

EDUCATION

Athabasca University (AU) is re-creating itself into a twenty-first-century university through its adoption and use of technology to expand the opportunities for its stakeholders. The growing needs of students, academics, and staff to learn and work in an integrated online environment is reflected in the institution's movement to a virtual campus with easy access to learning assets. Students are allowed to learn on their time at their pace in their place. In adapting to the knowledge society, the university decided that institutional change was essential and necessary and must be cost-effective, while respecting the needs of students by maintaining pedagogically sound courses.

A series of projects are described with particular focus on two recent major initiatives that challenged our capacity to deal with large complex programs. An analysis of the effect of the start-up and operation of these two major programs with particular emphasis on project management, organizational change, acceptance by the academy, and absorbing the additional work is given. This is offered, in the form of lessons learned, our experience for successful systematic integration of ICTs within an open university. These lessons, we believe are relevant for technology integration at any large educational organization.

The Athabasca University environment includes a virtual media lab (the e-Lab) which is an integrated website platform for curriculum enhancement and development, social networking, and pedagogical and disciplinary research. The e-Lab consists of a Virtual Tool Cupboard, a Demonstration space featuring e-Portfolio (Mahara), a Workshop space that uses Adobe Connect for webconferencing, a Social Networking environment called the Landing (built in Elgg), and a space for Pedagogical Research whose current theme is mobile learning. Although complementary, these initiatives are reasonably autonomous.

The primary benefit of the e-Lab to the university community is in supporting experimental initiatives for online learning, networking, creativity, and communications. These can be tied directly to courses and applied coherently across entire programs in an online learning community. The knowledge management strategy is to use the e-Lab initiatives to assist in transitioning the University from traditional distance education pedagogies such as correspondence learning using print media, through creative, collaborative adoption of online technologies.

The innovators have learned a great deal about how to gain internal buy-in to new ideas; universities are typically federations of distinctive academic entities that guard their turf jealously and are only too eager to dispute any changes or perceived threat to their territory. Leading a project designed to encourage people to cooperate across traditional lines has revealed the best and the worst of the academy. The innovators have had to learn how to be inclusive, because being welcoming, and creative is not enough. We must also demonstrate to individuals as well as groups how they will gain. And, since universities are competitive places, we must also suggest to colleagues how not to fall behind “the others.” We must make sure that opinion leaders and decision-makers are on side. The importance of consistent, on-going communication of progress and results must be stressed. This is crucial, especially in a dispersed workplace. As for external partners, innovators should be more patient and take more time up front in coming to agreements; each organization has its own culture, its own needs and neuroses. It is important to focus on the right questions to ask and what issues to probe before bringing in other university departments to any discussion.

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