

# Royal Roads University: Using Synchronous Web Conferencing to Maintain Community at a Distance

**Mary Burgess**

## **Setting the Context**

ROYAL ROADS UNIVERSITY, located in Victoria, British Columbia, was established as a special-purpose institution in 1995 with a mandate to provide applied and professional learning. Academic programs at Royal Roads are designed using a learning-outcomes approach and a blended delivery model consisting of short residencies and online delivery using a variety of learning technologies, including the Moodle Learning Management System and Blackboard Collaborate.

In 2010, the Royal Roads University MBA program embarked on a new way of connecting with students at a distance in sessions called Virtual Experience Labs (VELs). The VELs have had a significant impact on students and faculty in the program, as they enable the use of a team-based, collaborative-learning model and bring to the forefront the professional experience of our adult students—all at a distance using synchronous technologies. The creation and fostering of a learning community is a core pillar of our learning model. In the past, we had only been able to create these robust, intense learning and community-building experiences in our face-to-face residencies. Unfortunately, many prospective students were not able to enroll in the MBA program due to an inability to attend the number of residencies required. Developing learning experiences using synchronous technology has increased access to our programs, and, after some tweaking in the initial stages, both faculty and students are finding the VELs a rewarding and empowering experience.

## Rationale

In early 2010, the twenty-four-month MBA program was shortened to eighteen months to improve accessibility to prospective students. Until that time, the program had included 3 three-week residencies; one at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end, with twelve-week distance courses delivered mostly asynchronously via Moodle in between the residencies. The residencies included instructional sessions and community-building activities to help strengthen the bond students felt with each other, with faculty, and with the institution. On a twenty-four-month cycle, the number and length of residencies was difficult but doable for students. When the program was compressed, however, many prospects did not ultimately enter the program because taking that amount of time away from work and family over eighteen months rather than twenty-four was not something they could accommodate.

A solution that maintained the vital link built during face-to-face sessions but that enabled enrollment was sought. Key to that solution was an increase in student access to the MBA program without compromising our core learning model, which focuses heavily on the fostering of a vibrant and supportive learning community.

In response to the problem being faced by the MBA program and similar issues being experienced by other programs at the institution, the Royal Roads University Centre for Teaching and Educational Technologies wrote a thought piece entitled "[Rethinking Residencies.](#)" The paper offered alternatives to face-to-face residencies, including doing them online using synchronous tools.

Concurrently, a license for what was then Elluminate Web Conferencing System (now Blackboard Collaborate) was being procured for Royal Roads.

The pieces were in place to give something new a try!

## Description of the Virtual Experience Labs

The Virtual Experience Labs were created to ensure the continual fostering of the learning community, so they are not content driven.

There are two types of delivery for the VELs. One uses a half-day conference model to allow students to present to their peers on a topic in their field of expertise, and one facilitates collaboration and connection related to a capstone project called the Organizational Management Project (OMP).

The conference model, facilitated by MBA instructor Amy Zidulka, provides a forum for students to practice presenting content and receiving feedback from their peers and faculty. The average age of students in the program

is forty-one, and they typically have at least seven years' experience in their field. This model provides a golden opportunity for students to learn from each other as well as from their instructor. During the VEL, presenting students moderate Blackboard Collaborate sessions within breakout rooms, and their peers provide them with feedback, including a vote of "Best in Conference," which takes place at the end of the day. The instructor also provides feedback to the students.

The OMP model, facilitated by MBA instructor Don Caplan, is focused on ensuring that students working on their capstone projects have the support they need, both from faculty and peers. Potential for attrition at this point in the program is at its highest, so continuing to foster the learning community is key to the successful completion of the projects and ultimately the program. In these sessions, content is presented using uploaded slides; students then break into groups to discuss their research questions, methodology, and proposals and to provide each other with feedback. Depending on where in the research process students are, the instructor also brings in experts; at one stage, a librarian is brought in to field questions; at another, an expert in ethical reviews and research methods joins in. Tools such as polls are used to gauge topics of interest, and external video is also utilized as additional content.

## **Is It Working?**

Following the VELs, students fill out an online survey and are asked specifically, "Do you feel more connected?" The response has been overwhelmingly yes. This indicates that the goal of maintaining the learning community has at least in part been met. Although a cohort has not yet graduated who has gone through this model, early signs point to positive results.

## **Challenges**

Ongoing problems with the technology continue to drive a need for improvement. Because issues can stem from such a variety of sources—the headset being used by a participant, the bandwidth available to another, upgrades to software that require new learning, just to name a few—it's unlikely the VELs will ever be akin to physically being in a room together. Thus, managing expectations becomes one of the challenges. In addition, the early stages of this initiative were not well resourced. Innovation is messy and teaches lessons at every step. For instance, we are now aware of the difficulties for faculty

members managing a synchronous online classroom of fifty students while dealing with technology at the same time. A technical-support person is now in the room with the faculty member at all times, providing much-needed relief from the back channel of the chat room and instead affording the faculty member the ability to focus solely on facilitating learning.

## **Applicability to Others**

Other institutions using a distance-delivery method could certainly make use of this technology and the community-building model. In our experience, students in the program find the continual focus on the learning community helps keep them connected, and thus the tendency for the distance student to become isolated is significantly reduced. Expert facilitation, of course, must accompany appropriate learning technologies in order to ensure a positive experience.

## **Conclusion**

Incremental improvements are continuing, and the overall feeling is that the goal of maintaining the learning community when students are at a distance is being met.

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