



Centre for Learning and Teaching

# focus

on university teaching and learning



Volume 19 Number 1 • Spring 2011

## From the Director

Opportunities to integrate information and communication technologies in the learning experiences we create for our students, and for our broader communities, and for ourselves are exploding. In this issue of *Focus*, Dalhousie colleagues share their insights on how these technologies can enrich learning - and teaching - across the disciplines.



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*Inspiring Minds*

## A Brief Overview of Online Learning Partnerships at Dalhousie's ILO (Integrated Learning Online)



by Aaron Panych,  
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The Integrated Learning Online (ILO) unit at Dalhousie has been in the business of facilitating online learning partnerships since its inception in 1996. The nature of these partnerships has evolved over the years with the adoption of different information and communication technologies (ICTs). This article offers a brief overview of how these ICTs have shaped and will continue to shape online learning partnerships at the university.

In 1996, Dalhousie began using a virtual learning environment (now known at Dalhousie as Blackboard OWL) to help faculty members run online course spaces and blend face-to-face courses

with online delivery. As of 2011, approximately 85% of Dalhousie undergraduate courses are set up with corresponding online spaces for students to access “anytime, anywhere” course content and interact with content, instructors, and other students.

Despite the potential benefits of this system, there is still debate about whether basic OWL operation results in student-centred learning partnerships. Some online learning specialists argue that OWL in its current form follows a traditional lecture-based, instructor-centric model and is used primarily for administrative tasks (Downes, 2005; Wiley & Mott, 2000). Much of the current Blackboard OWL use at Dalhousie bears this out, as many faculty use the technology to post lecture notes and other course-related files; to administer assignments, exams, and grades; and to post announcements and send mail messages. In this way, the OWL is not exactly a learning partnership much different from a traditional lecture-based, face-to-face class.

However, other OWL courses commonly take advantage of

the asynchronous interactive component that online discussion boards offer and extend their class discussions online. In this capacity, the OWL offers the potential for basic interactive instructor-student and student-student learning partnerships.

OWL also enables similar partnerships outside of formal classes. There are currently over 200 online community course spaces in the system representing a vast array of subject matter from research projects

to student groups to book clubs to inter-professional educational initiatives. For example, students in the health professions learn and interact with one another in the inter-professional health education OWL space through both the Health Mentors Program and new online inter-professional modules. [See Basiletti article on page 4.]

In 2002, the online learning landscape at Dalhousie changed. The ILO licensed a synchronous webinar platform (or virtual classroom environment) called Wimba Classroom. The technology allows for online, real-time meetings and presentations with small and large groups using a content board, audio, and video. The technology changed the available model for online delivery. Not only are live online meetings now possible, instructors can easily open up participation to guests outside Dalhousie. It is now common for programs and instructors to bring in remote students and lecturers using the technology.

It can also be used to participate

in remote events. As an example, Daniel Ruzzante of the Biology department recently used Wimba Classroom to deliver a set of live presentations to a graduate class in

Brazil – all while he was sitting in the basement of the Killam library. The College of Continuing Education (CCE) uses instructors from across the country to deliver course lectures online through the virtual classroom. There are currently hundreds of live, virtual classroom

initiatives at the university, with many of them employing learning partnerships with individuals and institutions external to Dalhousie.

In the last few years, new ICTs and the advent of social media have again changed the online

*“There are currently hundreds of live, virtual classroom initiatives at the university, with many of them employing learning partnerships with individuals and institutions external to Dalhousie.”*

school of thought argues that this hyper-connected environment is significant enough to call for a new learning theory for the digital age - connectivism - and encourages new online instructional strategies that emphasize a student-centric, personal learning model (Siemens, 2005). With the web and social media, students now have virtually unlimited resources at their fingertips to aggregate and search for knowledge, create their own content using all types of media, and connect with other individuals for sense-making. [See Gruzd article on page 6, and Spasova article on page 10.]

Dalhousie’s ILO now supports a social learning platform (Campus Pack) where instructors can integrate wikis, blogs, podcasts, and online journals into their classes. [See Bennett article on page 10.] Importantly, the platform also gives students (and instructors) the tools for their own online content creation, sense-making, and partnership-building, as well



*Integrated Learning Online Front Desk, Killam Library, B-269*

educational landscape. Online learning partnerships take on a new meaning based on the types of connections made online and how these connections are shaped into learning experiences. An emerging

as the capacity to build an online portfolio for use across their academic studies and into their professional lives. Anyone with a Dalhousie NetID is now able to create their own personal learning

space using the tools. This platform opens up more opportunities for all users to enhance online learning partnerships as it lets them determine the level of access to their content. They can invite anyone they choose to join their personal learning space. Access can be restricted to a few trusted people or opened up to the larger web for public viewing and interaction. This new personal and networked learning environment is still finding its legs at Dalhousie but offers new and exciting challenges for implementation. Of course, new ICTs continue to shape the landscape. Mobile learning and the “semantic web” are currently poised to have a significant impact on educational settings. It is anybody’s guess what kinds of new learning partnerships will emerge.

To learn more about the ILO and its educational technologies, visit <http://ilo.dal.ca>

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## Goodbye, Zita Hildebrandt



In February, after 10 years as the Administrative Assistant for the Centre for Learning and Teaching, Zita Hildebrandt left Dalhousie to work at the NSGEU office. As well as welcoming visitors at CLT’s front desk, and answering innumerable questions about our activities and programs, Zita has also been CLT’s consummate event planner. Many of you will have attended the Fall New Faculty Orientation, Teaching Assistant Development Days or Dalhousie’s Annual Conference on University Teaching and Learning. Even more of you will have participated in our workshop series over the years. From planning, through to registration and smooth running of events, all of us will miss Zita’s confident assurance that every event will be a great success. Everyone at CLT wishes Zita every success in her new position!