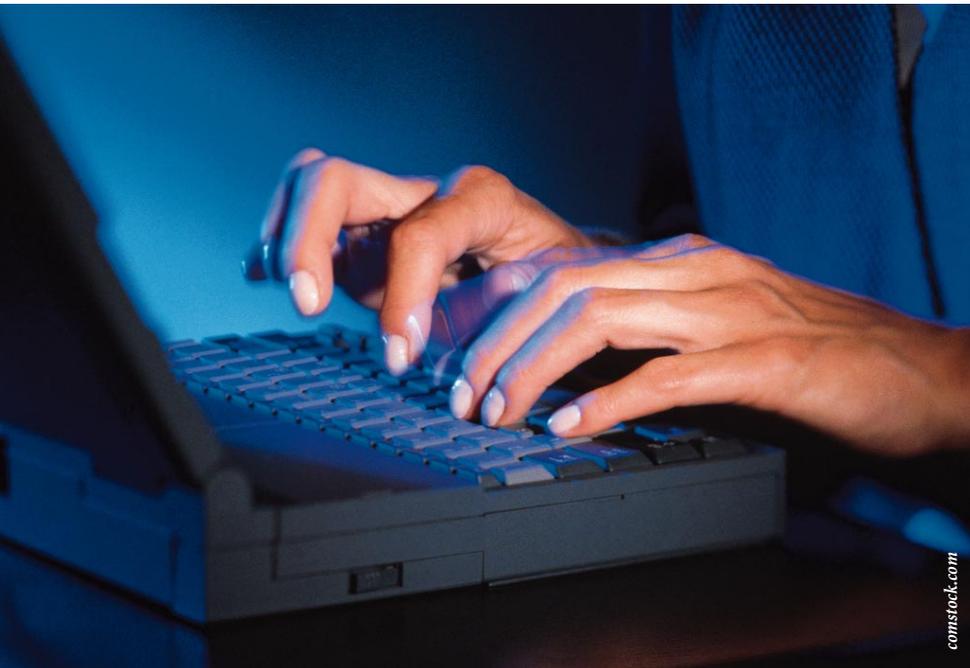


Education everywhere

by Anne Miller

... through the First Nations Distance Learning Initiative



CANADIAN FIRST Nations have dealt with obstacles in education for decades. Unique traditions, isolation and family commitments often prevent aboriginal communities from benefiting from the same education enjoyed by other Canadians.

First Nations education levels, although improving, still lag behind Canadian levels, with 37 percent of the First Nation population having attended post secondary classes as opposed to 51 percent of the entire Canadian population. According to the 1996 census, the employment-population ratio for First Nations people on and off reserve was 40 percent while the ratio for the general Canadian population was 59 percent.

Most recent demographics suggest that the education and employment situation is improving. There is still, however, a lack of available opportunities for specialized, IT skills-focused education and employment, due in part to the relatively small size and the isolation of the First Nations people.

At the same time, the global economy

is seeing a rapidly increasing demand for networking and Internet skills and only a limited number of qualified people available for IT related jobs.

In 2003, Cisco recognized the potential of developing a distance learning program, standardized to satisfy industry requirements, but customized to meet the unique needs of First Nations learners. This program would not only help students to gain marketable skills, but would also assist remote communities to leverage the benefits of network technology. Soon, the company embarked on a collaborative partnership with Industry Canada, Human Resource Skills Development and First Nations SchoolNet regional management offices (RMOs) on a new model for IT education – the proven and successful academy content would be customized and made relevant for First Nations learners.

The First Nations Distance Learning Program delivers the academy curriculum through blended distance learning – an instructor-facilitated learning environment that combines both in-person and remote

access to equipment, curriculum, and other instructional materials. The RMO teams have developed and implemented the technology infrastructure required to support the program, including integrated educational software platforms, Web-based collaboration tools, and integrated videoconferencing.

The program aims to eliminate distance barriers through instructional classes that use information and communication technologies to enable students to interact with instructors via Web-based video, audio, and text conference. All educational materials are posted on the Web and students interact with instructors and peers through Internet-enabled communications. Instructors are able to track student progress, perform assessments online and demonstrate the practicability of the curriculum regardless of geographic location.

As part of the program, First Nations instructors are trained and certified to deliver Cisco training and are mentored in development and delivery of online resources. These instructors are also taught how to adapt the delivery methods to suit their students; such as more emphasis on video lessons for students who have a strong auditory tradition, and flexible classes to accommodate students whose family commitments may require them to be away for an extended period.

The First Nations' Distance Learning Program also provides students with training to become qualified Cisco Academy instructors within their communities, in order to reach an even greater student base.

Since its launch in 2005, this distance learning program has become a best practice model – proof that learning can be accomplished anywhere, regardless of location, socio-economic status, gender, or race. ■■■

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NEARLY A DECADE AGO, Cisco created The Cisco Networking Academy, which now exists in more than 150 countries, as a way to reach out to individuals and organizations that recognize the need for evolving skills in the latest technologies, but require innovative ways to take part in them. Over 1.6 million students have enrolled at more than 10,000 academies located in high schools, technical schools, colleges, universities, and community-based organizations. Coming to Canada in 1998, the program now includes more than 325 participating secondary schools, colleges, technical institutes and universities coast-to-coast.

The academy offers a comprehensive e-learning program that provides students with the essential Internet technology skills and delivers Web-based content, online assessment, student performance tracking, hands-on labs, instructor training and support, and preparation for industry standard certifications. Through community feedback and electronic assessment, the academy program adapts curriculum to improve outcomes and student achievement.

The academy program is a partnership between leading-edge IT organizations, education, business and community organizations and government, in Canada and around the world, that forms an ecosystem to deliver the range of services and support needed by tomorrow's global workforce. Part of the Networking Academy content focuses on teaching students how to design, build and maintain computer networks through two certification driven programs: Cisco Certified Networking Associate (CCNA) and the Cisco Certified Networking Professional (CCNP). As well, the academy curriculum includes ecosystem-partner sponsored courses such as: IT Essentials I: PC Hardware and Software; IT Essentials II: Network Operating Systems; and Panduit Network Infrastructure Essentials.