

## It's Not That Tough: Students Speak About Their Online Learning Experiences



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## Newfoundland and Labrador

- the island is 43,359 square miles, while Labrador covers 112,826
- population was 505,469 in 2006 Census
  - 551,795 in 1996 / 568,350 in 1986
- 294 schools in 2005-06
  - 343 in 2000-01 / 472 in 1995-96
- 76,763 students in 2005-06
  - 110,456 in 1995-96 / 142,332 in 1985-86
- average school size is 220 pupils
  - 45% > 200 and 25% > 100



## Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation

The CDLI was founded in December 2000 by the Department of Education

### Synchronous – Online

- 30% to 80%, depending on subject area
- taught via a virtual classroom (e.g., *Elluminate Live*)



### Asynchronous – Offline

- remainder of their time
- taught via a course management system (e.g., *WebCT/Desire2Learn*)
- usually consists of independent work from posted homework or assignments or from their textbooks



## Earlier Study

- Students found the virtual classroom & e-mail most helpful, while audio clips, chat & video clips were found the least helpful
- Technical issues (71%) and lack of time (50%) were the two biggest problems
- Time management, motivation of the student, and well organized content were the factors most important for success

Barbour, M. K., (2008). Useful and challenging characteristics of virtual schooling: Secondary student experiences. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 4(9), 357-372.

## Methodology

### Interview Study

### Research Questions

- What virtual school learning components do secondary students recognize as helpful in their learning process?
- What virtual school learning components do secondary students recognize as challenging in their learning process?

## Sample

Pseudonym	Grade	School	CDLI Courses
Deirda	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>200 students</li> <li>15 teachers</li> </ul>	3 courses successfully 1 course dropped
Lisa	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>200 students</li> <li>16 teachers</li> </ul>	3 courses successfully
Linda	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>30 students</li> <li>5 teachers</li> </ul>	6 courses successfully
Annette	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>200 students</li> <li>12 teachers</li> </ul>	1 course successfully 1 course dropped
Kim	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>150 students</li> <li>13 teachers</li> </ul>	2 courses successfully
Becky	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>150 students</li> <li>19 teachers</li> </ul>	6-7 courses successfully
Ronald	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>200 students</li> <li>15 teachers</li> </ul>	2 courses successfully

## Findings

- Students indicated that they liked their synchronous classes, often more so than their face-to-face classes

*"...the teachers are amazing ... a lot of them have a lot of experience and they know the material very well, like there is no question that you can ask them that they don't know the answer to ..."*

*"enjoyed learning things on my own and not having the teacher have to tell me everything ... you're just more independent ..."*

## Findings

- Students said they liked their scheduled synchronous classes, citing reasons such as their teachers and a perceived sense of community

*"when we go into our online web-based class we would always say hi and talk about how each other were doing a couple of minutes before the teacher started teaching, so you definitely have a greater connection with those people."*

## Findings

- Technical difficulties were not a major issue, and only two students mentioned technical problems

*"the one problem that I had with it was being from a small community at home you only have access to very slow dial-up Internet, so of course you go to your school and you're sitting maybe two hours with online periods and there's high-speed Internet in front of you and of course you're very tempted to check your e-mail and maybe go to other sites and stuff which would take you away from your actual classroom and that part is hard."*

## Findings

- Students also enjoyed the sense of control over their own learning

*"A lot more responsibility and independence, like to take care of yourself and make sure you get stuff done on your own without like the prompting of the teacher there like all the time"*

## Findings

- Within a virtual school course there was the potential for two communities of learners to develop: one among the online students and one among the local students

*"you're being taught by a complete stranger that you've never met and you know nothing about them really and you know nothing about your classmates, so it kind of makes it impersonal..."*

*"instead of calling your teacher all of the time and ask for a question or whatever, you got someone else in your room that can probably help you with it and what you don't know they might know and what they don't know you would probably know."*

## Findings

- The process of local students working together, particularly during their asynchronous class time, may have also had negative consequences

*"offline classes we... most of the time we used to take it easy, it's a shame to say but, we could have done a lot of work, but yeah, we basically took it easy during offline classes."*

## Findings

- One of the reasons why students may have spent significant periods of their asynchronous class time engaged in off-task behavior was because of the nature of the asynchronous course content

*"we didn't even use the lessons much"*

*"I didn't use the stuff in WebCT much at all"*

*"just plain" and that "they could probably make it a little more flashy, it's a little boring to look at now"*

## Findings

- In order to be successful in online learning environments, the students recommended new students should become independent and have self-discipline

*"Make sure you pick the course that you are going to enjoy studying because the independence of the course requires you to study it on your own and its different, if you are in a classroom and someone is teaching it to you, but it's just easier to grow and develop an interest in it that way, but when you are actually have to start studying it on your own and basically learn it on your own, developing an interest in it is a lot harder and it takes a lot of self-discipline, so make sure you study, you do a course online that you are going to be interested in and make sure you develop the self-discipline and independence before you starts the course."*

## Implications

- How to best situate online secondary students for success
  - ensure that learners are provided with well designed and organized content
  - provide them with time management and motivational skills to be able to work effectively in this independent environment
- The reality is rural schools are forced to have students to learn online



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