



Canadian eLearning Network (CANeLearn)

STRATEGIC PLAN

April 2016

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Section 1

Business Overview

The Canadian eLearning Network's was founded to provide leadership, networking, collaboration, research and support to organizations and educators championing online and blended learning opportunities for K-12 students across Canada.

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Description of the Organization

The Canadian eLearning Network (CANeLearn) is a Canadian not-for-profit corporation registered under Corporations Canada. CANeLearn operates in accordance with its registered constitution and bylaws. CANeLearn's mission is to provide leadership that champions student success by supporting organizations and educators involved in online and blended learning through networking, collaboration, and research opportunities.

As a network of online and blended programs from across Canada, the purposes of CANeLearn are to:

1. Support networking between and among program providers to build relationships, enhance communications, share resources and best practices, and encourage innovation;
2. Collaborate through supporting partnerships, sharing professional learning opportunities, and finding efficiencies through technologies and shared services;
3. Stay current and participate in research studies, promote research opportunities, and disseminate research results;
4. Work with post-secondary institutions and other partners to foster professional learning opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers in online and blended learning;
5. Inform policy and professional standards regionally, provincially and nationally; and
6. Educate stakeholders and promote online and blended learning in Canada and abroad.

Research Overview

Current research in electronic, online or distance learning in the K-12 sector is limited (Barbour & Kennedy, 2014; Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Cavanaugh, Barbour & Clark, 2009, Patrick & Powell, 2009, Barbour & Kennedy, 2014). According to Cavanaugh et al. (2009) the current research in K-12 has focused on defining distance learning and its current strengths and weaknesses. However, many K-12 classrooms, both online and onsite (traditional school-based classrooms), are incorporating technology-supported open learning options and resources and are not part of this research.

Rice (2009) used a Delphi method to conduct extensive research in K-12 online learning and suggests that while there is clear evidence for priority research in online course design and online best practices, little has been done. To date this observation still holds true (LaFrance & Beck, 2014, Barbour & Kennedy, 2014; LaFrance & Beck, 2014). According to Rice's (2009) research, priority areas for study included defining best practices, evaluation of course design, delivery, access, and teacher training and accountability. Finally, the New Media Consortium's (2014) Horizon Report for K-12 supports a call for further study to evaluate models of open learning in the K-12 environment (New Media Consortium, 2014). In K-12 there is a definite need for future research in open and online learning practices.

While blended learning is used extensively in many educational contexts (Picciano, Seaman, Shea, & Swan, 2012; Staker et al., 2011) research in blended learning environments is lagging far behind its practical applications (Drysdale, Graham, Halverson, & Spring, 2013; Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia., & Jones, 2010; Drysdale, Graham, Halverson, & Spring, 2013). In addition, some research in blended learning environments is categorized as online learning research. Picciano and Seaman (2009) emphasize that researchers need to understand the difference between distinctly online learning environments and distinctly blended learning environments and should classify their research accordingly.

In short, there is a clear need for further research in K-12 online and blended learning in general. Specific to Canada, fostering research of Canadian practice is key for our growing network of practitioners as this research will inform our own practice as well as international. Given Canada's rich experience in online and distance learning, an investment in Canadian-based research would be wise. A national organization could foster, support, communicate and share such research in a manner that reaches local practitioners, not just academic journals.

Emerging Practices and 21st Century Challenges

Canada has an excellent, world-class education system that performs well in comparison with others on international measures. Despite this, there continue to be calls for reform in our education system from government, educators and policy makers alongside business, industry and corporate calls for changes in how we educate our future citizens. There is growing concern that our current education system is not preparing students for the world they will live in, merely preparing them for the world of the past. The discussion often centres on challenges embracing 21st century skills and competencies, and the adoption of educational technology is often touted as the solution to lead that reform.

A number of organizations have formed to support this movement, including the North American based *Partnership for 21st Century Learning* (P21), which developed a framework describing these 21st century skills (<http://www.p21.org/our-work/p21-framework>). In Canada, the *Canadians for 21st Century Learning & Innovation* partnership (<http://www.c21canada.org/>) is a similar group of education organizations, business, non-profit organizations and individuals advocating for the integration of 21st century competencies in teaching practices.

The Canadian Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC) has also advocated for the alignment of skills and education to the needs of the labour market (CMEC, 2015). The skills or competencies for 21st century learning typically include problem solving, critical thinking and reasoning skills, collaboration and communication skills, and focus on personal development for global citizenship in a technology-infused 21st century world. These are the very skills and competencies that align directly with what the workplace, and CMEC, are calling for. They are consistent with the Conference Board of Canada's *Employability Skills 2000+* (Conference Board of Canada, 2016) and provide a very clear outcome for educators to strive for, it is the path forward to the changes required in our education system that remains the challenge.

On the international front, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has long called for transformation in education and argues that information communications technologies (ICT) are a major factor in required economic growth, and that students need to be skilled in their use (OECD, 2015). However, OECD emphasizes that skill acquisition must be placed in the context of cognitive development, communications, team work and perseverance.

Given the rapid advances in technology, and the central role ICT now plays in all aspects of life, education policy makers need to consider how to ensure that ICT resources and students' access to those resources are provided equitably within education systems. (OECD, 2015, p.515).

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Section 2

Environmental Scan

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has also called for new models of learning that support the development of these competencies for the 21st century, challenging the conventions of formal education (Scott, 2015). UNESCO, in its newly released UNESCO working paper, argues new learning approaches that make use of technologies can address these new competencies by engaging students in collaborative, social environments supported by technology.

The research evidence is conclusive: enquiry, design and collaborative approaches to learning build a powerful combination of content understanding, basic skills and applied twenty-first century skills... [and] inspire high-quality work from learners and advance the very skills – commitment, problemsolving and adaptability – that employers demand of twentyfirst century graduates” (Scott, 2015, p.6)

Within a small, but growing, group of K-12 educators and programs in Canada the use of technologies to support a 21st century learning model has flourished. Those responsible for the distance, online and blended learning environments have been pioneering online and virtual learning environments for decades. This “transformational” approach is supported by ICT, creating a constructive and social atmosphere where “students and teachers co-design their work... [and] the learning environment, which extends beyond the classroom, is purposefully designed for students to think, research, analyze, develop and improve their ideas, and demonstrate deep understanding through the work they produce” (Milton, 2015, p. 9).

Canada is the second largest country in the world and ICT-supported distance learning strategies have evolved rapidly to bridge the country’s geographic expanse. When deployed appropriately, technologies can afford new methodologies for learning. Research conducted by UNESCO and UNICEF (2013) indicates that initiatives leveraging mobile devices for learning generally can offer achievable solutions to some of the educational challenges facing 21st century learning. UNESCO has led the call to capitalize on mobile technologies and social media to foster a participatory learning model with engagement between students, among students and teachers, and with subject matter experts (Scott, 2015).

The proliferation of technologies and digital learning spaces has led to the emergence of new instructional strategies and practices for teachers. It has also led to the design of online learning spaces and programs as extensions to the brick and mortar classroom, creating blended learning opportunities where at least part of instruction occurs in a classroom, part online at a distance to the teacher, both combined with some element of choice in learning for students (Horn & Staker, 2011).

Means, et al. (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of available research in blended learning and assert that blended learning environments demonstrate a higher level of effectiveness than fully online or fully face-to-face environments. In addition, they found that when online courses are either teacher-directed, or contain a great deal of peer-to-peer support, the effectiveness of the approach is greater than courses that use a purely independent study approach. Blended learning that combines the best elements of online and face-face instruction are likely to emerge as the predominant teaching model of the future. Students that work in a collaborative K-12 blended learning environment also have the opportunity to create or expand their own personal learning, leading to enhanced formal and informal learning (Horn & Staker, 2011). Finally, a shift to blended learning can be a catalyst for change as it encourages the use of Web technologies and enhances student collaboration (Watson, 2008). Blended learning, supported by emerging technologies, holds a great deal of promise as part of the change and innovation agenda for K-12 education and the challenges in building 21st century skills and competencies for the future world of today's students.

The first estimate of the level of ICT-supported K-12 distance education activity in Canada was presented by the Canadian Teachers Federation (2000) who estimated that there were approximately 25,000 K-12 students enrolled in online or distance education courses during the 1999-2000 school year. In 2013-14 this activity was estimated to be over 330,000 or 6.2% nationally, with some jurisdictions that actively collect such data reporting over 20% of K-12 students learning online (Barbour, 2014). There are gaps in how data is collected and reported across the country, so it is not inconceivable to estimate the level of active learning in online and virtual environments across the country to be one in five students engaged in some form of online or blended learning.

Many provinces and territories have some reference to distance education in their Education Act or Schools Act. This reference is typically used to describe distance education or to enable the Ministry of Education to create, approve or regulate K–12 distance education. In many of the jurisdictions there are no additional regulations describing online or blended, however, there is some use of contracts or policy handbooks to regulate K–12 distance education and online learning which are often included as part of a province-wide program.

Two exceptions to these general trends are Nova Scotia and British Columbia. In Nova Scotia the main regulation for distance education is in the collective agreement signed between the Government of Nova Scotia and the Nova Scotia Teachers Union. British Columbia has the highest level of regulation for K–12 distance education, featuring a system that allows students to freely choose any distance education option and a funding model where dollars follow student choice. Other provinces have organized sharing arrangements independent of government regulation. Despite the proliferation of online learning, there remains no national regulation or description for distance, blended or online learning in Canada.

Toward a Collaborative Network of Online and Blended Learning Practitioners

While there exists a sound argument for the use of technology to expand learning opportunities in support of building 21st century skills, a critical issue is ensuring the adoption of technology will lead to the acquisition of required competencies and engage students in collaborative, social learning environments. How will technology by itself foster a quality learning experience that meets the future needs of students? A commitment to quality learning requires skilled and competent teachers (UNESCO, 2015), yet despite the multitude of voices calling for transformation in our education system, little has been done to examine how to transform learning models to address 21st century skill development (UNESCO-IBE, 2013).

Action Canada (2013) conducted a survey of teachers in five provinces and found that the application of 21st century learning across provinces is inconsistent both in policy and application at the classroom level. The research also found direct links between teacher education, active use of education technologies and the implementation of 21st century learning. Stated another way, “while technological developments play an important role in learning and can create new and unprecedented opportunities, technology alone cannot ensure a successful learning experience” (UNESCO, 2015, p.8).

There is no doubt there is a quiet wave washing over our education system, yet for the past decade Canadian educators actively embracing these new learning models and technologies have worked in relative isolation, sharing only locally at best. With local, regional and recently emerging provincial initiatives launching to support this new pedagogy and expansion of traditional classroom learning environments, the need to share across the country is even more imperative. With education a provincial responsibility, no other national organization has emerged to support this online and blended learning evolution of practice.

Canadians for 21st Century Learning & Innovation (C21) calls for a move from top-down policy-driven change to one of building networks of collaboration (Milton, 2015). Creating a network of collaboration across Canada is possible if it is supported by technology. It is through such a network that a transformational view of educational practice can be developed at the grassroots level. Such networked approaches build knowledge collaboratively, sharing both vertically and horizontally within systems. The system adapts as a whole as change and innovation are introduced.

To be successful, a collaborative network requires meaningful professional development and learning such that teachers begin to shift learning paradigms, replacing past ways with new understandings of their role and how to support new learning models, technologies and pedagogies (Scott, 2015). OECD (2015) calls for teachers to learn to use technologies in their

teaching by participating in collaborative research and networking opportunities through engagement with the very same technologies they are to implement in their own practice. They argue further that “...professional development, at all points in a teacher’s career, is necessary to keep up with changing research, tools, practices and students’ needs” (p. 520) and note that the supply of professional development activities does not meet demand. This lack of professional learning opportunities could lead to innovation inertia where the education system fails to adapt and change.

New forms of professional development are required to support a collaborative network that can lead to transformation of our education system through the use of online learning technologies and environments to support the development of 21st century learning and competencies (Scott, 2015). To teach students new skills, teacher professional development must incorporate new design principles that leverage the very skills required to teach students: problem solving, critical thinking and reasoning skills, collaboration and communication skills, and focus on personal development for global citizenship in a technology-infused 21st century world.

Why a New National Organization

National associations in Canada’s education community are typically focused on representing or advocating for a specific group of educators (administrators, counsellors, teachers, etc.), curriculum (computer science, math, etc.), or educational issue (language, disabilities, dropouts, etc.)¹. In the K-12 education community there is no national organization focused specifically on supporting emerging pedagogy in online and blended learning.

When first exploring existing national organizations, founders of the CANeLearn network researched existing organizations to determine if there would be a fit for supporting instructional and leadership practices for online and blended learning programs. Our research reviewed the following organizations, however after extensive meetings and discussions, none were determined to be a suitable fit for the needs of our founding members.

Organizations Considered

Canadian Education Association (CEA <http://www.cea-ace.ca/>)

- CEA’s mission is to lead a research and action-based advocacy model focused on transforming education in Canada; and
- Its change and leadership mandate is not specific to technology nor the pedagogy surrounding its use.

¹ See http://handbook.cea-ace.ca/result.php?category_sub_code=22 for a listing of national associations.

Canadian Network for Innovation in Education (CNIE <http://cnie-rcie.ca/>)

- CNIE formed from a merger of the Canadian Association of Distance Education (CADE) and Association for Media and Technology in Education in Canada (AMTEC)² and adopted a mission of providing excellence and innovation in education in Canada;
- While membership is open to K-12, activity is driven largely by post-secondary organizations as witnessed through membership subscription and attendance at online and onsite events and meetings; and
- Membership and conference fees are prohibitive for K-12 practitioners.

Provincial/Territorial Distance Education Association (<http://canelearn.net/category/ptdea/>)

- The P/TDEA is a group of Ministry of Education contacts, and other key program leaders from the provinces and territories, that meet annually to provide updates on the status of distance education in each of their respective jurisdictions;
- The focus is on policy, governance and funding with limited attention on practice; and
- While affiliation with the P/TDEA is important for a national network of practitioners, the group is not a suitable one to represent general practitioner interests.

Canadians for 21st Century Learning & Innovation (<http://www.c21canada.org/about-us/>)

- C21 Canada is a national, not-for-profit organization that advocates for 21st century models of learning in education;
- It operates as a partnership between other organizations advocating for change in education;
- It is focused on systemic change in education; and
- While it advocates for the integration of new skills and competencies in teaching practices using technologies, it does not have a specific, practitioner focus on online and blended learning environments and tools.

Canada's Association of IT Professionals (CIPS <http://www.cips.ca/about>)

- CIP's mission is to "strengthen the Canadian IT industry by establishing standards and sharing best practices for the benefit of individual IT professionals and the sector as a whole"; and
- Their focus is primarily on technology and business, not education nor the pedagogy associated with the use of educational technologies.

² See <http://www.cjlt.ca/index.php/cjlt/article/view/15/13>

TakingITGlobal (<http://www.tigweb.org/tiged/about.html>)

- TakingITGlobal’s focus is on the use of technology for global citizenship, environmental stewardship and fostering student leadership;
- With a mission “supporting educators to utilize technology to create transformative learning experiences for their students”, the focus is primarily on global citizenship and environmental stewardship, again, not on pedagogy and technology.

International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL <http://www.inacol.org/>)

- iNACOL, while advocating for online and blended learning as a transformative approach to create student-centred and competency-based learning, does so by lobbying US policy makers and organizations which does make it suitable for Canadian educators;
- Despite the “i”, the organization remains relatively true to its original name and mandate as the North American (emphasis on ‘American’) Council for Online Learning. (see <http://www.international.gc.ca/education/partners-partenaires.aspx?lang=eng> for a partial list of such groups);
- Further, iNACOL has been associated with ideological organizations that are not reflective of general education policy in Canada; and
- While consideration was given to forming as a chapter under iNACOL in the same manner as each state in the US does, this was rejected as it was unanimously felt we would lose our national identity under the primarily US-centric organization.

Membership

CANeLearn began as a loosely coupled group of educators who were passionate about supporting learning and technology-supported online learning environments. Founding members recognized the need to include not only educators in the network, but government officials and other education organizations and corporations. Membership levels were established with that inclusionary view.

There are two classes of membership: *Voting and Non-voting*, and two types of membership, individual and organizational. Membership is annual, with individual membership open to Canadian educators interested or involved in K-12 online and blended learning, and confers the right to cast a single vote on any matter brought before the organization. Organizational membership is open to Canadian education institutions, boards of education, government and not-for-profit education agencies, along with public, independent, band and charter schools in Canada with an interest in K-12 online and blended learning. There are also student and associate membership options without voting privileges. Membership provides access to members-only content and services, and discounts on events and other opportunities.

To date CANeLearn has 175 paid members. The list of current organizational members includes:

- Argyll Centre (AB)
- BC Learning Network
- Heritage Christian Schools (BC)
- Navigate/NIDES (BC)
- TLA Online (BC)
- Alberta Distance Learning Centre (AB)
- Black Gold Regional Division No. 18 (AB)
- Golden Hills School Division (AB)
- Palliser Regional Schools (AB)
- Rocky View Schools (AB)
- Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre Inc.
- CAVLFO (ON)
- Ontario eLearning Consortium (OeLC)
- Partners in Research (ON)
- TVO (ON)
- LEARN (QC)
- Nova Scotia Virtual School

There are numerous organizations, programs, schools and individuals who are potential members of the network. However, with limited resources the recruitment of, and service offerings for, such members are currently restricted. To date most membership has been derived from the founding members and partners who came together originally to form the organization. CANeLearn has yet to penetrate the large pool of potential member educators who are migrating rapidly to online and blended learning practice.

Current Operations

Current operations are provided through volunteer work of members and one contract staff person acting as Chief Executive Officer. Operations consist of management of a website, monthly communications, online webinars, attendance at provincial and regional events and the development of online professional learning courses and events. The CEO is compensated on a fixed monthly fee of \$1000 per month which is based on available annual revenues generated largely from membership fees. At present the CEO works full time managing all operations from finance to administration, leadership to research, membership recruitment to professional learning. This operational model is not sustainable.

Potential Operations

With a limited membership CANeLearn is not able to grow effectively, nor to generate revenues to sustain itself. CANeLearn could remain as a volunteer organization, but would lose its ability to grow and consolidate research and professional learning opportunities. It would limit its ability to share experience and foster development of effective online and blended learning practice across Canada. However, as a national organization with support for its endeavours from membership, corporations and government, CANeLearn could grow into a significant and influential organization in the field of online and blended learning in Canada much like iNACOL has become in the US. This would require sufficient finances for operations, including appropriate compensation for a CEO and additional staff to support the organization.

Goals

To support its mission, CANeLearn must accomplish the following critical strategic goals within the next year:

1. Expand membership by providing a value to new members that is currently unavailable to them;
2. Solicit direct funding to support initial and ongoing core operations;
3. Foster Canadian-based research on K-12 online and blended learning;
4. Communicate regularly with members and share their innovative practices;
5. Create a teacher training program specific to blended and online learning and link the program to existing post-secondary teacher training and credit programs;
6. Continue to support and initiate cross-Canada networking events to share relevant research, information, and resources of value to current and potential members; and
7. Launch a national conference dedicated to online and blended learning practices in Canada.

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Section 4

Operation Plan

Action Plan

ACTION	BY WHEN
1. Build a communications strategy including weekly blog posts, monthly newsletter and online/promoted events.	December 2015
2. Create an online membership sign up, registration and payment system.	December 2015
3. Create and communicate a clear value for membership statement and series of offerings.	April 2016
4. Create a strategic direction and plan for the organization.	April 2016
5. Create user groups and communities for sharing and discussion between and among members.	September 2016
6. Connect with existing provincial, national and international organizations to support and coordinate professional learning opportunities that support online and blended learning.	October 2016
7. Create a micro-credentialed teacher training program specific to facilitating learning through digital and virtual learning environments.	November 2016
8. Seek grant funding and partnership support to hire staff for core operations.	December 2016
9. Consolidate existing research on K-12 online and blended learning and foster new research for sharing through the network and published on the CANeLearn website.	December 2016
10. Create partnerships with existing strategic provincial and national organizations to support current or planned research, events and initiatives.	December 2016
11. Launch a national conference and tie membership renewal and benefits to the event.	April 2017

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Section 5

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