

**ONLINE LEARNING IS A WAY
OF CONSTRAINING THE
SPREAD OF COVID-19**

My Contact North | Contact Nord colleagues continue to monitor developments related to COVID-19 and reflect on online learning as a supportive tool. Following are some of our evolving thoughts.

The “traditional” rationale for online learning includes

- an access argument
- an affordability argument
- a flexibility argument
- a pedagogical argument
- a lifelong learning argument

Now we can add a new argument: online learning is a way of constraining the spread of a communicable virus like COVID-19.

At the time of writing, there are over 111,363 reported cases in 109 countries and 3,892 deaths. Over 62,392 people have experienced the virus and have recovered (for the most recent information, John Hopkins University has an [interactive map](#) and up-to-date details). Both China and Italy have chosen to lock down large parts of their countries, with millions unable to leave a specific area. A large number of people are now required to spend 14 or more days under quarantine – unable to leave home. While the situation in Canada is contained - just 67 cases and no deaths at the time of writing – Health Canada has indicated that circumstances can change quickly. In the US, there are 545 cases and 21 deaths, with the virus continuing to spread.

Other jurisdictions have closed schools, colleges and universities because the number of reported cases suggests that the gathering of people in a single place for a period of time increases the risk of infection. These include Stanford University and the University of Washington as well as the University of Canada West in Vancouver. The University of British Columbia and University of Toronto – two of our nation’s largest institutions – are considering converting to online activity to conclude this semester. Foreign travel has also been cancelled or postponed by school districts, colleges and universities. Some international students are unable to return to their studies if travel restrictions apply – universities and colleges in the UK are experiencing a significant drop in returning international students.

At the school level, [UNESCO says that 291 million children worldwide](#) have already had their education disrupted by the spread of COVID-19, with nationwide shutdowns of primary and secondary schools across 13 countries and partial closures in another 9. Online learning is a growing response to these closures. In China, where online learning is already a significant component of the school system, online is being used as a response to the COVID-19 virus. [More than 220 education bureaus in 20 Chinese](#) provinces joined the free-of-charge DingTalk homeschool program, covering over 20,000 primary and secondary schools and 12 million students, according to state media Xinhua.

Colleges and universities, which are looking at the developing situation, are also exploring online learning as one response, some for the first time.

Duke Kunshan University – Duke’s university in China – had just one week to [convert classroom-based courses](#) to online and all seems to be going well. Drexel University and Penn State are [both preparing online courses](#) as potential response if the situation in the US makes such a move necessary. In Canada, online learning is well established and a great many courses and programs are available. In Ontario alone, there are over 20,000 college and university courses and close to 1,000 programs available and across the country there are many more in both English and French.

Online learning as an educational response to COVID-19 also raises some interesting questions:

1. Will the adoption of online learning as a response to COVID-19 spur the growth of online learning, especially in parts of the world, which have been historically resistant to the use of online learning?
2. Will this use of online learning lead institutions, which have not made use of online learning in the past, see the value of this pedagogy and make it a permanent feature of their portfolio?
3. Will policy-makers and governments re-evaluate online learning and its place in their post-secondary offerings?
4. Will the sudden growth of online learners change student attitudes to this mode of learning which, in many cases, is already favourable?
5. Will the growth of online learning lead to new start-ups and enterprises focused on the rapid conversion of classroom courses to online or on other aspects of this mode of learning?

COVID-19 has already led to some specialized course development by a number of MOOC providers - [FutureLearn](#), [Coursera](#) and in French from [FunMOOC](#). New courses and programs focused on health and wellness are likely to follow.

We cannot know what will happen next with COVID-19. Surely, we know that we have immediate term issues but what are we going to do for summer and next fall? If the preventative flu remedy is not available until next year, we may be facing an entire year of needed social separation in order to mitigate the impact. It is clearly a serious challenge to all, especially health providers and governments. What we can be sure of is two things: (a) COVID-19 will continue to spread and cause disruption; and (b) even when COVID-19 fades and treatments can be found, there will be a next virus or pandemic, which will impact the world.

The opportunity of the present moment for all engaged in online learning is to position this pedagogy not just as a “quick response” but as a way of inhibiting the spread of this and the next communicable disease. The sooner we help learners master the specific skills of being an effective and efficient online learner, the better.

Online learning is a lifeline for many students caught in the consequences of the spread of the virus, but may also be a way of coping with fourteen days of home confinement after all: there is a lot that can be learned in two weeks.