

Virtual classrooms provide flexibility and future opportunity: teacher

By **ROB PAUL**

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Plenty of things have changed over the last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and although it's been a struggle in many aspects, it has also led to industries evolving to adapt as they discover new more efficient practices.

When the pandemic first led to restrictions in Ontario last March, schools were one of the first to see drastic change. Students weren't able to be in the classroom and learn the same way they always had, which in turn led to an increase in online learning.

Online learning isn't a new avenue for students, but the pandemic led many of them to venture down the virtual path to keep up with their education.

Alicia Cuzner is a teacher and course developer at Ontario Virtual School and as one of the course developers, she creates the lessons and records herself teaching them. Having previously been a classroom teacher for five years, she's seen the effectiveness of both sides of learning for students.

She made the shift to virtual teaching when she realized the benefits and she says as virtual enrolment increased as a result of the pandemic, more and more people are seeing how important the flexibility of online learning is for students.

"I was working for OVS (Ontario Virtual School) before COVID began and I feel like I have a really good idea of the before and after," said Cuzner. "There was a huge increase in enrolment. We officially shut down in Ontario for March Break last year and we saw an immediate enrolment when it started because a lot of students—especially in Grades 11 and 12—needed courses because they were applying to universities.

"Our university deadlines are in April and all of these students were concerned all of a sudden about how they would finish their courses without going back. When you tell a high school student who has been working so hard that they're not actually going to university in the fall, it's crushing to them. We didn't want that to happen, so there was a huge enrolment of students joining us in what they thought were the most important classes to get into university because they needed those to be finished."

Offering the same credits needed for courses that Ontario high schools do, Cuzner says there's added flexibility of virtual learning because it's on the student's own time over a year long period.

"Ultimately we've noticed (online school) has been great because of the flexibility. Students have been able to balance classroom learning with online learning hand-in-hand because not all of them have made the switch to 100 per cent virtual. It's worked well together because in some months or weeks they may be focused on classroom learning—which doesn't have a lot of flexibility and has strict deadlines—and when they do have time then they can focus on the online learning where we have a rolling enrolment—you have a year to finish a course.

"In a classroom, teachers only have so much time for students to get work in before the end of the semester. For us, we can go by what the Ministry says—which is a year to complete the work—and that way if someone gets sick or they're dealing with stress or something happens, they can keep up. So far, I think it's been really good, and I've had a lot of positive feedback from students."

Echoing the importance of that flexibility, Cuzner points to the fact that in physical schools, classes can be capped, which can cause students to be put in tough positions, but in OVS that doesn't happen.

"It's been very easy for me and our OVS teachers [with the increased enrolment]," she said. "The way that it works is we don't have

a cap on our course, we'll just hire more teachers. I set the limit to my class to 25, but if more students want to take that course, then we hire another teacher and we just clone the course. As a course developer, I'm creating the course plan from scratch and then recording myself teaching them, but then I have other teachers that are essentially teaching or following up with students with my lessons.

?That way we never have a cap, so if a student needs to take a specific course they can and we're not going to say it's full?that's great for students because in the classrooms if you don't enroll fast enough, then you can't take a certain course and that can be hard if they're trying to get into a specific degree.?

With everything being online, students can easily go back and learn from their work while also having better access to their grades to ensure they always know where they're at in a course.

?Online learning is so easy to track students' progressions because the transparency is there?as soon as I punch in the marks, they can see my grade book,? she said. ?In classrooms, students don't necessarily see that and don't know how they're doing in the course. I have live calculations of their grades with every mark for their submissions, so students always know what's happening. Or if I've made a human error, they can go over all of my corrections and feedback?everything that they get, they can look through?and if they question something then we can go through it and cross-reference it.?

Having previously worked in the classroom with students who have learning disabilities, Cuzner thinks online learning has been beneficial to helping those students because it offers the ability to go back through lessons.

?For teenagers?who are usually independent?they love it because they can just learn exactly what they need to and there's no drama around the classroom to distract them,? she said. ?I also think students who are nervous in the classroom because they have learning disabilities are doing better with the online learning because if you have a processing learning disability or a working memory learning disability you can re-watch the lessons as many times as you need to and take your time.

?Sometimes my learning disability students, when I was in the classroom, would just sit quietly. Some students fly through the content when others need more time and with this, my students are all over the place in the course. They don't have to stick to someone else's timeframe, they can work when they want to work. This generation is an online generation so they don't have the same technical problems that an adult would, most students can figure things out the odd time it's not working. E-learning isn't for every student because some have a harder time being more independent and they might need that direct teacher interaction, but students and teachers are adapting to that.?

As online learning moves forward, Cuzner's hope is that it will give those in the Indigenous community a more comfortable learning experience and make learning more accessible to them.

?We're also doing Indigenous outreach?I did my bachelor education in the Aboriginal teacher education program where I worked in remote communities,? she said. ?Our lessons are recorded and not live and my experiences when I worked in Iqaluit when the Northern Lights would interfere, and we'd lose power it was inconvenient, with this all you need is battery for your computer, and you can continue the lesson.

?There's also still a lot of trauma in Indigenous communities when it comes to the classroom and this is great because now you can do this in the safety of your own home, making it a more positive experience. We're pushing towards expanding that and we're really excited about it. We want to improve it for the off-the-grid communities that don't have the same access to the classrooms or to teachers.?

As more students become comfortable with online learning as a result of the pandemic, Cuzner says she thinks it could continue to grow because it allows students to work in the setting that best fits them and at the pace they're most comfortable with.

?I feel like it might become the norm,? she said. ?Even at first, the students were hesitant with online learning, but I'm hearing a lot

in the past year that students think it's been positive. Students have a lot of anxiety and going into the school can be hard sometimes?we all normalized this anxiety because we were forced to go into the classroom ? but now that there's a reasonable alternative. Why would you continue with it if it's making you sick or really hurting you? I feel like students won't want to do 100 per cent online because they like the social aspect of public school and so I could see students doing half in school and half online, taking hands-on classes like gym classes and visual arts in school and doing calculus and vectors online where there's less distractions.?

HAVE YOUR SAY ? Is online learning working for your family? Where is it falling short? Send your thoughts to brock@lpcmedia.ca.