

Developing Rural School Collaboration: From New Zealand and Iceland to Newfoundland and Labrador

Ken Stevens

I came to Newfoundland from New Zealand to work on e-learning and almost immediately engaged with rural schools in selected areas of the province. Before my arrival in this country I was employed in a New Zealand university where I worked on issues in rural and distance education and it was very interesting to connect with people with similar interests on the other side of the world.

As an academic in a New Zealand university I had collaborated closely with Icelandic colleagues who were, at the time, developing the Icelandic Educational Network and with a team at the University of Helsinki who were establishing a network from the Finnish capital to small schools in Lapland. Iceland, like Newfoundland, is an island with two main cities and almost exclusively coastal settlement. Like Newfoundland, Icelanders have traditionally been engaged in the fishing industry. There are many similarities between Iceland and Newfoundland but each society has its own distinct history and culture. The link between these two societies was, in my case, through New Zealand.

When I visited Iceland during my first year in Newfoundland, I had to make a statutory declaration with my travel claim that the documents were in the Icelandic language and that there was, in fact, a language called Icelandic. It appeared that few, if any, people from Memorial University had visited Iceland before me. Several colleagues in the faculty questioned the purpose of a visit to this isolated northern country and wondered what possible relevance it could have to education in this province. Rural Icelanders, I believed, were at the forefront of solving the international education problem of how to provide instruction in small and isolated communities that is comparable in quality and scope to what is available in large, urban schools. The Icelandic Educational Network preceded the networking of schools in other places and provided me with a guide to the research and development work in which I was engaged in New Zealand before coming to Canada.

My initial appointment in the Faculty of Education was as an Industry Canada Research Professor in tele-learning (or e-learning as it is now known), in which my focus was to become the provision of enhanced education in the province's rural communities along the same lines I had been developing in my own country on the other side of the world. I had no knowledge of rural communities in this province before I arrived to take up my appointment but found, upon arrival, that the dean had chosen a rural school as a "test site." From this base a network of eight neighbouring schools were networked through the Internet the following year and included the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Within the network four Advanced Placement (AP) science subjects were initially taught online. The significance of this was two-fold: AP subjects were provided to small schools in isolated communities for the first time in the province and, for what also appeared to be the first time, the senior science subjects were taught online. These developments in rural Newfoundland and Labrador put the province in the

front line of developments in the provision of education in small communities located far from major centres of population. The problem of providing access to extended learning opportunities for rural students is an international one and Iceland, New Zealand and Newfoundland & Labrador each crafted new, internet-based approaches to it that provided models for other countries.

The transition from traditional rural education whereby students were educated by teachers appointed to their schools, to one that continues this approach alongside open, collaborative teaching and learning, mediated by the Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation (CDLI), was based on technological change (the advent of the Internet), new pedagogy (e-learning) and, most importantly, conceptual change, whereby students were often taught by teachers who were located in other schools. Teachers and students in rural Newfoundland and Labrador engaged with one another not just in schools but in the spaces between schools. The changes that took place in rural education in the province were not without problems. Initially there was alarm in the teaching profession that the Internet could eliminate the jobs of some teachers. Parents frequently expressed concern about the amount of time their sons and daughters were spending in front of computer screens and the school board office had multiple technological problems to sort out to keep classes running. The advent of e-learning brought new challenges for some Newfoundland and Labrador school principals. Principals were not always comfortable with the idea of an online teacher teaching their students from a distant site. In the early days of e-learning, another site meant from another school in the district. Principals wondered who was responsible for the online teacher's teaching and on-site teachers in schools receiving online instruction were sometimes upset that a teacher from elsewhere was teaching what they perceived to be their students. Somehow these challenges were met and as the initial rural school network began to expand to include more schools in Newfoundland and Labrador, the provincial government called for a ministerial inquiry into the concept of "distance learning in schools." The report of this inquiry (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2000) led to the creation of the Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation (CDLI), an organization that rapidly expanded the linking of classes throughout the province through online teaching and learning.

Today, CDLI is an integral and very important feature of education in Newfoundland and Labrador. The technological, pedagogical and conceptual changes that have taken place in Newfoundland and Labrador education over the last decade provide a model of how to provide students with learning opportunities regardless of where their homes are located or the size of their local communities and schools. In 2013 school size in Newfoundland and Labrador and the physical location of teachers and learners are no longer reasons to consider rural students to be disadvantaged. New Zealand, Iceland and Newfoundland and Labrador have successfully pioneered new approaches to the provision of educational opportunities in small schools regardless of where they are located.

Reference

Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. (2000). *Supporting learning: Report on the Ministerial Panel on educational delivery in the classroom*, St John's, NL, Department of Education.