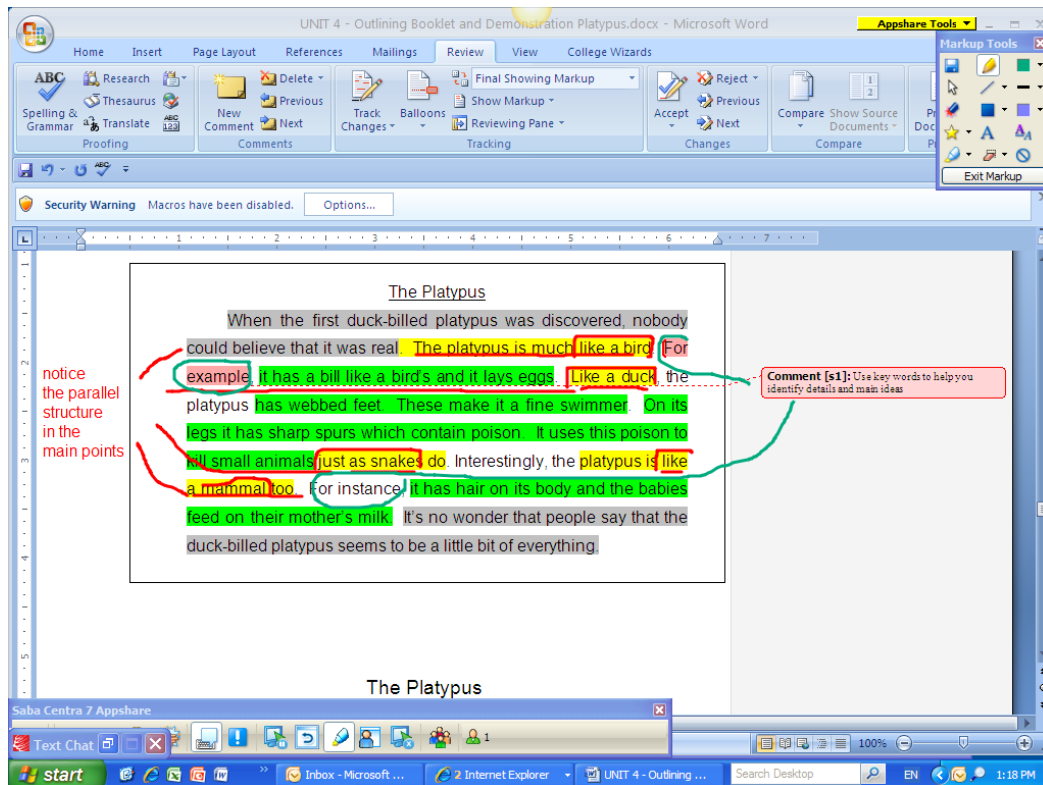
Start at Any Time: The students write a placement test to determine their appropriate start point. In a subsequent phone interview, a learning plan is set up, including which courses they will take, program expectations, available supports, learning strategies to overcome barriers, and timelines for achieving long- and short-term goals. They are registered on Centra and Blackboard and have online introductory meetings with each professor to discuss their program, the process of learning, and the curriculum. Each new student is taken to the breakout room which is part of the Centra virtual classroom and the uses of Centra, Blackboard, and the e-mail system are explained and demonstrated. Considerable support is necessary to help students learn how to use unfamiliar technology and start the learning. The professors gain as much knowledge as they can of student needs and goals in order to work with them most effectively. The professors offer a welcoming atmosphere in their course sites and in the breakout room meetings.



Work Independently: Each student has an individual learning plan, with suggested minimum progress in terms of number of assignments completed every month. The students work through a series of progressive online assignments, with online support materials and interaction with the professors. Students can work through practice assignments, which are marked automatically by Blackboard and/or by the professor, until they are ready to demonstrate mastery learning – with a requirement of 80% in LBS courses and 70% for ACE.

To support the learning, examples, step-by-step instructions, practice exercises, and mini-quizzes are provided, as well as the possibility of meeting the professor in the breakout

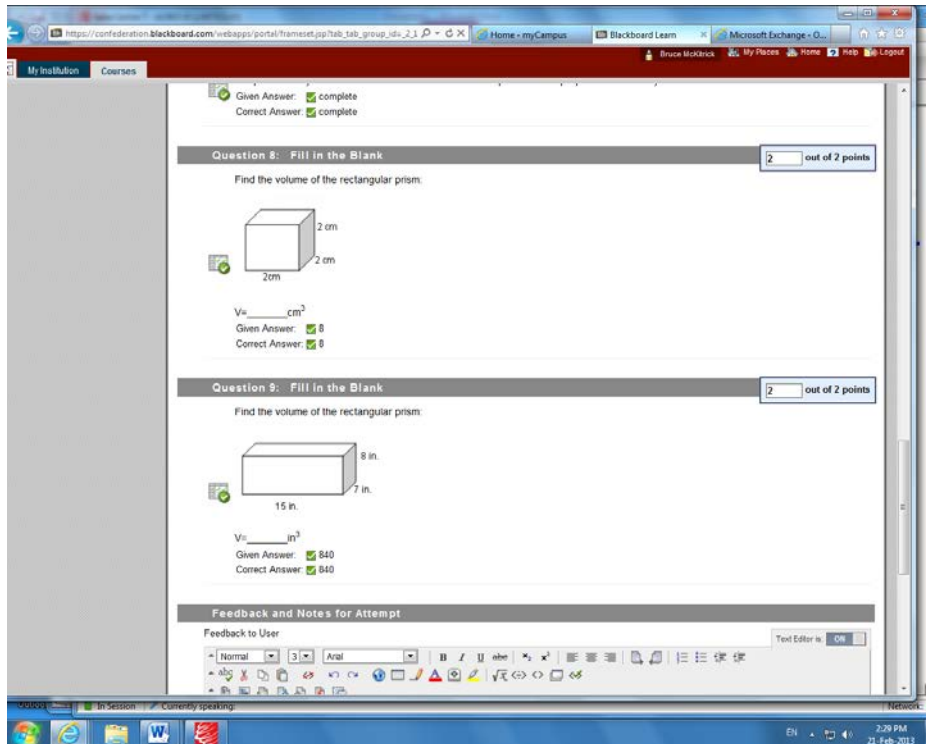
room for individual support, discussions, and attention. An illustration of working online with a student in the Communications course is shown below. Using AppShare, the student assignment is displayed for both professor and student and, using highlighting and comments, the professor demonstrates and reinforces what she is saying.



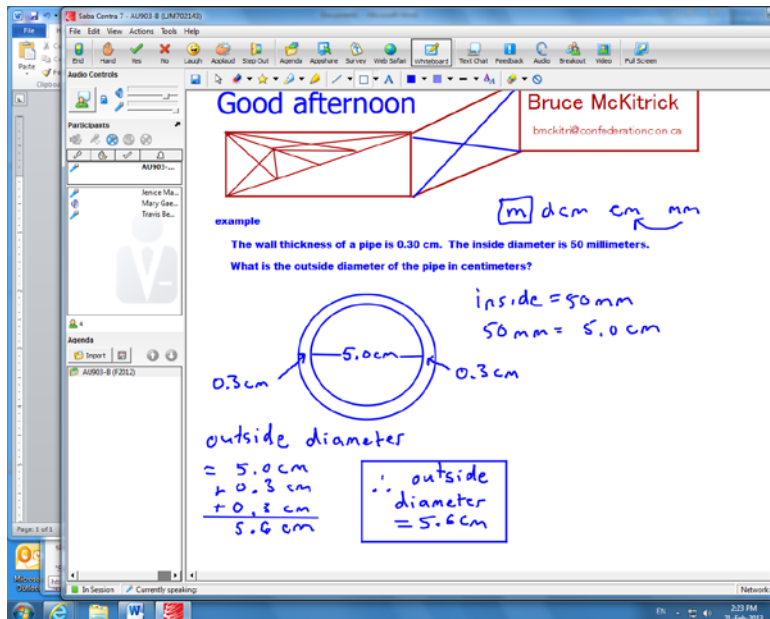
For the math program, paper booklets are used, with mini-tests available on the LMS. The software for doing maths online is complex and demanding so the paper option, supported by online practice, is found to be more effective. Below is an example of an online quiz – with scoring.

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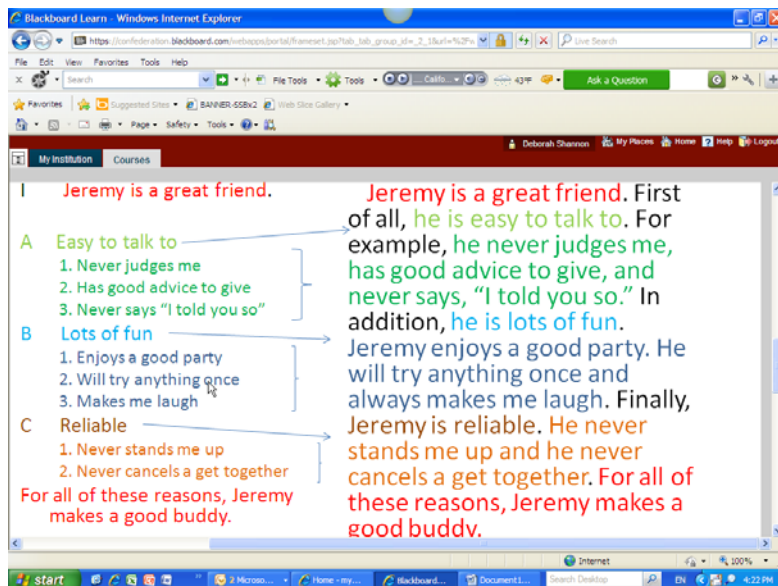


The professor also uses the whiteboard to work through complex equations live with a group or individual students.



Group work is restricted by the continuous intake and independent progress approaches of the program; in some cases, often near the end of their programs, it is possible to bring groups of students at the same level together in the breakout room for group discussions and learning. They can work together with the professor on document analysis and revision or mathematical solutions, with shared screen visuals and audio links. For the unit tests and exams, invigilated sites are used.

Curriculum Support: Numerous curriculum support materials have been created or made available through links to web sources for students who are having difficulty. For example, Deborah Shannon, professor of Communications, has created vodcasts using Jing software that allow her to create a video of her desktop with audio support. In this example, she has produced a video featuring PowerPoint slides with voice-over so that students get both visual and audio explanations of how to turn an outline into a paragraph.



Links are also offered to additional sources of information and practice such as the college library (as well as a vodcast on how to access the virtual library from off-campus), videos from other educational institutions and sources such as the Khan Academy, and flashcard practice in math.

Outcomes and Benefits

The online, synchronous access to LBS and ACE provided by Confederation College is essential in many communities because as Leslie MacGregor, Manager of Academic

Upgrading, explains, options can be extremely limited in northwestern Ontario. Students can prepare for post-secondary education or apprenticeship opportunities or improve their access to jobs and promotion. This benefits both individuals and communities.

The students are students of Confederation College – which is meaningful to them and their communities and ensures that the courses are accepted as prerequisites for college programs. For those students who have post-secondary goals, the Coordinator works with the student to ensure a smooth transition.

Checks and balances are in place so that the progress of each student is tracked, with intervention and individual instruction for those who are not progressing.

The combination of online and synchronous learning means that students receive clear and timely feedback in real time – using both visual and audio links. Students can practice and repeat materials as often as they need for mastery learning. The professors also provide additional support through vodcasts, links to other sources, and discussion boards.

The flexibility of delivery enables diverse learners to access the programs. One student has offered the following comment: *"I have been in the ACE DL program for a little over a year. ACE DL works so well for me because it combines my preference for independent learning with the support of an interactive online relationship with a teacher. My teachers do not just talk, draw, or email me through the tough spots in my work, they also keep me moving forward when I've forgotten my motivation. With such great support and flexible class times, it's hard to find an excuse not to do the work, even if you have a painful chronic illness, like me."*

Challenges and Enhancements

A key challenge is the initial lack of computer literacy skills, including e-mail and word processing, among the students. The instructors work with each student to build up these skills so that they enhance rather than impede learning.

Student motivation can be difficult when working online. The monthly planners help to encourage focus and progress is reviewed every month, with new goals set to try and keep the learning on-track. Instructors emphasize the final goal of post-secondary education, apprenticeship, employment, etc. to help students persist in their programs.

Because the majority of the students are working individually at their local Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre, it can be difficult to create a collegial environment

online. Monthly class meetings, photo share, and other activities are set up to create a sense of community and encourage continued attendance and sustain motivation.

Potential

Many students register for Academic Upgrading because they want to earn an ACE certificate, which requires successful completion of the Communications and Math courses and two additional electives, which include Computers, Self-Management and Self-Direction, Biology, Chemistry, or Physics.

The ACE Computer course is available online asynchronously and Self-Management and Self-Direction will be available starting in May 2013 as an asynchronous online course. ACE Biology, Chemistry, and Physics courses are currently offered on-campus but will soon be also offered to distance students through a virtual classroom linked to the face-to-face classroom, enabling students to complete their ACE Certificate entirely online.

For Further Information

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