



ROAD TO HIGHER EDUCATION

ONLINE LEARNING: MODERN EDUCATION FOR A GROWING PROVINCE

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POSTMEDIA CONTENT WORKS

Facebook. Twitter. Wikipedia. These websites have changed the way we interact with each other, and where we go to find information. As the world becomes more dependent on digital media, those who do not keep up may find themselves at a disadvantage, which makes embracing this new reality from a young age important. In Saskatchewan, this increasingly means using the internet to access educational material, with online learning growing in popularity across the province.

For most people, the idea of online education brings to mind sitting in front of a computer screen reading pages of text, or perhaps watching a pre-recorded lecture. While that may have been true 15 years ago, today's online learning embraces a wide range of means and mediums to help students engage with the material in meaningful ways. Whether through the use of interactive media, games, challenging activities or even social media, the focus is on reaching learners through a variety of different means while still meeting the standards laid out by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education.

This also means that online learning is more than just the successor to correspondence schools and courses, as it goes far beyond those traditional boundaries. In the past, the focus was – by necessity – on content and facts as they were the easiest to test and grade via post or email. As a result, lessons tended to be rigid and slow paced, with the student asked to read a lesson before completing a written assignment or test. Only after these were received and graded would a new lesson be sent out to the student.

In comparison, modern online learning is instantaneous which allows students to interact with the material at their own pace,



Today, online learning encourages students to bring their own experiences into the educational process.
(PHOTO: FOTOLIA)

without long periods of waiting. In some situations, the entire course may be made available to learners right from the get-go, providing instant access with only a click of a button.

However, one of the biggest benefits of online learning is that students are given more space to do things their own way, and to bring their own experiences into the educational process. This is done by viewing distance as an opportunity that allows each learner to interact with the material in his or her own way. At its core, this is a recognition of the unique situation that each student is in, and the variety of different resources

he or she might have access to. The end result is that the students are encouraged to apply what they are learning to their own lives, and to show this through their assignments and projects.

Of course, when they hear “online learning,” most people immediately think about the freedom and flexibility it provides for students in where they do their learning. For some, travel and location make it hard for them to attend a physical school, which makes online education even more attractive. However, there are also benefits for students who have access to a physical school but struggle with learning disabili-

ties or social anxiety. Students who might otherwise fall through the cracks can reach their full potential when they have access to a quality education that doesn't put extra burdens on them.

Due to these innovative approaches, online education in Saskatchewan has been steadily growing over the past 10 years at both the kindergarten to Grade 8 (K-8) and Grade 9 to 12 levels. According to the most recent statistics, in 2015 there were over 10,000 online K-12 students in the province, a growth of 25 per cent since 2013. Additionally, student numbers are evenly split between the primary and secondary levels, indicating

that learners of all ages are choosing online education.

In response to this trend, most Saskatchewan School Divisions have begun offering at least some of their courses online, with the goal of meeting the needs of today's learners. As of 2014, 16 of the province's 28 school divisions were taking part in online education to some degree, either by offering their own courses or by partnering with another division. These partnerships are necessary because most divisions that offer online courses do so while also running physical, real-space schools. With limited resources to go around, working together is the only way they can ensure students have access to online courses.

Alternatively, a new breed of school is also emerging within Saskatchewan: completely virtual. Two examples of this are the Sun West Distance Learning Centre and Progressive DiscoverE, which only offer online education. Schools such as these have the ability to devote all their resources towards providing high-quality online materials, without worrying about real-space aspects.

While most provincial school divisions only offer online distance learning to students in Grades 10 to 12, Sun West School Division offers online distance learning options to all of their K-12 students. Through this initiative, they have built a large learning repository of K-12 courses and provide access to all of their teachers to use these courses in their face-to-face classrooms.

At the end of the day, whether solely online or split between online and classroom, the goal is still the same: to provide the highest quality education possible to Saskatchewan students. With online learning continuing to gain popularity, and more school divisions getting involved, the future looks bright for online education in the province.

Stats source: www.canelearn.net