

## **CONTACTSOUTH**

### **GOING WHERE NO "CAAT" HAS GONE BEFORE**

**Dan Holland**

For the past 30 years the Ontario Community Colleges have been successful in providing postsecondary education to a wide variety of learners. In fact many would say that over the last 30 years the colleges have been the leaders in innovative methods of educating learners. However, the time has come when innovation, even lots of it, is no longer enough. The reality is that innovation does not equal transformation, and multiple innovations do not add up to fundamental change. Evidence of this fact is widely available and equally widely ignored. It is convenient to ignore because otherwise we might have to disrupt the status quo. As long as the innovation does not threaten the "core functions" it is accepted. Once we begin to stretch the margins of the institution we begin to create pressure for a shift in the way we do business.

In the fall of 1994, the Continuing Education department at Loyalist College began to offer courses using electronic mail as the mode of delivery. Their success was discussed at the Distance Education Symposium hosted by the Ministry of

As we approach the millennium, the colleges are faced with a very real challenge of how to compete in what is quickly becoming a "no holds barred" global educational arena. If Ontario colleges don't change the way they carry out their fundamental mission they face the real possibility of being out of business within the next ten years.

A few years ago a small number of colleges recognized the shift that was taking place in education throughout the world and decided to make the transformation from the traditional model of delivery to an on-line model through a consortium known as Contact South.

#### **Background**

Education and Training. In the spring of 1995, Loyalist College began receiving calls from other Ontario colleges, regarding how this type of delivery worked. A verbal agreement was formed, between Loyalist College and Algonquin College, which would allow Algonquin College to offer

courses developed and based at Loyalist College, to students in the Ottawa area and to share the associated costs. Enrolments grew, and this sparked an interest with other colleges in the system. In the fall of 1995, a group of interested colleges formed a consortium, "Contact South, to develop and deliver on-line post secondary education throughout the Province of Ontario. By January 1999, nineteen of the 25 CAAT's had become members of the Contact South consortium.

### **The Structure and Administration:**

Contact South functions as a collaborating body that is responsible for the administration and delivery of on-line courses. The courses offered follow the administrative procedures and operational guidelines set out in the partnership agreement that each college has signed.

A Board of Directors was established (one member from each college), to determine which college will host the new courses brought to the table. If more than one college is interested in the development of a whole program, a vote by the members will decide which college would be better equipped to develop and deliver. In many cases, two or more colleges will share in the development and delivery.

### **Looking at the Process**

The lead (or host) college for a course, is responsible for course development, hiring the instructor, providing course information to all partners (including textbook information), and invoicing for the course. Each of the other colleges orders and sells the appropriate textbooks in the bookstore, provides an invigilator for the final exam, and in most cases, provides a free orientation session for first time users.

Students register at the college of their choice, and receive their grade report from that college. Each member college contributes to the overall enrolment of the courses. Each college keeps all the revenues collected, and shares, on a per student basis, the instructor costs, as well as a standard administrative fee to the centralized service provider.

### **First Class Client**

The on-line (or computer conferencing) courses that are delivered by the Contact South Consortium use software called First Class Client developed by SoftArc Communications Inc. This software is free shareware, which means the students registering for the courses can download the software (and the instructions on how to use it), free of charge from the college's home page.

First Class Client, an advanced telecommunications and information services system, provides a powerful, easy-to-use means of receiving and distributing information. Once the clients have downloaded the software, they are ready to receive the class notes from the instructor.

The courses are set up on First Class, in "Conferences". There is a separate conference for each course. Within the main conference are conference folders, which have been designed by the instructor to fit his/her course requirements. Each of these folders contains messages from the instructor with the course outline, class notes, tests, etc. A student simply clicks on the conference to open it, then double clicks on the message to read the course information. Students can work on-line, answering messages &/or doing assignments, or download course information to work on and resend later.

## **Service Provider**

With enrolments in the consortium increasing at a rate of approximately 30% per semester, it was evident that a larger service provider would be needed if the consortium were going to continue to grow at this remarkable rate.

In January 1999 the Contact South Board of Directors undertook a process to develop and post a RFP for a service provider. In March 1999 an agreement was reached with Embanct Inc. to act as the service provider for on-line courses offered through the Contact South Consortium. Embanet was chosen for several reasons. The primary reasons were their familiarity with FirstClass Client software, and the work they are doing with similar groups. eg., UCLA on-line, Washington On-Line and the University of Colorado. Emabanet expects to handle some 60,000 on-line learners this year, and that is before Contact South joins.

## **Markets**

**Who are our students?** Recent survey information indicates on-line students mirror traditional part-time learners in many ways. They are between 25 and 55 years of age (80%), they are predominately female (63%), sixty-one percent have some prior post-secondary experience and eighty-one percent are employed. Contact South estimates it will deliver courses to more than 5000 learners in 1999. This will be an increase of more than 2000 over the previous year.

The good news is, no member of the consortium is reporting a drop in traditional part-time enrolment as a result of increased on-line activity. This is a new market, one that the colleges, because of their long-standing record of excellence, have an opportunity to capture. However, the

opportunity is not going to remain forever. In fact it is disappearing every day.

**What do these students want?** In a recent magazine article entitled "Collegiate Life: An Obituary," Levine and Cureton summarize findings from several studies of American undergraduate students. They note that these older, part-time working students want something different from the traditional relationship with their colleges. To put it simply, students want to be treated like customers. They want a relationship like they have with their bank, their supermarket or their local garage. They want product quality and service, and they want it at a place and time that is convenient to them - 24hours a day, seven days a week. If the college's don't supply it, there are lots of others who will.

**Who is the competition?** One need not look very far for competition. The Contact South Consortium has 19 member colleges working together, and sharing curriculum and instructor costs in a way that is unheard of in the Ontario college system. One of our biggest sources of competition comes right from within our own walls. There is a vast amount of alternative delivery experimentation taking place behind closed doors at most colleges. Many are using different platforms on which to develop their courses and when they are completed they are left with the challenge of how to "get the word out". As well, who is to say that the person in the next office isn't also developing the very same course on the very same platform.

We waste an incredible amount of time, money, and effort in the college system trying to outdo each other. In actual fact, we should be pooling our resources in order to stave off the real competition. This pooling

of resources and recognition of each other's strengths is the foundation of the Contact

If you want to know what the real competition is then check this out. The University of Phoenix is the fastest-growing higher education institution in the world. While enrollment has been flat at elite institutions, the private for-profit organization has expanded over the past decade from 3,000 students to nearly 70,000 students on almost 100 campuses in 32 states.

Within little more than five years, postsecondary education in the United States has been transformed from a sleepy sector of the economy to a \$3.5 billion-a-year business - making education one of the hottest emerging growth sectors of the United States economy. The University of Phoenix is joined by other for-profit higher education companies including DeVry Inc., ITT Educational Service, Computer Learning Centers, Inc., and a growing number of others who will be coming soon to a store front across from our campuses. These organizations don't even begin to touch the cable industry giants "corporate universities", and an array of new partnerships eg., Sylvan Learning Systems, partnering with MCI and a collection of top universities including Berkeley, to develop and distribute on-line learning.

### **Safety in Numbers**

Membership in the Contact South consortium has several benefits. We are able to provide students with the courses they need, we cancel fewer courses, and we make some money. In addition we share instructor costs between all Contact South members who have students registered in a particular course. Finally, and perhaps the most important benefit, is having access to each other's strengths in terms of course and

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program development. Through Contact South, we are able to share curriculum for delivery that we otherwise would not have had access to, or that we would have had to develop and deliver ourselves. This can be difficult given the scarcity of resources in colleges today.

### **Closing Thoughts:**

In a time of reduced government funding and college reorganization, Contact South is an excellent model of the kind of collaboration needed today, and in the future, for the Ontario College System. Increased student access, shared teacher costs, elimination of duplication of course development and delivery, and having access to each others' strengths in terms of program development are all ways in which the consortium addresses the Ministry's need for accessible and flexible post-secondary education for the residents of Ontario.

In order for a project like Contact South to expand and strengthen, it must be able to operate free of many of the constraints found in the traditional model of postsecondary program delivery. There is a need for flexibility in making decisions and acting quickly. For these reasons, Contact South has grown out of the Continuing Education areas of the participating colleges. The representatives from each college have collaborated for years through their affiliation with the Provincial Heads of Continuing Education. It is because of this long-standing affiliation and trust for each other that we have been able to take the system to a place no CAAT has gone before. The Virtual College of Ontario is here; it's time to open the doors.

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