



NEWFOUNDLAND: Singapore of the Atlantic?

by Heidi Wicks

THE FATE OF RURAL NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR has been a sore spot in this province for many years. However, Dr. Ken Stevens, professor and researcher in the Faculty of Education, may have a remedy.

Dr. Stevens is a New Zealander and has given advice on rural education and e-learning to the New Zealand Minister of Education, the Department of Education of Newfoundland and Labrador, and Industry Canada in Ottawa, among other organizations.

“E-teaching has paralleled classroom teaching, and online classes have equalled physical classes in this province,” he said. “There are more students being taught by teachers in other places, and students in high schools in small communities now have pathways to places like Memorial University and College of the North Atlantic and an expanding range of subjects taught to them. That has been a success story.”

Dr. Stevens, who came to Memorial as Chair of Tele-learning, has helped the system become more sophisticated, and has also suggested that the e-learning that is happening in schools here could reach beyond that.

“What we’ve got in this island economy is a sophisticated communications network, and what we’ve achieved is collaborative electronic structures to enhance the capacity of the schools and to considerably extend the opportunities for young people. There is the question of how this high-tech infrastructure (in the schools) could be used more effectively. It’s there, and only used for the school day right now, when the hope is that it will reach out into the rest of the community.”

According to Dr. Stevens, this province could be a world leader in e-learning in terms of training other countries to set up learning opportunities beyond urban centres. He adds that countries like Africa, Ghana and many others could benefit from observing Newfoundland’s system.

“Most African communities have vast rural communities as does Newfoundland. From Somalia to Capetown, there are cables right now being laid under the sea. And they are being hooked up with places like Kenya, Uganda, South Africa—all these places where they are mostly rural populations. So it makes no sense for them to go to Toronto or Vancouver, which are cities that don’t really deal with rural population issues. They need to come here to Newfoundland. And e-teachers here then could have a whole other life advising people who really want their skills and information. Then adapt what Newfoundland has done to their own conditions.”

Dr. Stevens also believes that e-learning and e-living could help strengthen the province’s place on the world map. “Since the time I got here (to Newfoundland and Labrador) there have been more and more technological advances. It reminds me of Singapore, which is a high tech society, but has very few resources. They have nonetheless become one of the richest societies in the world by becoming a very serious trading place. Newfoundland is a little like this—but you’ve got far more resources, hard working and well educated people and a lot of technological infrastructure.

“We’ve got something we can train and trade here,” he continued, “that practically every country in the world would be interested in.”

This province also boosts the almighty island mentality, which Dr. Stevens suggests, is partially why when Newfoundlanders and Labradorians decide to do something, it gets done quickly.

“I think it’s because a lot of the people with influence know each other,” he chuckled. “So in all seriousness, it is a good place to get things going. Where I see the real opportunities here is being small and efficient and having record uptake, I don’t know any place better.”

Dr. Stevens’ most recent research includes the Study of the Relationship Between Aspirations and the Realization of Post-Secondary Choices by Rural Newfoundland Youth, as well as \$1,000,000 over five years from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council to study the Effectiveness of New Learning Technologies in Providing Education to Rural and Isolated Communities. ■



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