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# Beyond volunteerism and good will: Examining the commitment of school-based teachers to distance education

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*Abstract* – Two decades ago Newfoundland and Labrador introduced distance education in the K-12 environment. The program focused upon providing advanced-level courses to rural school students, and worked largely due to the widely known, but rarely documented significant amounts of content-based assistance from school based personnel. In the past seven years the province has moved to a virtual school model of distance education and more rural schools find that they must rely upon this virtual school to offer academic-level courses to students with a wide range of abilities. This has created many new responsibilities for teachers that have also gone undocumented. Studies that document the duties and time required to provide support for this new models of distance education are vital, as research is suggesting that this school-based personnel is vital to student success.

Newfoundland and Labrador has an area of approximately 155,000 square miles and a population of 505,000, half of who reside within a 100-mile radius of the capital. Two thirds of the approximately 300 schools are located in rural areas and half of those schools cannot be closed because they are located so far from another school. The use of distance education was first introduced in 1988 to provide students with courses that were important for post-secondary admission and were difficult to offer in these rural schools due to low levels of student enrollment. Since 2001-02 the Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation (CDLI) has had this responsibility.

## CDLI Delivery and the Role of the Mediating Teacher

The method of delivery utilized by the CDLI includes both synchronous and asynchronous instruction. The CDLI provides anywhere from 30% to 80% of the students' scheduled time (which is 10 one-hour periods over a 14 day cycle), depending on the subject area, in synchronous instruction using a virtual classroom. This classroom allows for two-way voice over the Internet, a shared, interactive whiteboard, instant messaging, application sharing, breakout rooms, and interactive quiz and survey management. Through this classroom, teachers are able to teach in much the same way they would in a traditional classroom.

The asynchronous instruction is conducted using a course management system (CMS). The CMS provides the teacher and students with a variety of tools, including a discussion forum, a shared calendar, an internal e-mail system, and a place to house the course web pages. The course web pages are designed by a team: a teacher acting as a subject matter expert and a multimedia specialist to add images and interactive items into the content. The course web pages

are divided into the units called for in the curriculum guide, further divided into sections which are akin to themes, and finally into lessons which can be completed in one to three hours of student time. Each lesson is broken down into a list of instructional outcomes in student friendly language, lists of prior knowledge and skills students are expected to have mastered, the actual content of the lesson, activities that students need to carry out, and a self-test. Teachers also regularly utilize the course calendar to post upcoming work and assignments, deadlines, and notifications for quizzes and tests. Teachers regularly use the internal e-mail system and discussion forums to communicate with their students.

Each participating school is responsible for having a mediating teacher (known as the m-teacher) or mediating team (known as the m-team). The m-teacher or m-team is to provide initial maintenance and trouble-shooting for the CDLI computers (all major problems are handled by a district-level technician or by the CDLI), along with supervision and support (although not academic support) to the students enrolled in CDLI courses. This includes proctoring tests and exams, monitoring student attendance and behavior, and providing general support in gaining the independent learning and self-motivation skills that may be needed to succeed in the CDLI environment. At many schools, these responsibilities fall upon a group who might include a school administrator, technology teacher, secretary, custodian, and/or a student enrolled in the CDLI (who is often given the title of e-tutor).

It is often the administrator, who is usually the only individual not scheduled for a full teaching load, who has the primarily responsible for the supervision of the CDLI students. However, supervision is often limited to random visits to simply "check in" on the students. The exception is when the students are required to complete tests and examinations. The more formal supervision of proctoring assessments is typically completed by the administrator, although as many administrators also have teaching responsibilities (as much as a full load in some rural schools), any teacher who has a preparation or non-contact period when the assessment is conducted could be drafted into supervising. If there is no teacher available, sometimes the school's secretary may be called upon to fulfill this responsibility. As many rural schools do not have a full-time secretary, sometimes CDLI students have to complete their assessment in the same classroom as the administrator while he was teaching one of his own courses to a separate group of students.

Background on the Mediating Teacher

In their initial evaluation of the CDLI, Coffin and Stevens (2002) indicated, "e-learning of high school students does work. With the present level of connectivity and because on-line high school programming is still in a nascent stage the success of e-learning will be restricted to students with specific traits, habits and abilities" (p. 49). The difficulty is that, as Haughey and Muirhead (1999) described, the preferred characteristics of students involved in K-12 online learning include the highly motivated, self-directed, self-disciplined, independent learner who could read and write well, and who also had a strong interest in or ability with technology. This seems to justify Mulcahy (2002) concern that web-based distance education may not be accessible be all students.

The problem arises when more rural schools are forced to utilize online learning to offer the regular academic curriculum because of declining student populations. Barbour and Mulcahy (2006, 2007, 2008), in their examination of student performance in CDLI courses, found no significant differences in the performance of classroom-based and web-based students. However, the authors have questioned whether or not their sample of web-based students contains students from the same range of abilities as would be found in the classroom. In many rural schools, students without the preferred or desired characteristics have to enroll in online courses in order to graduate from high school from the academic program. The only alternative is to register for courses in the basic program, which essentially prevents these students from any post-secondary options beyond trade school. Recently, in their study of three rural schools along coastal Labrador, Mulcahy, Dibbon and Norberg (2008) found that two of the schools had a higher percentage of students enrolled in basic-level courses and speculated the fact that many of the academic courses were only available online through the CDLI as a possible cause.

One of the solutions to this potential problem, and one of the suggestions made by Mulcahy et al. (2008) to improve upon the delivery of online courses by the CDLI was "for increased support and supervision in the school for students taking distance courses" (p. 33). As Coffin and Stevens (2002) originally noted the CDLI "should be treated as a significant innovation that has the potential to transform the teacher-student relationship and, hence, the nature of learning that occurs. Those possibilities need to be explored and accommodations made to online programs and the delivery mode" (p. 24). Cuban (2002) describes the process of transforming an educational system as first introducing technology and then "altering fundamental ways of achieve organizational goals…. [and] introducing new goals and interventions that transform the familiar ways of doing things" (p. 229). The use of "volunteerism and good will of overworked teachers" is consistent with the former model of distance education that existed in the province (Mulcahy et al., 2008, pp. 32-33). Models of innovation have shown us that change will only come when it "offers them a better way to do something; is compatible with their values, beliefs and needs; is not too complex; can be tried out before adoption; and has observable benefits" (Surrey & Ely, 2007, p. 106). Clearly more research is needed into the role, responsibilities, and time commitment of the in-school teachers who have volunteered their time and good will to date.

Unfortunately, there has been little research on how these school-based responsibilities are actually being implemented. Mulcahy (2002) was concerned that with less student selectivity, an increasing need for distance education by rural schools, and the nature of the proposed delivery, teachers who were given mediating responsibilities for the CDLI would play a critical role in the success of this new initiative, and that there was a failure to consider the additional workload that would be placed on these rural teachers. This concern was well founded, at least during the initial year of the CDLI. Barbour and Mulcahy (2004) found teachers in one district reported "quite a burden [was] placed upon them due to the wide range of duties and time commitment associated with these new responsibilities" (Conclusion section, ¶ 2). They also found these teachers provided technical and instruction assistance, both of which were outside of the original vision of the ministerial panel. Unfortunately, no further research exploring how these additional responsibilities are managed at the school level has been conducted.

Importance of this Issue

As more rural schools begin to rely upon online learning to offer more of the academic-level curriculum, the CDLI must find ways to better support students who do not possess the qualities that are necessary for success in a virtual school environment. At present, the only school-level support that the CDLI has envisioned in its delivery model is an individual or team of individual who provide a variety of administrative, supervision and technical services without compensation or release time, and in addition to their full teaching load. Studies designed to gain a better understanding of the range of responsibilities undertaken by these individuals and the time involved in performing these duties are needed. Information from studies of this nature will provide policy makers with data that can be used to begin to transform the familiar way of doing things, the teacher-student relationship and, the nature of how learning that occurs within the CDLI.

At present, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador are in possession of a report prepared by the Teacher Allocation Commission (see Shortall & Greene-Fraize, 2007) that recommends allocating one specialist (i.e., teaching professional) to schools "at a rate of one per 175 students to support the areas of… Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation (CDLI) support" (p. 109). Later in the report in a section entitled "Other Issues", the authors that that "CDLI courses need school personnel support for administration, supervision, and *subject support*" (emphasis added, p. 180), and recommend that the Government consider this issue when considering future plans for growth and development. The recognition of the content-based support by the Teacher Allocation Commission is important. Barbour and Mulcahy (2004) characterized content-based support provided in the former model of distance education in the province as "well known, but rarely documented" and indicated that "the success of distance education in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador has been in large part due to the assistance provided by teachers in our rural schools above and beyond their contractual obligations to the school or the school district" (Conclusion section, ¶ 2). Based upon the results of studies examining the role and time commitment of those school-based personnel providing support for the CDLI, recommendations like these can be evaluated and implemented to bring this volunteerism into the contractual obligations of teachers in the province – recognized by time or additional compensation to perform the functions.

However, it would be remiss of us to paint this solely as an issue affecting distance education and online learning in Newfoundland and Labrador. Many jurisdictions utilize school-based personnel to support their distance learning programs. Barbour and Stewart (2008) described the model used in New Brunswick, where each participating school has distance facilitators at the school level to support their online students. Watt (2005) described the use of an in-class student mentor by Sunchild E-Learning Community, an online program that targets aboriginal youth, to provide "assistance to learners and ensures that those learning from remote locations are not disaffected by the faceless delivery of on-line education" (p. 2). These are only two of the many examples from across Canada that we could provide. Similar situations exist in K-12 online learning programs in the United States. For example, in their evaluation of the ACCESS Alabama online program, Roblyer, Freeman, Stabler and Schneidmiller (2007) found that "facilitators that are directly working with students day by day are key to the success of the program" (p. 11). Clearly a greater understanding is needed of this important role in the success

of distance learners at the K-12 level to improve upon the potential for student success in all K-12 distance education programs.

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