

Distance Education
at the Secondary Level in Québec

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF DE AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL IN QUEBEC

Why do we do what we do ?

- A need for learning materials
- A need to deliver teaching/learning in particular situations

1946-1995: an administrative unit at the Ministry of Education

1946

- A lack of materials in French for Vocational education
- A lack of technical schools
- Solution: A Correspondance School !

1972

- Extended the scope of its activities to general education (academic courses)
- Télé-Université is created for DE at the University level

80's

- Another extension of DE to popular education and to cegep level courses
- Registrations peaked with this wide variety of courses offered
- End of 80's: beginning of sales of learning materials to Adult education centres
- Business-like mentality versus public service mentality

90's

- A breakdown
- CCFD, a DE institution dedicated solely to the cegep level is created
- At the secondary level, the variety of courses offered is progressively restricted to education leading to a diploma, particularly academic courses
- Less courses, less services, a sharp decline in the number of registrations

1994

- CLIFAD (a liaison committee for DE at all levels: secondary, cegep and university) is created with SOFAD, CCFD and Télé-université as its members.

1995-1996

- A major change in the infrastructure of DE at the secondary level. For about 40 years, DE was always a single administrative unit within the Ministry of Education and had as its mandate to develop learning materials and offer services to its clients. That was changed.

A new system with two subsets

- In January **1995**, all teaching and related services direct to the student population (registration, tutoring and testing) were transferred to the school board system.
- In April **1996**, SOFAD was created as a central body, located outside the Ministry of Education, administered by the school boards, mandated to develop, produce or coproduce learning materials designed for general education either in DE or in adult education centres.

The mandate also includes:

- to promote DE;
 - to carry out studies and research;
 - to foster the use of new technologies;
 - to encourage partnerships.
- Note that SOFAD produces for both **French** and **English** speaking communities.
- It should also be noted that in Québec: **DE is only for the adult population, 16 years and over.**

More than 200 courses offered now

- All academic courses for Secondary 1 to 5, in French and in English
- Vocational courses in Secretarial Studies and Accounting (in French only)
- A few professional training and popular education courses (in French only)

MAJOR RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND ISSUES

COURSE REGISTRATIONS

CR and the number of students are the main indicators that we have to monitor the whole system (and its two subsets: SOFAD and the school boards). Over the first eight years of this system, we observed...

NUMBER OF COURSE REGISTRATIONS AND NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN DE SINCE 1995-1996

YEARS	1995-1996	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003 *
REGISTRATIONS	10 646	10 889	11 744	15 282	19 157	18 552	20 783	23 227 *
STUDENTS	5 294	5 255	5 555	7 378	8 752	9 171	10 341	11 853 *

* Data to be confirmed

- Almost without exception, the number of course registrations and the number of students in DE have grown each year since 1995-1996.
- Since 1995-1996, these numbers have more than doubled:
 - + 118 % for the course registrations
 - + 124 % for the students

But this growth has been very **unequal**.

- To begin with, there was a huge gap, relatively speaking, between the level of activity in the most populated areas and the less populated areas of Québec. Many had predicted this would happen with the setting up of the new infrastructure. The potential number of adults interested in DE was indeed the same as before, but the number of units offering the services had been multiplied by 57 ! The financial burden was thus too much for small school boards with the smallest potential clientele.

«**Solution**»

This has been partially resolved over the years, when some school boards have handed over their DE mandate to other, bigger school boards. Some more moves like that might happen in the near future.

- Another unequal development appeared later on, between the school boards of the most densely populated areas of the province, in and around Montréal that is. Relatively speaking, some now appear underdeveloped, while others appear overdeveloped. Since there was no prescribed way as to how DE was going to be managed locally, different ways of doing things have emerged. This might influence the number of people who are attracted to DE. Underlying this is an issue of the quality of the services offered to the students by the school boards.

«Solution»

SOFAD will hold a special conference addressing this issue in March 2004. People in charge of DE will be invited to participate. The objective of the meeting will be to discuss local practices and hopefully foster some sort of harmony based on the best practices.

MAJOR RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND ISSUES

GOVERNMENT COMMITMENTS

Over the years, with memoirs, speeches at public hearings and so on, CLIFAD (the multi-level liaison committee in DE in which SOFAD has been very much involved) has participated in the preparation of the *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training*. Two years ago, CLIFAD was mandated to produce a *Portrait of the situation in DE in Québec*.

Ministry of Education's multi-sector based working group

Since last year's P/TDEA meeting in Québec, a committee of people working in different sectors inside the Ministry of Education prepared a *Report* to clarify concepts, involvements of the Ministry, partners, needs, markets,... Published last May, their *Report* was influential both for CLIFAD and for SOFAD.

CLIFAD

Having stated that the Ministry should give itself an authority in charge of DE, the *Report* then suggested that CLIFAD should turn into a larger committee, that it should — for instance — integrate universities that use DE only partially. Which was exactly what CLIFAD had been doing recently. In 2002, the *Portrait of the situation in DE* was actually prepared under the authority of a new/enlarged CLIFAD. That said, work is now being done to specify more formally how this new enlarged CLIFAD will proceed. We have a meeting, the 16th of October, on this sole topic.

SOFAD

As far as SOFAD and the secondary level are directly concerned, the *Report* stated that both the structure and the financing of DE should be reassessed so that DE would give its full contribution to the public education system in all regions of Québec. It seems the planetary alignment was finally favorable to us because, even before the publication of the report, serious talks had already begun with the Ministry of Education about a new agreement (SOFAD, Ministry and school boards) for a three year period.

The «new deal», called ***Agreement about DE and e-learning in Québec School-boards***, was finalised late this spring and, hopefully, it should soon be signed by all parties concerned:

- The Ministry of Education
- The FCSQ (Federation of Québec School boards)
- The ACSAQ (Québec English School Boards Association)
- SOFAD

NOTE This is the first time that SOFAD itself will sign an agreement with the Ministry.

1) It states in its preamble that considering the *Lifelong Learning Policy*, considering the *Action Plan* that comes with the policy, considering CLIFAD's *Portrait of the situation*, considering the *Report* of the Ministry's working group, measures should be taken:

- To favour the emergence of a demand for lifelong learning, particularly in DE;
- To insure the development of courses and services in DE and e-learning at the secondary level;
- To widen SOFAD's mandate and to improve its resources.

SOFAD is then clearly identified as **the privileged partner** of the main actors of the secondary education network, namely the school boards and the Ministry.

2) About **the organisation of DE**, the agreement states that — eight years after the inception of the new 2 subset system — some measures are considered to further a new dynamism all over the territory:

- To favor the establishment of school boards in consortia
- To favor the harmonization of politics and practices about access and services in DE (March 23rd 2004)
- To examine financing (SOFAD, School boards)
- To examine the case of out of Québec students
- To examine the access of the youth sector to DE and e-learning

3) SOFAD's new mandate:

- To develop learning materials in DE and e-learning required by the Ministry and designed for general and vocational adult education, in French and in English, at the secondary level.
- To promote courses and services offered at the secondary level, inform anyone who contacts SOFAD directly and thus facilitate the actions of the school boards in these matters.
- To carry on with its research mandate, particularly about new clientele and about the pursuit of a greater efficiency of the whole system of DE at the secondary level. SOFAD will ensure the development of systems, methods and new tools required by present and future educational needs.
- To contribute to teachers' continuing education.
- To contribute to the development and the production of an online preparation to the General Education Diploma's (GED) tests.

4) SOFAD's annual financing by the Ministry will have three parts:

- 2M\$ to maintain the activities related to recurring elements of SOFAD's mandate.
- Some financing to cover the development of new courses for the Ministry. These courses being specified by an annual plan approved by the Ministry.
- A special financing for activities covering particular needs related to the Action Plan for Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training

5) Mandates and financing linked to other «networks»

DE will be more and more in demand for the continuing education of the workers. There will be cases where the needs are on a provincial scale or even wider. In these occasions, SOFAD would be the representative and the project manager. When they are willing to do so, school boards would be associated to the project. These activities would be financed differently than the ones mentioned so far.

MAJOR RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND ISSUES**CUSTOMIZED SERVICES**

- A new Sector that came into existence this year.
- New Staff: a director, a project coordinator, a secretary, a customer service representative.
- One Big Project: An agreement with the Environment Ministry makes SOFAD the producer of distance courses and the organization responsible for training more than 25 000 workers using or selling pesticides in Québec.

It is believed that there should be many more such mandates in the future, given the possibilities offered by DE and online learning to meet the needs of working people.

MAJOR RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND ISSUES

ONLINE LEARNING

SOME OPERATIONAL PRINCIPLES

- In the future, all credit courses will be developed online and in print.
- Online and printed versions will be available at about the same price for the student.
- Courses will be designed for DE students as well as in-class students.
- Courses will also be available to independant students.

SOFAD IS MOVING FAST TOWARDS ONLINE LEARNING AS WE SAID LAST YEAR...

Well, not as fast as predicted... Some of the main challenges (things that prevent you from moving as fast as you'd wish...) in the production of online courses concern:

- The writing of interactive multimedia content.
- The copyrights of the materials used to produce multimedia content.
- The production of interactivities.
- Quality control.

As far as our portal is concerned, an LMS platform was choosen (with Novasys) and is being modified to meet our needs. We now hope that *EduSOFAD*, our Portal of online courses, will be launched at the end of november. *EduSOFAD* will have three sections respectively dedicated to:

- Students
- Teachers
- Administrators

THE ISSUE OF QUALITY

Quality in the digital age, global approach, these seem to be the latest buzz words in DE. At SOFAD, since our inception in 1996, quality and a global approach have always been a preoccupation. We now feel like we have a quality approach in our **production process** for online courses.

- **We use prototypes**

This means that we have a preoccupation with quality during the production process, not at the end of it. At this prototype stage, we want to spot the fuzzy areas and try a first experimentation before we go into real production.

- **We have a team process**

Our productions are developed with the participation of a diversity of expertises at the many stages of the production process. Thus, many informed points of view feed the quality of the reflections before we reach a decision.

For instance, at the pedagogical design stage, program specialists, content specialists, teachers, pedagogical counselors, instructional technologies consultants, pedagogical design specialists, DE specialists... all these people can contribute to foster the quality of the design.

- **We build on what we know**

We have to make sure we do not start again from scratch each time around. So, at SOFAD, we try to do as we always did in the paper version of DE, that is document our ways of doing things and share them.

THE NEED FOR A GLOBAL APPROACH

That said, no matter how good the content is, this is not sufficient to make sure that potential students will:

- *register*, (easy access to all the information needed, fast registering process, flexible learning modes,...).

Nor is it sufficient to make sure that actual students will:

- *persist till the end of the course*, (quality support services [pedagogical, technical, administrative])
- *succeed* (follow up and support of the student during the the learning process)
- *and take other distant courses* (to complete the secondary diploma)

In other words, if we aim for total quality, we need (and we lack as of now) a global approach. This is our quest for the Graal, kind of, since the support services in DE are the responsibility of a constellation of school boards. The need, the desire, the necessity of a global approach seems even greater when we get into online learning.

WHAT'S UP ? 6 online courses are completed:

- Some to supplement printed courses (*Outils de télécommunication; Initiation aux ressources informatiques*)
- Some complete online courses (*Du français sans fautes; Éveil à la lecture et à l'écriture*)
- Some adaptations of printed courses (*Réunions d'affaires; Communication bilingue*)
- 27 other courses are in production.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE SCHOOL BOARDS

Last June, SOFAD invited all the school boards to an information and consultation workshop about possible partnerships in online learning. More than 40 people from 28 school boards came. SOFAD presented its way of functioning, its method of producing learning materials, as well as its view on the advantages of partnerships. Reaction was positive.

Two school boards have signed preliminary papers stating their intention to contribute financially to the production of six courses in *Physical science, History* and *Mathematics* (there was a possibility for 28 courses in secondary 4 and secondary 5). These will then be added to the 27 online courses already included in our plans for 2003-2004. And the door is still open for latecomer

This medium-sized result in response to our initial proposition to the school boards might be considered ideal. If nobody came, so to speak, SOFAD would have been weakened. If everybody would have wanted to participate, we would have had to actually start producing the extra 28 courses, causing stress for a sudden major growth of the organization.

«CONCLUSION»

P/TDEA meetings are certainly interesting and worthwhile because we get to know each other and other provincial institutions in DE. However, I think we can strive for more than a simple sharing of information, so to speak. We can perhaps encourage exchanges in-between annual conferences. Exchanges on issues of practices, methods or tools, etc. I will conclude with a small illustration of such an exchange.

An interactive Web site on interactivity types or models

My colleague Samantha Slade, Research and Development advisor at SOFAD, participated in the P/TDEA last year. So did Tim Winkelmanns from the Open School BC. Tim recently sent an e-mail to Samantha saying: «I have a meeting coming up with my staff and I would like to show them some examples of online activity templates, similar to some of the examples you showed at the P/TDEA last year. Is there a way I could show these to staff as examples?»

Samantha's answer: «Here is a long answer to your question concerning SOFAD's online templates.

At SOFAD we sort of fell into producing online interactivities based on what we call an approach by **interactivity types or models**. It is a process by which we try to establish for a project the types of interactivities that will be needed, and then use them as a tool box for the production of the course. For example, the *Social Studies* course that I presented last year had within it seven different models of interactivities.

Each of these interactivity models:

- offers a different user experience (functionality);
- aims at a different pedagogical target;
- is composed of different component parts, each adhering to detailed technical and pedagogical specifications.

Last fall, when I presented those interactivity types or models, all of the information around each model had not yet been made explicit. What we had at that time was mostly a rough list of the different components of each model, a few technical and pedagogical specifications, and an emerging terminology. However, all the specifications we had discovered along the way and all the lessons learned had not been documented. Also, we realized that simply providing examples of the interactivity types from the *Social Studies* course was not sufficient enough for their reuse by other project managers.

Hence, we decided that we should invest in making explicit all the information around the interactivity types. We decided to do this by producing an interactive web site. The goal of the web site is to serve as a tool to help both project managers and writers to become familiar with the world of interactivity models or types for online learning and more specifically to be able to:

- distinguish between five of the models we have developed;
- select the appropriate interactivity type for a specific objective or competency;
- plan for the production of interactivities;
- design and write all the components of an interactivity type based on clearly stated technical and pedagogical specifications;
- recognize well designed and well written interactivities.

Not an easy task, but it is one we have undertaken with gusto. As I write this message though I have very little to show you. We have finished the prototype phase and the content is complete; we have left but to program and integrate. It is a small project though (represents approx. 6 hours of learning) and we should have the finished web site up and running by late October.»

So, Samantha and Tim are communicating and exchanging about attempts, errors, tools developed, etc. and I think this can be done by other people here.