

# Learning Networks as Strategy for Sharing e-Learning Capacity

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**ABSTRACT.** Royal Roads University of Canada has chosen to develop its own e-Learning software platform in order to ensure that the pedagogy adopted for educating mature adults is embodied in and expressed by the technology learners experienced in distance education courses. Currently, the university seeks to share its experience and its software platform with other institutions struggling with the formidable barriers they confront in beginning to offer online learning. The costs of the resulting “learning networks” are slight for the new adopting institutions, but in the aggregate make it possible for Royal Roads University to maintain and enhance its platform.

**KEYWORDS:** *Blended-learning model, Canadian higher education, e-Learning, International education*

From the perspective of 2015 or 2020, the period between 2000 and 2006 will likely be seen as an interregnum in the development of online learning, especially within higher education.

On the one hand, acceptance of Internet-based instruction and learning is widespread among North American and European universities. As noted by Allen and Seaman (2004), evidence is unequivocal, that in the United States “online enrolment projections have been realized, and there is no evidence that enrolments have reached a plateau. Online enrolments continue to grow at rates faster than for the overall student body, and schools expect the rate of growth to further increase”. Similar results are reported in Canada and in Europe, and considerable activity is being financed in other regions and developing countries.

The business of e-Learning, as represented by the number of commercial vendors of online software and services, has matured somewhat and, most recently, saw the attempted amalgamation of the two largest providers, Blackboard and WebCT.

However, experience suggests that acceptance of e-Learning by regulatory and governing bodies, especially in developing societies, remains far from complete. Recently, a senior official of the Ministry of Education of Taiwan stated to the author that there would be no approval of any foreign university proposing to offer courses and degree involving programs via the Internet. Mainland Chinese education officials express similar reservations, although with less vehemence than their Taiwanese counterpart or their own earlier commentary. Moreover, resistance to e-Learning on the parts of government

officials who oversee post-secondary institutions, coupled with a dearth of resources in general, make it difficult to imagine how universities in developing societies interested in exploring online education, will be able to do so. It is in such circumstances that a young Canadian university of a very different sort is working to advance a more pragmatic approach to assisting other institutions to experiment in what is for their faculty, staff and students, new and different ways of teaching and learning. Termed a “learning network”, the approach is being implemented at present in Thailand.

Virtually alone, among Canadian public universities, Royal Roads University is governed by a “corporate-style” Board of Governors without a Faculty Senate. In addition, there is no provision for faculty tenure at RRU. Furthermore, the principal goal of RRU’s Board of Governors is financial self-sufficiency.

Established in 1995, Royal Roads’s philosophy of education evolved over the past decade and it informs the University’s development going forward. At the core of this philosophy is the notion that learning is essentially a social enterprise, regardless of the means, by which learners engage and interact with one another or with faculty. Knowledge is constructed from the interaction of learners who, by virtue of their experience and maturity, bring to learning a wealth of insight and is thus a derivative of the sustained engagement of small groups of learners working together on learning tasks, facilitated by professors. Less is taught, perhaps, but more is learned.

Given such a philosophy, the University’s task is to establish a context and manage an environment within which this kind of learning takes place and to facilitate engagement and interaction. The emphasis is on learning, not on teaching.

The decision to build rather than buy an e-Learning platform was a risky one, but one made with some resolution, since the commercial software available was not seen as incorporating the educational philosophy and pedagogy sought for Royal Roads.

At the same time, however, the initial decision was made to embrace Microsoft and Microsoft-compatibility in all of the information systems of the University. That decision has been rescinded partially in enhancement work now underway, and open-source Moodle is now the choice for the next generation of e-Learning, in part, because of the social constructionist approach embraced by Moodle and, in part, because of a preference for open-source software.

Over the three-year period 2003-2006, discussion was given over

within Royal Roads to how the University might take advantage of its investments and success in delivering learning, particularly to more mature students, keen on incorporating pursuit of a Master's degree on a full-time basis with full-time employment. After all, RRU had developed deep expertise in and the human and technological infrastructure for addressing the interests of mid-career professionals: why not make that capacity available to others?

From these discussions, the idea of "learning networks" emerged. Learning networks are formal relationships among organizations focused on the preparation and delivery of training and education through a variety of methods of engagement and instruction. Increasingly, technology is a key component to the delivery of learning across and within the network.

Learning networks are typically characterized by the sharing of resources among the participating organizations, and this sharing often produces powerful efficiencies. Together, the networks are able to deliver more than the sum of their parts.

In recent years, a "blended learning" model has been recognized as a preferred format for adults, combining brief, intensive face-to-face residencies with asynchronous, technology-enabled interaction and communication<sup>1</sup>. Since its inception as a "special-purpose university" of British Columbia, Royal Roads has pioneered in the development and refinement of the blended learning model for educating mature adults. During subsequent years, RRU has refined both its pedagogy and its technology to an extent that the institution now possesses the human and physical infrastructure, as well as the expertise and experience, to:

- respond to and act expeditiously on requests or opportunities to deliver high-quality learning for adults and
- share its knowledge and capacity with other organizations and thereby enhance their potential as "hubs" of multi-institutional learning networks.

At present, Royal Roads is working with a consortium of Thai organizations and a consortium of Peruvian universities to facilitate the development of learning networks in three regions. The original Thai group consisted of KPI, Khon Kaen University (KKU), Mahasarakham University (MSU), and Prince of Songkla University (PSU) as well as the King Prajadhipok Institute. The group has been joined by Chiangmai and Chulalongkorn Universities, and a sixth Thai institution is also likely to join.

The Peruvian group includes Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú,

1. Based on data from a study of 30 companies, Bersin & Associates (2003) assert "Blended learning is the highest impact way to deliver corporate training on mission critical business initiatives. Companies are finding that 'just e-Learning' is not a viable solution for a business critical solution"

Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia, Universidad del Pacifico, and Universidad de Lima.

In addition, RRU offered its Master of Business Administration degree in Iran to students through residencies in Tehran and e-Learning delivered via the Internet from RRU servers and with RRU technical and helpdesk support. In total, students from 48 countries and all 13 Canadian provinces and territories are included in the University's enrolments.

The Thai network launched in November 2005 with its first residency in Bangkok. The Peruvian network is still in the planning stage. These networks consist of the following elements:

- RRU serving initially as the technological platform and support services "host" (or, in the parlance of the times, as an "application services provider" [ASP]) for the e-Learning component of the blended learning model, thus affording an easier transition of new providers
- RRU providing consulting services in the organization and administration of the face-to-face residencies as well as faculty to teach and for content development for e-Learning
- RRU using its membership in the national Canadian Virtual University to engage the programs and offerings of eleven other Canadian institutions including the Télé-Université du Québec, Athabasca University, and the Royal Military College to ensure that other program needs and opportunities can be met
- a "hub" institution or organization to provide local leadership and to serve as RRU's principal point of contact for the region
- in the case of a geographic region, a regional hub country serving as the site of residencies for RRU learner cohorts, thereby affording the students an international learning experience
- RRU hosting residencies for students from the international universities and organizations on the Victoria campus, thereby providing an international learning experience
- sharing of innovations in blended, e- and m-(mobile/wireless) Learning within the network with the potential for assessing their potential for commercialization.

Royal Roads' learning networks will focus first and foremost on markets of adult learners, with some post-secondary education: highly mobile individuals seeking a competitive employment advantage with access to just-in-time communications, information, and learning/training.

A second market consists of traditional university students, many of whom are already familiar with e-Learning, even though much of their instruction remains conventional face-to-face pedagogy.

A third market is made up of adult learners in developing countries whose governments have chosen to place a priority on primary and secondary education, delivered through conventional classroom instruction and therefore will require alternative means for reaching the adult learner population, also seeking access to continuous learning.

In time, a fourth market - K-12 - will emerge as wireless devices, especially wireless telephones, continue to be available and adopted in such populous nations as China and India. As world population reaches 6 billion people, nearly one billion wireless devices are already in use, and growth will only continue. These devices have as yet untapped potential for bringing learning to children everywhere without the expensive infrastructure usually associated with e-Learning.

As an international economic initiative, RRU's learning networks make it possible to export high-value "knowledge-rich" products and services. As an international assistance effort, learning networks contribute to nations' development by assisting with the building of greater capacity for learning in those countries.

As an education initiative, learning networks can help to establish Canada as an important player in the emerging competition for international students and thereby also contribute to the attraction of much-needed skilled immigrants. Even more likely, this initiative can improve the knowledge and skills of learning organizations and the institutions whose personnel are educated as a result.

Just as important, learning networks have the potential to improve the skills and knowledge of Canadians and enable them to operate effectively internationally in terms of business and commerce, areas of critical importance to Canada given the dependence of trade.

As a technology initiative, learning networks are natural extensions for Royal Roads University, arguably the most successful Canadian university in the development and use of blended learning. As noted above, RRU developed its own e-Learning platform to reflect both its pedagogy and the market of adult learners. Its technical support and help desk are exemplars of service to e-learners and the student support reflects in every way the learner-centred focus adopted by the institution at its establishment.

Royal Roads enjoys still another advantage in working with other nations and regional consortia because of its membership in the Canadian Virtual University, a national consortium of colleges and universities

whose distance education offerings cover a wide spectrum of traditional disciplinary degree programs, as well as distinctive niches such as those of the Royal Military College and Francophone institutions. As a result, RRU is able to turn to its CVU partners to meet institutional, national or regional needs to which RRU is unable to respond itself.

In addition, this initiative builds on Canada's emergence as one of the most "wired" nations in the world, in terms of Internet access to broadband, and capitalizes on British Columbia's and Canada's national success in computer gaming, wireless/mobile communications, and general telecommunications development.

Strategically, learning networks can be powerful means by which Canada asserts itself in a global context. At perhaps no other time in its history, Canada has a unique opportunity to influence the lives and fortunes of people all around the world. While no one doubts the military and economic might of the United States, it is becoming increasingly apparent that neither type of American power alone or in combination can bring about or sustain a world order in which peoples' everyday lives consist of less conflict, less violence and more hope. As both a formal ally and geographic neighbor to the U.S., Canada enjoys a special relationship with and a distinctive perspective on America unlike any other country.

Equally important, Canada and Canadians are viewed by much of the world as different from the U.S. and as a generally benign force for good in their relations with other countries and other people. Contemporary affairs thus present Canada with a chance to play a constructive role in world affairs. Learning and the capacity for continuous learning will be even more critical components of nations' development and Canada is positioned well to assist other countries and regions through the type of learning networks under development by Royal Roads University.

Moreover, by working with selected institutions to bring about regional networks, RRU can help to foster collaboration and the sharing of resources among neighboring countries and professionals within the region, while avoiding unnecessary duplication of effort and achieving practical efficiencies.

In just a few years, Royal Roads University has established itself in Canada as a provider of the "blended learning" approach to education and training. At the heart of the RRU approach is the imperative to create compelling learning experiences (Pine, Garland, 1999) using the blended learning approach. To accomplish that, the University has had to develop and hone its skills in the practical logistics of the blended model,

which includes, but is more, than e-Learning alone. That said, protecting hard-earned intellectual property devoted to a process is quite difficult as patents and copyrights seldom can be achieved for processes as opposed to software or hardware, for example. Accordingly, the business strategy for using RRU's expertise is planned to be as follows:

- RRU will license use of its e-Learning platform/LMS to not-for-profit organizations at very low costs consisting primarily of incremental additions to existing services such as help desk, server capacity, etc.
- In exchange, the licensee will agree to the following:
  - *to provide RRU the right of first refusal for consulting services associated with content development, authoring skills, and the like associated with the use of the RRU platform/LMS and the delivery of blended learning for a period of 12 months from the date of licensing (thereafter, the licensee may contract with any other entity for such support but with notice provided RRU);*
  - *to share all innovations in the use of the licensed platform/LMS for the full term of the license granted.*
- As noted above, RRU is also prepared to act as an ASP on a fee basis.

The value propositions underlying this strategy are straightforward. If a number of institutions with which RRU forges relationships also avail themselves of access to and use of the e-Learning software, then the incremental costs paid by each institution may be sufficient to cover the costs of normal maintenance and updating of that platform, thus saving Royal Roads substantial sums but not burdening unduly any one institution. This "economy of scale" could be significant.

But it is the institutional learning by RRU that could be the more valuable outcome of this approach. In 2003, Royal Roads sought to transform itself from a Canadian institution active internationally to a global university with deep Canadian roots, focusing primarily on the Pacific Rim region. But the university remains relatively small and its inventory of degree programs quite focused, so obtaining experience in different cultures and national settings could prove to be too expensive and require too long a period of adaptation.

By requiring partner institutions to share both their experiences and their innovations in the use of the RRU e-Learning platform with their students, Royal Roads can acquire insight on and understanding of the limits and the potential of the blended learning model in different cultures and either adapt its offerings accordingly, or elect not to deliver programs to students and places for which the model seems ineffective. In cases where the culture and students are seen to be receptive to

the model, Royal Roads can join with native institutions to offer joint degrees or deliver RRU's distinctive degrees with the assent of the native university or college.

And it is in the Canadian approach to different cultures that RRU can truly take advantage of the learning accruing from work with partner institutions outside Canada in creating learning networks. To date, Canada has shown itself able to accept different cultures and the people who come from those societies and not require that they give up their cultural identity for the sake of cultural homogeneity.

It was de Tocqueville who observed that when one can marry self-interest with the public good, one has the best of all worlds. In making its software systems and expertise in blended learning available to other universities, Royal Roads is able to assist institutions to, at once, experiment with Internet-based learning and avoid the large upfront investments typically required to do so.

Royal Roads, on the other hand, benefits from the sharing of its technological infrastructure and attendant costs and is able to learn about the strengths and limitations of its particular approach to education and adapt de Tocqueville would be pleased.

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## Sintesi

*L'Università Royal Roads del Canada ha scelto di sviluppare una propria piattaforma e-Learning allo scopo di garantire che il modello pedagogico adottato per l'educazione degli adulti sia conforme agli standard più attuali per i corsi di formazione a distanza. Attualmente, l'Università sta cercando di condividere le proprie esperienze e lo sviluppo della piattaforma con altre istituzioni ed enti di formazione superiore cercando di superare, in questo modo, la complessa fase iniziale di organizzazione ed erogazione di corsi a distanza. Lo scopo è quello di creare un vero e proprio "learning network" che comporti costi ridotti per le istituzioni che intendano farne parte e che permetta alla Royal Roads, attraverso uno sforzo comune, di mantenere, potenziare e sviluppare la piattaforma formativa.*

