



Case Study *December 2005*

Community-Based Learning Opportunities for Aboriginals, Winner, 2005

The Sunchild E-Learning Community Model

OVERVIEW

Education is a cornerstone of Aboriginal human resources development. Despite recent improvements in educational attainment levels by First Nations learners in Canada, a substantial gap relative to non-First Nations peers still remains. Aboriginal learners continue to be the most disadvantaged segment of the Canadian school population. In 1999, the Sunchild E-Learning Community was established to develop and deliver high-quality education aimed exclusively at the educational needs of grades 9 to 12 Aboriginal students in 12 First Nations communities across Canada.

The Sunchild E-Learning Community is a private, non-profit, non-government funded and incorporated school that provides First Nations learners with access to a range of education choices through an e-learning delivery service. The choices include: high school diploma courses; basic adult upgrading programs;

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and lifelong learning programs and initiatives. This case study addresses community learning.

Name of Program
Sunchild E-Learning
Community

Date Established
1999

Skills Developed

Literacy
Numeracy
Computer
Communication
Problem-solving

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trades training; industry training; and university courses.¹ It augments and supports conventional school programs by offering Aboriginal students accessible, responsive, flexible, and culturally respectful curricula. The school is an example of how First Nations are exerting control over their educational futures by embracing technology in order to meet specific learning needs.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the Sunchild E-Learning Community are to:

- provide accessible education to Aboriginal students in remote and rural communities;
- provide affordable access to a range of educational programs;
- create community, government and corporate partnerships that support the delivery of e-learning programs to Aboriginal students across Canada;
- increase the retention levels of Aboriginal learners; and
- encourage and support the academic achievements of Aboriginal students at all levels of education in a cost-effective and fiscally responsible manner.

TARGET GROUPS

The Sunchild E-Learning Community is currently accessible to Aboriginal students in a number of communities, schools and colleges, including: Alexis, Aseniwuche Winewak, Athabasca Chipewyan, Chipewyan Prairie, Fort McKay, Fort McMurray, Louis Bull, Mikisew Cree, O'Chiese, Peigan, Saddle Lake, Sunchild and Whitefish First Nations; and Tsui Tina, Old Sun College, Red Crowe College, Siksika High School and KainaiPikani High School. In 2006, Doig, Aboriginal Futures, Driftpile and Cold Lake will be served by the Sunchild E-Learning Community.

ACTIVITIES

The Sunchild E-Learning Community consists of a mix of live instruction and archived tutorials that offer individual learners the opportunity to work in a structured and interactive environment. At the same time, Sunchild provides flexibility in the pace at which individuals may learn, accommodating the varied responsibilities of family and work.

- Students access the Sunchild E-Learning Community from their desktop through an Internet connection that links them to their on-line instructor.
- Students are provided with a blend of instructor-supported e-learning courses that incorporate audio, video, whiteboard and chat capabilities (operating over a common telephone line using compressed software—WebCT and Elluminate Live).
- An archiving feature enables students to access previous classroom instructions and courses.

- Students are provided with in-class support from a student mentor. The mentor provides in-class assistance to learners and ensures that those learning from remote locations are not disaffected by the faceless delivery of on-line education. The student mentor acts as a community liaison, learner coach and support, technical troubleshooter, and helps keep students on track with assignments and performance reporting.

RESOURCES

Most Sunchild E-Learning Community sites access the Internet using a dial-up modem, as there is little access to high-speed connectivity in some of the more remote communities. The technological needs of each learning site are assessed on an individual basis. The basic desktop configuration required by each student learner includes a monitor, hardware, printer, sound card and microphone. The satellite and/or Internet hook-up costs, as well as the workstation costs, are covered by the communities accessing the Sunchild education services.

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In addition to the technology requirements, the cost of delivering the learning model is approximately \$30,000 per year (50 courses = 50 enrolments x \$600/year).² Sunchild employs eight certified course teachers who typically have a wealth of teaching experience and are highly educated. The delivery costs cover the curriculum and certified teachers but do not include facility costs, site maintenance costs, textbooks, travel, technology capital and maintenance costs, or the costs of the student mentors. These costs must be absorbed by the site community and/or corporate sponsors.

INNOVATIONS

The Sunchild E-Learning Community has instigated a number of processes and procedures to address the unique learning needs and approaches of First Nations learners, including the following:

- The use of an e-learning platform eliminates the geographic barrier that limits the ability of many First Nations schools to attract and retain high-quality teachers.

- The Sunchild E-Learning model recognizes the value and importance of having skilled and qualified teachers, and commits time and resources towards their professional growth and development.
- The student mentor typically comes from the local community and acts as a vital connection between the learning content and the challenges and issues that learners face.
- Learners are required to take ownership and responsibility for their education. Prior to enrolment, they are asked to submit a “Sunchild E-Learning Student Letter of Agreement” that indicates that the student is committed to succeeding in the school and that they have established graduation and career goals.
- All Sunchild courses are based on the Alberta program of studies. This ensures that all Sunchild E-Learning Community learners have access to a full, rich curriculum equal to that of other Albertan learners, while incorporating culturally relevant content matched to the needs of First Nations learners.

CHALLENGES

There are a number of challenges that the Sunchild E-Learning Community has had to face and overcome over the years, including:

- a lack of sustainable operating funds;
- the geographic distribution and often extreme isolation of some of the communities that the program serves; and
- the need for a coordinated and collaborative approach to building and delivering the learning programs among various First Nations communities.

SOLUTIONS

The current funding model for the Sunchild E-Learning Community is based on revenues generated by matching contributions from site communities and corporate sponsors. Typically, sponsors cover 50 per cent of the course cost and communities cover the other 50 per cent. In some cases, however, corporate sponsorship covers 100 per cent of the course costs. As of 2003, founding sponsors agreed to a funding commitment of three years, after which each community is required to cover the costs in full. Sunchild E-Learning Community corporate sponsors include: ConocoPhillips Canada; Burlington Resources Canada; Nexen Canada; Shell Canada; Suncor Energy; Syncrude Canada; and TransCanada Pipelines Limited. These corporations

also contributed to the start-up funding needed to take the learning model from a community-based initiative to a not-for-profit organization with the appropriate governance and structure in place.

Institutional partnerships and government support have been formed to broadcast post-secondary training, career awareness and other developmental training through the Sunchild E-Learning platform. Institutional partners include: Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT); National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation (NAAF); Cisco Systems; Red Deer College; Athabasca University; the Province of Alberta; and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC).

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The Sunchild curriculum designers use a “bio-regional” approach to content development. Administrators and course teachers interact with Aboriginal colleagues, community Elders and First Nations experts to identify and gain approval for culturally relevant content that is respectful of the specific language, culture, environment and perceived “sovereignty” of each First Nation.

Finally, the Sunchild E-Learning Community governance structure helps to mitigate many of the political and accountability challenges faced by band-operated reserve schools. Sunchild is an incorporated and not-for-profit corporation, separate from the local band administration, and governed by a Board of Directors that consists of Sunchild and independent directors. The presence of community directors also ensures that Sunchild E-Learning reflects community values, while helping to cultivate a sense of community pride and ownership.

OUTCOMES

This First Nations–controlled school has had significant success, with high-school graduation rates of 80 per cent, compared to estimated on-reserve graduation rates of 20 per cent. Success is largely due to the e-learning model that brings teachers and curricula into diverse classroom sites through the use of collaborative technologies.

- In 2000, the Sunchild E-Learning Community was piloted to enhance and augment the delivery of existing accredited high-school classroom education learning. The pilot program produced a number of measurable successes, including a 79 per cent pass rate at the diploma level, with 24 of 30 students completing their courses.
- In the 2003–04 school year, there were 441 course enrolments and 246 course participants.

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- Over the four-year history of Sunchild, 73 per cent of enrolled learners participated in their on-line course, with 65 per cent of participating learners successfully completing their courses.
- While successful completion of high school cannot be attributed solely to Sunchild, it is important to note that over the course of four years, 27 out of 36 Sunchild learners (75 per cent) have graduated. Although not a directly comparable statistic, this four-year average achievement rate far exceeds recent provincial estimates of high-school completion rates of First Nations learners, which indicate that only 5.5 per cent of Aboriginals living on-reserve in Alberta had attained a high school certificate, and that 60 per cent had attained less than a high school education.³

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

The Sunchild E-Learning Community is an investment by Aboriginal communities, government, education, corporations and individuals in the development of skilled, knowledgeable and productive citizens. The model boosts student confidence and satisfaction levels, encourages interest in higher education and career paths, builds community capacity through enhanced employment and business opportunities, and removes many of the constraints around the mobility of students.

Sunchild E-Learning helps teachers and students utilize and become comfortable with technology (e.g., computer and Internet applications). As well, the school focuses on building a number of core competencies such as math, science and reading abilities. In addition to developing a skilled workforce and enhancing the relationships between businesses and Aboriginal communities, the school also provides a cost-effective education and industry training program that builds cultural awareness within organizations.

USE AS A MODEL

The Sunchild E-Learning Community has the real potential to be an effective skills and learning development model for Aboriginal communities across Canada. With its focus on providing quality instruction that is accessible, responsive and respectful of cultural differences, the learning model ensures that the needs of students and communities are being addressed. The incorporation of Sunchild as an independent, not-for-profit entity enables it to operate outside of the usual political environment within which most First Nations' schools are subject—giving it more fiscal autonomy and authority to make decisions and act on them.

1 Sunchild E-Learning offers courses for grades 7 to 12, basic adult upgrading classes, and pre-apprenticeship screening and readiness courses.

2 The cost of enrolment decreases as the number of courses/students increases. For 50 to 75 seats, the cost is \$500 per individual/seat. For 75 to 100 seats, the cost is \$450 per individual/seat.

3 Ben Brunnen, *Encouraging Success: Ensuring Aboriginal Youth Stay in School* (Calgary: Canada West Foundation, 2003), p. 6.

About the Education and Learning Case Studies

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and learning programs and initiatives. The case studies provide in-depth analysis of the methods used to develop, assess, implement and deliver education and lifelong learning in schools, colleges, universities, workplaces and communities. They focus on goals, activities, resource requirements, achievements and outcomes, benefits, innovations, and keys to success and challenges.

This case study addresses the theme of community learning and highlights an award winner from the Community Learning Awards, funded in part by the Office of Learning Technologies, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

Community-Based Learning Opportunities for Aboriginals, Winner, 2005: The Sunchild E-Learning Community Model
by *Douglas Watt*

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