

Contact North | Contact Nord's Top 10 Wish List for Online Learning in 2016 (<http://teachonline.ca/tools-trends/exploring-future-education/top-10-wish-list-for-online-learning-in-2016>)

Each year, many of us make New Year's resolutions and try and keep them. Others, usually newspapers and media outlets, speculate on the key things to watch out for during the coming year. Rather than resolutions or predictions, we list ten developments we wish for online learning in 2016.

We hope these come true, but it will take clear resolution, firm commitment and lots of hard work by all to make them happen. This is why we refer to this as a "wish list".

Not from the realm of pure speculation, all items in our list are developments from current practices in technology, learning, and public policy.

We wish in 2016:

1. **We stop debating about whether or not online learning is as effective as classroom teaching.**

The evidence is clear. There are no significant differences in learning outcomes from face-to-face versus online learning (see here (<http://www.nosignificantdifference.org/>) for the evidence base).

This is the conclusion of multiple studies conducted across a range of disciplines and conditions over many years. More significantly, learners no longer see "the sage on the stage" as the gold standard for learning. Rather, they expect authentic, engaged learning to involve a range of different learning activities appropriate to their own learning needs, the subject matter at hand and the available resources to support that learning.

In fact, 2016 should be the year in which all involved with higher education accept that blended and online learning are simply part of the mix of options offered to learners for each program and course of study.

2. **Canada starts collecting quality data about online, blended and flexible learning so that we can make evidence based policy decisions.**

For some time, our counterparts in the United States have collected systematic data about developments in online, blended and flexible learning in public and private post-secondary institutions in their country.

The Online Learning Consortium (formerly the Sloan Consortium) partners with others to collect these data, showing trends and patterns that provide an evidential basis on which policy and strategy can be developed at the national, state and institutional level (see here

(http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/survey_report/2013-survey-online-learning-report/)). Canada has no such data.

It is time for a systematic, Canada-wide approach to the collection of these data and this is a year in which this could occur: a task for Statistics Canada and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC).

3. The federal government and service providers accelerate broadband Internet access for all Canadians.

Not all Canadians have access to broadband Internet services. The current intention is to use public funds and private systems to ensure 98% of Canadians have some broadband Internet access by 2019. This still leaves a significant number – mainly First Nations – without access.

But there is another issue. The broadband speeds we are seeking to provide are significantly slower than those set as standard by the United States telecommunications regulator. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) calls for download speeds of 5 mbps and upload speeds of 1 mbps, while the US now requires 25 mbps (the speed you need to watch a movie on Netflix) and upload speeds of 3 mbps or better. If we are to accelerate access to online learning, support innovation and enterprise, and encourage social development through communities of sharing and practice, all Canadians need access to online services and knowledge. New developments in technology – use of satellites to deliver broadband, for example – can aid these developments.

Several countries – Spain, France, Finland, Costa Rica, and Estonia – have determined broadband access is a fundamental right of its citizens. Perhaps it is time for Canada to make this commitment and accelerate and reinvigorate the Connect Canada program.

In the meantime, communities not connected to the Internet could still access substantial online learning resources by using the Aptus (<http://oasis.col.org/bitstream/handle/11599/695/Aptus-Brochure.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>) device, which makes learning resources available on a local network. Developed by the University of British Columbia in partnership with the Commonwealth of Learning, the device is low cost, smart and easy to adapt to local conditions.

4. Indigenous Online learning comes of age.

There were important developments in blended and online learning for First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples during the last decade. Innovative programs incorporated content and design reflecting appropriate culture and history; the experience of elders, collaborative and authentic learning, structured communication with peers, elders and instructors, and individualized programs with mentors and coaches and so on.

Some creative work has happened over the last decade and several events recently highlighted effective practice and are focusing resources on what needs to happen now, especially in British Columbia. Others will follow suit. What is needed is a strong focus on leveraging technology for enhanced learning for Indigenous peoples. We can learn from experiences in Australia and New Zealand.

A focus on the development of open education resources targeted at indigenous learning and languages could accelerate these developments in 2016. There are already dedicated MOOCs for indigenous learners (see here (<https://www.lib.uwo.ca/blogs/education/2014/11/ubc-faculty-of-educations-mass.html>) and here (<https://www.open2study.com/courses/indigenous-studies>)) and a growing body of relevant resources at iTunes University.

5. Innovative assessment tools appear in significant numbers and grow in acceptance.

In December 2014, Peter Hill and Michael Barber published an important paper heralding a renaissance in assessment (see here (http://gr8dbl.doverbay.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Preparing_for_a_Renaissance_in_assessment.pdf)).

Their observations are clear and direct. During the last twenty years, as online learning began in earnest, the focus has been on programs, courses and learning processes. It has not been on assessment. But that is changing with the development of new methods of assessment involving simulations and games; adaptive learning engines which enable assessment as learning is taking place; new methods for developing assessment tools using machine intelligence; and new developments in ensuring the security and integrity of online assessments. We are approaching an era in which new thinking about how we assess knowledge, competencies and skills will start to bear fruit.

In addition, employers are adopting badges, verified learning certificates and other forms of micro-credentials showing that employees and graduates have the real-world knowledge, understanding and skills needed for the workplace.

This work is aided by significant development of machine intelligence and adaptive technologies. Software like Knewton, Maple, ALEKS, Cengage, Grockit and KnowRe are all designed to accelerate adaptive assessment and learning.

6. Learner mobility becomes a focal point for public policy.

To facilitate mobility, efficient credentialing and more effective learning recognition, widespread use of tools such as Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) and transfer credit are essential.

Canada lags other jurisdictions in the fast-track recognition of block and individual course credit, as well as work-based learning credit. Indeed, the EU strategy for learning (http://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/1017981/1667851/YKB17_Text.pdf/84ae531b-fbc8-440e-95bf-082d585420bf) 2020 features a commitment to learner mobility as the cornerstone of its work.

To build a competitive, knowledge driven economy, residency as a component of quality may be valuable, but is not essential for quality learning – ending residency requirements makes more sense than retaining them. PLAR can move away from equivalency by means of course-to-course comparison and focus more on learning outcomes, competencies and skills. Credit coordination through outcome-based assessments is a better way of enabling mobility.

The wish for 2016 is for collective approaches to learner mobility, which breakdown the barriers to the transfer of learning and credit within and between institutions, countries and regions.

As more nations sign up to transnational qualification frameworks and Canada's trade deals explicitly seek to fast track credential recognition for key professions and trades, Canada needs to develop alliances and practices that accelerate and simplify learner mobility and credit recognition.

7. Access and increased accommodation expand.

Access to quality and equitable education is one of the Sustainable Development Goals to 2030 recently adopted by the United Nations.

Online learning can reach groups previously disadvantaged in terms of educational access and this extension needs to happen in Canada, as well as around the world. Individuals, communities, and societies benefit from increased educational opportunities, matched with social and economic development. Online learning can respect and adapt to the unique conditions faced by students – whether they live in small and remote communities, are refugees, incarcerated, marginalized, disabled, or educationally unprepared.

Online learning has a substantial contribution to make to fulfilling the broader social purposes of education and training

8. New funding models for higher education begin to appear in 2016.

Ontario released a proposal for a new approach to funding its universities (see here (http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/pepg/audiences/universities/uff/UniversityFundingFormulaConsultationReport_2015.pdf)), which will also have implications for the funding of colleges and apprenticeships.

The intention, if the government adopts the recommendations of this major consultation, is to shift from enrolment-based funding to the funding of outcomes, driven by strategic mandate agreements and strongly focused on engaged learning. What is intended is to reduce the focus on enrolment growth and focus more on quality, continuous performance improvement and innovation. Alberta is also looking to change its funding model for both colleges and universities (see here (<http://globalnews.ca/news/2208840/alberta-ndp-government-begins-tuition-freeze-for-post-secondary-students/>)).

As the debate about funding continues in the early part of 2016, a related issue is the reduction of the regulatory constraints created by government and quality assurance regimes so as to enable more rapid innovation and more effective performance improvement.

As funding changes – and it will take time – innovation in program design, development, deployment and delivery will occur. This is where we see real change in the use of technology-enabled learning, open educational resources and new models of assessment and learning outcome recognition. It will take time, but the wish is that the real journey begins in 2016.

9. Significant growth in collaborative and global programs.

Collaborative and joint college and university programs using inter-institutional alliances and partnerships between institutions and professions or institutions and employers grew substantially in the last decade. The wish for 2016 is to see these expand significantly, with more collaborations and joint programs enabling Canadian learners to study abroad.

Many more college and university joint programs may develop, reflecting the fact that many first degree holders are now attending colleges to improve their work-ready skills (see here (<http://http-server.carleton.ca/~mmcguire/J-Ed/j-prog/h-programs.shtml>) for examples of such programs in journalism). Co-operative programs may also grow, with online learning being used to support student learning in the workplace.

One approach to learning that could accelerate the growth and development of collaborative and joint programs is the use of online learning and open educational resources supported by mentors and coaches from partner institutions. Another is the use of flexible learning models, which permit learners to leverage the strengths of partner institutions, using their own judgements as to which components of a program should be taken from each institution.

10. A relaunch of major and sustained initiatives in e-Apprenticeship

Several attempts were made to re-think the way in which apprentices learn in Canada, such as shorter courses, blended learning with more intense work placement, and online learning for the key skills needed for workplace success. But the model for apprenticeships remains largely unchanged since the 1970s.

In the United Kingdom, the Virtual College supplies colleges and other training providers with e-learning components to support accelerated apprenticeships (see catalogue here (http://vceducation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Edu-directory_online-version.pdf)). Manitoba allocated \$5 million in 2011 to support e-apprenticeship development. On the other hand, some initiatives may be abandoned with British Columbia deciding not to spend \$13 million allocated for this same work. Even Australia, which pioneered e-apprenticeships in 2000 and massively increased completion rates by doing so, cancelled its investment and reverted to traditional texts and classroom teaching (see here (<http://www.tonybates.ca/2015/10/12/australia-moves-backwards-from-online-apprenticeship-training/>) for an understanding of these developments).

2016 could be the year in which a successful focus on learning outcomes and effective support for learning, using learning technologies where appropriate to do so for e-apprenticeships, showcases what is possible.

Let's collectively accelerate the journey for change and transformation in 2016!

There are other things we can hope for in 2016. One would be for our federal and provincial governments to expand significant tax credits for learning to create incentives for life long learning.

But these top 10 wishes for 2016 would stimulate real change and development for learners and enable learning providers to accelerate their journey towards transformation.

Tools and Trends

Exploring the Future of Education (<http://teachonline.ca/tools-trends/exploring-future-education>)

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