



Terry Anderson

Tony Bates, Canada’s pre-eminent distance education expert formally retired over 20 years ago—but he forgot to tell those who have relied on his insights and publishing ever since. Thus, Tony is the most qualified Canadian to overview the past but more importantly to forecast the emerging needs and opportunities for distance education institutions, students and researchers in Canada and abroad.

As a typical Canadian, Tony begins by noting the large size of Canada and the sparse population. He correctly notes however that Canada is highly urban with over 75% of Canadians living within 160 km of the United States Border. Thus, Canada has had a need for and a tradition of using distance education to serve rural and isolated learners. However, as in other countries the vast majority of distance learners live and work in urban centres with relatively easy access to campus based institutions. The distance in Canadian online education is more is about time shifting, access, multi-tasking and flexibility than large, empty Canadian landscapes.

Tony next provides the usual lament that, unique in the world, Canada has no national secondary or postsecondary education system—no national targets or plans, no national curriculum, no national education ministry. This anomaly was developed and engraved in our constitutional documents from the intense rivalry and ethnic and cultural distrust amongst Canada’s founding populations. However, despite the lack of national coordination that results, the separate provincial systems allows for a great deal of innovation and local adaptation.

I was pleased to see the discussion about the diversity of delivery platforms now emerging with the once predominance of the single institutional LMS being gradually replaced or enhanced by more teacher controlled video courses at one end and aggregated student social media at the other. I can’t resist noting Jon Dron’s and my development and support over 7 years of a “boutique” social network (Athabasca

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Landing) that provides the security and lack of advertisements of a social platform with the student control, wide distribution and archiving of an open network.

To update the description of Canadian MOOCs, a check (February 2017) shows 57 Canadian MOOCs offered by postsecondary institutions. As Tony notes, the largest and most prestigious Universities have partnered with large American MOOC providers—notably Coursera and EdX, while the smaller—medium sized universities are exploring more self-produced options from Canvas or through their own LMS or social network systems.

Tony correctly details the continuing development in Western Canada of open textbooks for both campus and distance delivery. However, there are three other significant Canadian open access initiatives worthy of mention. The world's largest open access research publication system, Open Journal Systems (OJS) was developed by Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia. Over 9000 journals are published using the OJS system (including most of the open access distance education DE journals globally) and it now provides hosting, analytics and professional development support. Second, is the number of Canadian founding and current members or OERu, an international organization dedicated to providing free credit courses through collaborative development and support. Finally, Athabasca University Library supports the OER Knowledge Cloud which offers a global database of research articles published on OER development and use.

The chapter ends with the universal and most certainly Canadian challenge of helping faculty to adapt to the quickly changing context of networked living and learning. Of course the necessary personal and institutional changes and new investments come at a time when both private attention and public funding has many competing demands. The old saying that change only happens here through death or retirement will certainly not do! However, if others keep learning and contributing in retirement as Tony has done, the future for Canadian distance education looks promising!

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