

Appendix E: *Classroom at your fingertips.*
An article about the Workplace English
site

Classroom at your fingertips

Athabasca University tries to make courses more available, no matter where students live and work

Tony Tin taps the buttons on a brand new iPhone while a dozen or so students look on eagerly. What's got their attention on this cold January morning in Lac La Biche, Alta., isn't the cool app of the moment or the latest offering from Kelly Clarkson. It's a lesson in workplace English.

"Our ESL students have a good knowledge of basic English," says Tin, "But what we're trying to do is give them a good grounding in English used in the workplace. And that can be quite different."

Tin is an Athabasca University (AU) researcher with a special interest in adapting technologies for use in distance learning. In Northern Alberta, that means using technology like the iPhone to bring the classroom to the students, either at home, in a work camp or in a remote native village.

That's the focus of Athabasca University's three-year Learning Communities Project, an ambitious plan to bring university level courses to the student, no matter where they live and work. The project was sparked by a personal donation from Allan Markin, the chair of Canadian Natural Resources, a company that employs thousands of Canadians at its worksites in northern Alberta.

"A more educated workforce benefits workers, communities and the province," said Markin, whose company's Horizon Project worksite was the focus of phase one of the Learning Communities project.

The scope of the challenge at first may seem daunting as most of its target students already have full-time jobs, often involving

overtime in very remote places. The workforce is often transitory, with more than 50 per cent of the workers coming from out of province. Those circumstances don't leave a lot of time for education.

"We learned a lot from the Horizon site," says Lori van Rooijen, AU's vice-president of Advancement and co-leader of the Learning Communities project. "There are a number of barriers to education we need to overcome as we head into the next phase. The sheer size of the region, the diversity of the workforce, the special needs and conditions that exist among aboriginal communities and workers all require unique approaches. There is no one size fits all."

Using the iPhone could be called a unique approach. It was never designed for post-secondary course delivery. It's a phone after all. But where there's a will — and a curious mind like Tin's — there's always a way.

"Our remote technologies component is vital to the success of Learning Communities," says van Rooijen. "We have to make education as accessible and easy to use as possible. One of our goals is to have our course content instantly available on devices that most people carry around with them, like cellphones and PDAs".

Now that phase one of Learning Communities is complete, the project is looking to expand into other rural communities in Northern Alberta. That will require partnerships with other educational institutions to help develop material and deliver courses to a widely scattered student body.



TAP INTO EDUCATION – Researchers at Athabasca University, through their three-year Learning Communities Project, are adapting technologies for use in distance learning. Devices such as the iPhone are being taken into consideration when designing classes for students, many of whom have full-time jobs and come from out of province.

"Everything we've done to date indicates that the concept will work," says van Rooijen. "What we're doing now is partnering with Alberta North technical and community colleges, and rural and remote communities to identify need — who should be

involved and how to engage the community in learning."

She says the overall goal is to make it as easy as possible for remote students from a logistical point of view. The rest is up to them.

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