ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

ACQUISITION OF SOFT SKILLS AND AFFECTIVE OUTCOMES IN ONLINE DISTANCE EDUCATION: A SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDY

BY

JODY L. HERTLEIN

A thesis submitted to the

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The undersigned certify that they have read and recommended to the Athabasca University Governing Council for acceptance a thesis "ACQUISITION OF SOFT SKILLS AND AFFECTIVE OUTCOMES IN ONLINE DISTANCE EDUCATION: A SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDY" submitted by JODY L. HERTLEIN in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF DISTANCE EDUCATION.

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Martha (Marti) Cleveland-Innes, Ph.D.

Committee Supervisor

_____

Mohamed Ally, Ph.D.

Committee Member

_____

Tom Jones, Ph.D.

Committee Member

Date: _____, 2008

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to those teachers who willingly spend their days and evenings preparing, teaching and evaluating our future generation(s). This thesis is also dedicated to the children of generations to come (including my own two children), that they may be the leaders and educators that make this world a better and safer place.

ABSTRACT

Canada is facing a shortage of workers skilled in affective outcomes, specifically soft skills. Some fingers are pointing to the primary and secondary institutions for failing to aptly prepare future employees with those skills. While these skills have been considered a part of the 'hidden' curriculum in the education of children, outcomes from our education curriculum, especially in primary and secondary schools, appears to not be meeting the soft skill requirements essential to today's job market. While much literature explains the necessary inclusion of soft skill instruction in distance education, empirical evidence of its permeation and levels of success is limited. Is it possible to teach soft skill via distance educational media? If so, what practices accommodate them and how does this acquisition compare to traditional models of education? A mixed mode method was planned for the collection and analysis of data. Students within three Alberta school districts were invited to participate in this study; however, a lack of student involvement limited the quantifiable results collected from the six online distance education students. Six teachers were interviewed on their school's policy and individual techniques teaching effective communication, working cooperatively in groups, acting responsibly, flexibility in learning, and creative problem-solving skills. Interviews were held with both online distance education and traditional school settings so that comparisons of methodology of soft skill teaching/modeling could be made. While soft skill teaching and practice is apparent in both types of educational settings, there appears to be a lack of continuity between school and the work force. That the online distance educational setting is effectively teaching the soft skills within the affective domain, with possibly greater degrees of success than their traditional counterparts. Comments and ideas by teachers and administrators are discussed along with

possible explanations to be considered. Limitations to this study are also described with the recommendation of further studies into this Canadian problem.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Canada is facing a shortage of workers skilled in affective outcomes, specifically soft skills (also referred to as social skills - Ally & Cleveland-Innes, 2007; Bates, 1995; Conference Board of Canada, 2003; Overtoom, 2003). While these skills have been considered a part of the 'hidden' curriculum in the education of children from Aristotle's day to current times (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2002), outcomes from our education curriculum, especially in primary and secondary schools, is not meeting the soft skill requirements essential to today's job market.

One only needs to look to the Internet to realize this skill shortage. Web-sites sites such as YourCareerWave.com and the Occupational Information Network (O*Net Center – www.onetcenter.org), are being developed and placed on internet sites to help businesses train their personnel in the development of the missing skills of communicating effectively, acting responsibly, being flexible, creative problem-solving, and accomplishing tasks in a team environment (Conference Board of Canada, 2003). Skills that are perceived to being absent from our primary and secondary school teaching.

If schools are being relied upon to prepare students for future employment and to actively model/teach these soft skills, why is there a shortage of such skills in the Canadian marketplace? Is there disconnect between the soft skills required in business and those currently being taught in schools? Are educators and education planners effectively reaching today's youth in preparation for tomorrow, especially within the growing trend of educational delivery through distance and distributed learning networks?

Statement of Purpose

Data on soft skills required in today's employment sector and the recorded shortage of soft skills in the Canadian workplace are easily found (Ally & Cleveland-Innes, 2007; Bates, 1995; Conference Board of Canada, 2003; Overtoom, 2000; Staudt, 2001; UNESCO, 2005). However, empirical evidence to ***explain*** such a shortage is lacking. The assumption that educational systems in this country are expected to result in outcomes that will lead to soft skills underpins this research.

A soft skill, for the purpose of this study, is the knowing of how something is done. Soft skills are those skills that employees require to interact with others, get along productively with others, and to work in teams (Ally & Cleveland-Innes, 2007). These would include, but not be limited to, communicating effectively, acting responsibly, being flexible, problem-solving creatively, and accomplishing tasks in a team environment (Conference Board of Canada, 2003).

Soft skills are generally learned informally through socialization – the interaction with people and the viewing of the models in one's life (parents, teachers, peers, significant others, mass media, etc.), especially from a young age (Ally & Cleveland-Innes, 2007; Clausen, 1968). Rarely does the measure of soft skills become a deliberate and purposeful curriculum within the education system. Rather, soft skill development relies on face-to-face, synchronous occurrences (Ally & Cleveland-Innes, 2007) that are reinforced by the rewards and/or sanctions of a specific behaviour in a specific situation.

In distance education, the lack of face-to-face contact and the asynchronous nature of learning would not allow for soft skill development that is normally occurring in informal systems of traditional education. With the absence of social cues associated with face-to-face

contact, particularly vocal tone and pitch, facial and body expression, distance education must rely on other methods to promote soft skill development. Can other instructional methods adequately replace the lack of physical cues associated with socialization in the traditional education setting?

The effectiveness of distance education in fostering soft skills is unknown (Ally & Cleveland-Innes, 2007). While much of the literature (Johnson, Poliner, & Bonaiuto, 2005; NASP, 2002; Brooks & Thompson, 2005; Kerka, 1996; Smith, 2000; Warner, 2003; Newberry, 2001; Velayo, 2001; Oren, Mioduser & Nachmias, 2002; Lobry de Bruyn, 2004) identified what education institutions need to ensure soft skill acquisition, little is known regarding ***if*** or ***how*** they are being implemented. Little empirical evidence exists regarding levels of success of soft skill acquisition in distance education situations. If soft skills are missing in the work place, are the informal systems that encompass soft skill outcomes inadequate? Can we be sure if there is no formal training or testing to measure soft skill outcomes from an educational standpoint? Do distance and distributed education exacerbate this problem?

Answers to these questions would be of considerable value to educators and employers. These skills will continue to be of importance as a growing number of students turn to distance education for their learning needs (Smith, 2000), and as the formation of a global economy and global community emerges, facilitated by the technological advances of the day. This study identifies factors that contribute to the development of soft skills in distance delivered courses.

This comparative study investigates whether or not students in Alberta secondary distance education schools are acquiring soft skills. Data collected measures and compares the

acquisition of soft skills for distance education students with traditionally educated students. The following research questions revealed practices for teaching soft skills in distance education settings:

1. Is it possible to effectively teach soft-skills via distance education?
2. How does the acquisition of soft skills in distance education students compare with the acquisition of soft skills for traditionally educated students?
3. What practices best accommodate the learning of soft skills in distance education?

Assumptions of the Study

Three main assumptions underpin this study. First, it is assumed that the social development of the student, as seen by teachers, school administrators, and government planners, is of equal importance to that of intellectual development in the education of the student. Second, it is assumed that teacher participants were open, honest, and forthright with their answers and communication.

Significance of the Study

This study aims to further the research regarding soft skills acquisition in a distance education environment. Through the comparison of soft-skill acquisition in distance education and traditional education systems, a picture emerged as to the levels of soft skill acquisition between these two approaches of education. Furthermore, this study identified whether or not soft skill acquisition is possible in a distance educational setting and which practices best facilitate this acquisition, especially.

Data from this study will allow educators in distance education settings to compare current practices with those identified as best practices to inform what soft skill practices for future employability are incorporated into the education of the student. Those in the business

sector will also be informed to what measures are being taken to ensure that future employees will have the adequate levels of skills needed to function in the global economy. Government administration and other curriculum advisors/planners can use such information to ensure that instructional design addresses such social skill needs in both traditional and non-traditional modes of education. Moreover, students and parents can be assured that the student is receiving a well-rounded, holistic education.

Finally, this study will further the dialogue regarding soft skills in education, its feasibility, and create a beginning point for measuring levels of acquisition in soft skills in distance educational programs. This dialogue will address contemporary as well as future educational methods in order to promote the practice and further development of soft skill acquisition in conjunction with academic knowledge. This study and dialogue will bring to light the importance of soft skill inclusion, practices which yield soft skill acquisition, and further encourage the research of soft skills in primary and secondary education systems.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study is delimited to the acquisition of soft skill development through distance education delivery within a sampling of population of two regions in the province of Alberta. All school districts with distance education schools were invited to participate. Four schools agreed to partake, with only three districts meeting all requirements for the study. It was from these three school districts that a traditional school sample was selected. Sampling was confined to one class per school location to keep the sample size within a manageable number. Sampling included self-assessments, interviews, and a quiz on soft skills related to Canadian norms (those set out by businesses, educational institutions, government, and society in general).

Limitations to this study include a number of items, mostly related to the study of a single phenomenon in the qualitative method design. The Freedom of Information and Privacy Act (FOIP) required that all students receive parental/guardian permission to be studied. For this reason, sampling was subjective and limits generalization to other populations. FOIP also limited the direct contact the researcher had with the student sample to ensure a significant sample size. Thus, the researcher was reliant upon the teacher of each class sample to contact and obtain permission from students and their parents to join the study and/or to release contact information to the researcher. A further limitation was the willingness of student participants to participate in the study within the region of sampling.

Data from the study is limited to the geographical areas in which samples were taken, specifically within the northern half of the province of Alberta. There is a danger of the Hawthorne effect in situations of those who answered surveys and those who were interviewed. Hawthorne effect occurs where respondents supply answers they think the researcher wants to hear, rather than what is accurate and/or real.

Structure of Thesis Study

This thesis document has been organized into five sections: an introduction to the study (chapter one), a review of literature on the role and importance of soft skill acquisition (chapter two), the methodology (chapter three), research findings (chapter four), a discussion of how the findings relate to the literature (chapter five), and a summary with the study's conclusions, implications, and recommendations (chapter six).

The literature review is based on the historical significance of social skill development in traditional education; however with the change in technology and new ways to educate the student, society must look at how to ensure soft skill acquisition in a non-traditional way.

This soft skill shortage is of a growing concern for educators and education planners in general as more and more Canadian employers report a lack of soft skills among employees entering the workforce. As more and more students take one or more courses in a non-traditional education setting, instructional design must ensure that soft skill acquisition objectives are being met.

Chapter three presents the research design used for the gathering of data, the survey instruments used, a description of the sample and data analysis procedures. Its intent is to describe the collection of data and its treatment within this study.

The research findings in chapter four present the findings from the interview data, revealing those practices used by current teachers in traditional and distance educational settings.

Chapter five will compare the results of the findings to the literature presented in chapter two. This comparison will be of those practices in theory to those practices currently in use. This chapter will also give an indication of soft skill acquisition within Alberta online distance educational high schools.

The final chapter of this thesis will provide a summary of conclusions reached by this study as they pertain to the research questions, the identification of audiences who would benefit from this study, and further implications and the significant questions raised by the study and its conclusions.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Controversy exists over soft skill acquisition in online distance education discussed in the research literature over the last decade. While some profess impossibility, others advocate that, with the right instruction, improvement in soft-skill performance will occur. “The virtual school provides access to online, collaborative and self-paced learning environments – settings that can facilitate 21st century skills” (North American Council for Online Learning [NACOL], 2006, p. 2). However, little empirical evidence has been produced regarding soft-skill development in primary and secondary school-aged children.

In order to fully understand the findings in this study, one must understand the importance of soft skills in society and how they develop, especially in online distance educational settings as they pertain to online and/or virtual learning. The literature provides a picture of the importance of soft-skill development, what is entailed in the acquisition of soft skills by students, and the factors that influence soft-skill attainment within primary and secondary school population.

The Importance of Socialization in Society

In our current social climate that encompasses a rapid economic restructuring, increasing globalization, and the rapid advancement of newer, more sophisticated technologies, society needs to learn to adapt to a growing diversity of people and attitudes. These changes in human social behaviour and new skill development fall under the domain of affective outcomes, particularly the development of soft skills (Ally & Cleveland-Innes, 2007).

Socialization is the process by which people learn soft skills. It allows a person to function within various norms of a defined society (residential, work and/or school, interest memberships, etc.). By definition, socialization is the process by which humans learn to adopt the behavioral patterns of the community in which they live (Clausen, 1968). Community, at varying levels, includes all groups sharing and/or interacting in many ways: through intent, belief, resources, preferences, needs, etc. The strength of the bond formed between the members of a given community is then dependant upon the degree of commonality amoung its individuals (American Heritage Dictionary).

Parents are the primary instructors of socializing the young. This primary process occurs in the early stages of life in order, "… to prepare the individual [the child] to function as a full-fledged, competent member of society, who perceives, feels, and acts in ways appropriate to his personal characteristics and his placement within the society …" (Clausen, 1968, p. 140). However, socialization also includes adult individuals moving into environments significantly different from one(s) in which they have previously lived, and as a result of moving, must learn a new set of behaviors or norms. A norm, or social norm, is a rule that is socially enforced. Norms are enforced through rewards and sanctions, which distinguishes them from cultural beliefs and values (Online Medical Dictionary, 2007). Norms are thought to affect a wide variety of human behavior. The adaptation to new norms is a process that must occur at some level when an individual moves from one country to another, from one climatic area to another, from one's mother-tongue to another language, or from one work place to another (Clausen, 1968).

Good social skills are critical to the successful functioning of life. They enable one to know what to say and when to say something, how to make choices that fit within the norms

and expectations of society, and how to behave in a variety of situations – both positive and negative (NASP, 2002). “For a society to endure, it must socialize each generation of youth to embody the virtues and characteristics that are essential to that society’s survival and prosperity” (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005, p. 64). One must have social abilities to communicate, negotiate, assert one's self, work in a team, and have empathy for another (UNESCO, 2005).

Educating the Whole Child: Re-focusing our Teaching Goals

> “Too many highly proficient people commit fraud, pursue paths to success marked by greed, and care little about how their actions affect the lives of others. … Surely, we should demand more from our schools than to educate people to be proficient in reading and mathematics.” (Noddings, 2005, p.10)

From the early days of Aristotle, through times of Dewey, to the present day, education has theoretically been the teaching of the whole child – intellectually, socially, and morally. In days past, the school was merely an extension of what parents taught their children at home. However, in present society, schools are increasingly becoming a major provider and significant partner to parents in facilitating the social learning process. This change is mainly due to increased negative social influences and increasing demands on families (NASP, 2002). Schools are becoming more accountable for the development of responsible citizens in a democratic society.

The drive of society today is to be the best at almost all costs. Social norms and other ethical thinking have been abandoned to be replaced by students who are willing to resort to actions that are signs of a lack of integrity. A recent online survey in the United States recorded a sizeable number of teens who indicated cheating, plagiarizing, telling lies, and/or resorting to violence was not a problem, and sometimes a necessity, in order to get ahead.

Furthermore, these same students were, “indifferent to the consequences of behaving badly, recording it and airing [their] antics on the World Wide Web” (Baltimore Sun, 2008, ¶2). In fact, one report indicates that 90% of students say they cheat on homework consistently (Donaldson James, 2008). The pressures to get into the top universities to gain access to the top jobs push students to more drastic measures.

“But both history and common sense tell us that a democratic society expects much more [than reading and math]: It wants graduates who exhibit sound character, have a social conscience, think critically, are willing to make commitments, and are aware of global problems” (Noddings, 2005, p. 11). “In an increasing competitive global economy, it is not enough for students to acquire subject-level mastery alone. Skills like creativity, problem-solving, communication and analytical thinking are necessary for all levels of success …” (NACOL, 2006, p. 2). In this part of the socialization process, there is recognition of the distinctive talents of the individual and the creation of opportunities for students to flourish in them, to create responses to emotional, imaginative, and social ideas, and to promote growth and development in what is often called the hidden curriculum within education (Eisner, 2005, p. 18).

Consequently, with a lack of soft-skilled employees further showing in a lack of social integrity in today’s student population, there is a need to refocus on this aspect of education for children. With the current trend being a need for educational institutions to re-examine what is being modeled and taught to children within its system (and to what levels of success). There is also a need to examine what is necessary to make future employees employable – to adjust this hidden curriculum accordingly.

The School’s Growing Role in the Socialization Process

The role of socialization and soft skill training needs to be one that is actively and consciously a part of the hidden curriculum – the curriculum of behaviours, norms, citizenship, and social responsibility. Lavoie (1994) reminds us that children go to school for a living. “School is their job, their livelihood, their identity. Therefore, the critical role that school plays in the child’s social development and self-concept must be recognized” (¶2). Social skills, such as cooperation, communication, and self-restraint, are those skills that must be taught and practiced through the gatherings of groups of people. Teachers, who model and include these practices, create learning opportunities to hone soft skills (Johnson, Poliner, & Bonaiuto, 2005, p. 60-61).

> For social and emotional learning to succeed, students need opportunities to practice their skills in safe and reinforcing environments. … Effective social and emotional learning requires diligent attention to explicitly teaching social and emotional skills, but students also need opportunities to see skills modeled, to practice emerging skills, to apply skills in novel situations, and to receive feedback and reinforcement. … Changing students’ social and emotional behaviour requires more than skill lessons – it requires attention to the environment in which the students learn (Johnson, Poliner, & Bonaiuto, 2005, p. 62-63).

“With a full repertoire of social skills, students will have the ability to make social choices that will strengthen their interpersonal relationships and facilitate success in school,” and later in life (NASP, 2002, Consequences of Good Social Skills section, ¶1). Effective practices identified by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) are inclusive of a teaching process that uses a behavioural/social learning approach and uses a

common or universal language that allows for full understanding of the newly expected behaviour (2002). This includes specifically:

- focus on the facilitation of the desirable behaviour and eliminating the undesirable behaviour,
- use of modeling, coaching, and role-playing with immediate performance feedback,
- provision of training and practice in a wide range of settings with different groups or people to encourage generalization of new skills to multiple, real-life like situations,
- inclusion of parent(s)/guardian(s), and
- individualized focus to meet a particular person's and/or group's needs (NASP, 2002).

To prepare students socially for their world, educators, administrators, and related professions need to create learning where students are involved in "quests to make sense of their world" (Brooks & Thompson, 2005, p. 48). Part of this sense is the appreciation of diversity, promotion of equity, advancing broad-mindedness, encouraging voice and expression (Books & Thompson, 2005, p. 49), and giving students ways to practice those required skills throughout their school day and into the future (Johnson, Poliner, & Bonaiuto, 2005, p. 59).

To exemplify the need to refocus on social skills in all facets of education, members of the European Council in Lisbon mandated for a greater social cohesion within its members' educational systems. In order to meet this mandate, the council recommended:

- early education to provide the best chance to develop social skills in children, to prepare them for the increasingly multi-cultural world, and

- citizenship education, including opportunities for participation in civil society, as a means of combating cultural and social exclusion and facilitation of the integration of people with special needs (Council of the European Union, 2005, p. 4).

As part of the strategy, the council members suggested working in peer learning clusters (p. 7). This building of a learning community is the main and most important factor to the development and sustaining of a sense of community within the classroom – for students to work and interact together, and to build and become part of a community (Kerka, 1996; Smith, 2000, p. 18).

In order to ensure the youth of today have the skills for tomorrow, all educational institutions need to ensure that learning is moving from the traditional lecture and 'listen to what I have to say', to a more interactive and cooperative style of learning with the teacher as a facilitator of the learning. Students need to learn responsibility for and to find motivation within their learning through the facilitation and modeling of the teacher as maturity allows within the student's learning journey. "It has to prepare the people to be sensitive for the developments of the future and to be able to react within the shortest possible time. It has to support the access to knowledge for everybody. It has to promote a high performance culture" (Staudt, 2001).

Socialization in Distance Education

"Distance Education, in particular, needs to provide the types and extent of interactivity consistent with the new global society" (St. Pierre Hirtle & McGrew-Zoubi, 2000, p. 3). While online distance education and its use of technology allows for interaction through communication, there is a line of thinking that the learning of affective outcomes is not possible via distance education. The loss of facial cues and body language creates a false and

superficial sense of community. Yet, 'meeting on-line' is fast becoming a norm as it becomes an everyday occurrence for many. Popular online sites, such as the *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life*, are becoming havens for people to create their own character and live vicariously through them. Within these on-line communities, members have the ability to create and join virtual 'sub-communities' that share common ideas and personal experiences and/or knowledge on a regular basis. These 'sub-communities', such as in *Second Life*, range from art shows and art history lectures to Harvard's *CyberOne Project* which allows the public to join mock trials (Timson, 2008). Interactive sites and other social software such as *Nexopia* and *Facebook*, allow people to chat, blog events of interest and experiences, view pictures, join networks of common interest, buy and sell items, etc.

A growing number of people are using computer mediated communication (CMC) as a way to seek contact, commonality, companionship and community. Personal relationships conducted via CMC are commonplace in today's society with 60% of one sample in a study reporting they had formed a personal relationship with someone they had initially contacted through social software online (Chenault, 1996). Because of this growing trend, society must begin to re-think the image of how relationships are formed.

As people interact and disclose personal information by means of CMC, they are forming relationships that are longer and lasting. Chenault (1998) cites a hypothesized this 'interactional' theory: "Revealing leads to liking and liking leads to revealing," – a cyclical and continuous set of events. Heavy users of CMC were found to meet their social needs through the making of friendships that were carried 'off-line' and eventually formed into cohesive social groups (Chenault, 1998; Oren, Mioduser, & Nachmias, 2002). Oren, Mioduser, and Nachmias (2002) further suggest that CMC is now perceived as a social

meeting place, which provides opportunities for the development of new modes of interpersonal relationships.

Parks and Floyd's (in Chenault, 1998) research challenges the old notion of the inability to form relationships at a distance. Personal relationships do develop as the participants in the 'conversations' come to depend on each other more deeply and in more complex ways. As relationships develop, breadth and depth of the interaction increases, as well as the variety of topics, activities, and media use. Other research studies confirm that personal relationships can and do develop in CMC, but more slowly due to the lack of the face-to-face clues that are not present in the CMC format (cues toward self-disclosure, development of trust, and communication of intimacy). "… [CMC] offers the possibility to abandon obviously distasteful or unsuitable connections, as well as [offers] opportunities to enter into simultaneous relationships with a number of people" (Oren, Mioduser, & Nachmias, 2002).

Online distance learning also allows students to interact with one another, to hear and see more views and opinions, and to meet more people than was normally possible 15 to 20 years ago (Sherry, 1996). Chen and Jiang (2000) found that social discourse was possible via online distance education learning through a constructivist approach to the solving of a problem, as well as heavy interaction and social discourse (p. 187, 188). Not only did this occur among students and their mentor-teachers in the online program, but also among the students themselves.

Lobry de Bruyn (2004) goes so far as to claim that online education actually allows for *greater* social growth than the traditional classrooms. Not only is everyone afforded a voice, but a more equitable voice, unrestricted by time and space (p. 69). While she found that affective outcomes were more present in the initial stages of discussion (introductory

assignments), students continued to show affective outcomes in later and more cognitive discussions through the use of emoticons and in self-disclosure. This latter show of affective outcomes was especially shown in the admitting of a lack of prior knowledge by students while still willing to contribute on a topic of discussion.

Collaborative learning is a key factor in the facilitation of interpersonal communications and student affect. The orientation of activities around collaborative learning in fact not only improved academic learning, but lengthened the attainment and outward use of affective outcomes in undergraduate students. Furthermore, when collaborative learning was used in conjunction with mastery learning (group-based, teacher-paced learning model), an even greater effect was made on affective variables and cognitive gains. The overall effect of employing the dual strategies was motivation within a group setting that had an affective orientation which manifested itself in the demonstration of social responsibility (Krank & Moon, 2001). While traditional classrooms seem to lack this element within their learning environment, online learning facilitates thrive on the collaboration of students working towards a common goal (Roger, 1998).

"Online courses often feature consensus building and group projects, through which the learner can develop skills in collaborating with distant colleagues and cooperating with diverse individuals" (Kerka, 1996). These are the very skills that are needed in today's global workplace: global awareness, self-directed learning, information and communication technologies (ICTs), problem-solving skills, time-management, and personal responsibility (NACOL, 2006). Smith (2000, p.17) found that collaborative learning through CMC increased cultural awareness which would have been previously limited in a conventional classroom setting, and removed barriers to the learning for a variety of reasons (physical

disability, shyer students, remotely located students, etc.). The removal of physical appearances and/or isolation allowed for learners to concentrate on team building and working towards a common aim.

With social interaction occurring and growing through CMC, for both personal and business uses, educational institutions must be able to rethink their teaching of soft skills to include those skills used via this technology. Because schools play a tremendous role in socialization and in the community (NACOL, 2006; Wood, 2005), the online communities will serve to be the socialization process for those engaging in this 'new society' (Scarafiotti & Cleveland-Innes, 2006). "This potential can only be realized if online students are taught these skills in intentional and measurable ways" (NACOL, 2006, p. 8).

The Best Practices of Soft Skill Teachings in Distance Education

"The best and most effective projects engage students in activities where they build displays, hold events, role play with others … and engage in immersive environments related tot heir area of study (Timson, 2008, ¶23).

In Warner's online distance education study (2003), students were asked how to encourage the building of social cohesion through the use of discussion boards. Students unanimously cited the necessity for positive interpersonal communication. Their criteria included a non-threatening environment, building familiarity with one another early in the course, and adequate time to become acquainted prior to discussion assignments. Furthermore, these same students also mentioned:

- mandatory class groups, which were assigned on the first day of class
- creation of a "buddy" system
- provision for social interaction outside of the assignments

- provision of a “meet and greet” or introductory assignment.

Consistent with Warner’s study, Newberry (2001) offers seven principles of good practice in online distance education courses to facilitate the development of soft skills in distance education courses. These seven are:

- encouraging student-faculty contact
- encouraging cooperation among students
- encouraging active learning
- giving prompt feedback
- emphasizing time on task(s)
- communicating high expectations
- respecting diverse talents and ways of learning (p. 3).

“These principles emphasize the creation of a learning environment that ensures high levels of interaction, cooperation, and communication” (Newberry, 2001, p.3). The online teacher has to be a facilitator and take the time needed to develop the relationship necessary with their students (Wood, 2005). As well, the interaction must have real purpose in order for the students to ‘buy into’ the discussion (Velayo, 2001). Once a community has been formed with the students, Oren, Mioduser, and Nachmias (2002) then propose a decrease in teachers’ involvement in discussion to truly build student ownership, hence the development of interdependency and leadership growth. Teachers also need to:

- moderate the group’s work to enable student interaction, only as facilitators, and to minimize their interventions to allow students to work interdependently as the course progresses further

- encourage participants to act in a friendly manner and create a relaxed and calm atmosphere
- be attentive to participants' social needs and offer messages (or parts of messages) that have social meaning rather than just content-base
- enhance the social atmosphere by using supportive feedback, discussing ways to facilitate the creation of social interaction and emphasizing the importance of peer feedback
- encourage students to relate to each other beyond the learning activities.

> Students' digital social behaviour may be improved by teaching them new communication skills that are relevant to the participation in virtual discussion groups, such as how to bridge between colloquial spoken and written language, how to express feelings by symbolic means [emoticons], how to participate in asynchronous discussions (e.g., to reflect on other people's and their own previous messages, [to maintain] parallel lines of discussion), and how to moderate peer-group discussions (Oren, Mioduser, and Nachmias, 2002).

Lobry de Bruyn (2004) advocates the appointment of a student to summarize discussions (furthering synthesis of material as well), the assigning of tasks in groups, and augmenting asynchronous communication with synchronous technology. The inclusion of synchronous media types, "tend to help create greater social presence" (Newberry, 2001, p.6). Furthermore, having students interact in a face-to-face mode early in the class allows them to begin forming personal relationships that may be maintained or extended via online activities.

An added technique students may use in order to raise social presence is to ensure that they respond to others' messages (especially in asynchronous media) as quickly as possible. "Students should make sure that their responses are appropriate and related directly to the other person's previous communications" (Newberry, 2001, p. 6). This is accomplished through the careful consideration and reflection during the reading of another's posting and prior to posting one's own comments.

The measurement of soft skills is one of the hardest to measure. It is not a skill that can necessarily be measured with tests and other scores, but becomes evident with a visible change in behaviours exhibited (UNESCO, 2005). This is why it is of importance that teachers in distance educational settings be certified, knowledgeable in their specific subject area, and trained in effective online distance education strategies. She/he must be able to determine the degree of students' interaction and be able to evaluate student achievement, attitudes, and perceptions at a distance (Sherry, 1996). "In other words, the adoption of online education can act as a catalyst for institutional transformation on many fronts, aligning institutions with requirement of a new social order" (Scarafiotti & Cleveland-Innes, 2006, New Role for Online Learners section, ¶8).

The Social Needs of Tomorrow

Teens are becoming more and more dependant on the virtual world to, "communicate, express themselves and explore their identities. Experts call the Internet the socialization institution of modern society" (Gordon, 2005, p. 48c-48d). They are using the Internet to research, work collaboratively, be creative in a virtual world, to flirt with one another, to bully, or to explore different identities or roles. With teens averaging six and a half hours per day of media consumption, students are readily able to communicate without a true reality

check. This is, “encouraging kids not to take responsibility for their own actions,” because of limited consequences in the online environment (Gordon, 2005, p. 48f).

This technological familiarity is not limited to just the teens of the 21st century. In 2005, the Education Department of the United States reported that almost one in four children in nursery school had used the Internet – children as young as the ages of three and four. *Pixie Hollow* (Walt Disney Internet Group), *Webkinz* (Ganz) and other such ‘web playgrounds’ are on the rise, where pre-school children are introduced to the virtual world, usually through pictorial representations to guide their movement (Barnes, 2007). Those born between 1980 and 2003 are identified as the ones who will take the technology for granted. By 2011, it is estimated that 20 million children will be members of a virtual world at some point (Barnes, 2007). Computers, Internet, cellular phones, iPods®, and other digital equipment will be – and already are, by some – seen as common household items in everyday use (Scarafiotti & Cleveland-Innes, 2006).

This introduction and rapid growth of technology is challenging the norms within a society in a multitude of ways. The norms of interacting, socializing, and cooperating are mutating as newer and faster technologies emerge. This growth in use of technology is changing the way that individuals socialize. “Because humans are involved [in this relatively new form of socialization], social norms do develop in cyberspace, but they require new communication competencies,” (Kerka, 1996, The social nature of distance learning section, ¶1), hence the challenge to some traditional norms. For example, ‘social software’, such as blogs, wikis, email, groupware, etc., are allowing for groups of people to come together based on interest and commonalities without meeting a person face-to-face. Such software types allow for the support of social networks and help people to build new relationships in

new ways. "… it's about co-evolution: people in personal contact, interacting towards their own ends, influencing each other." It is, in fact, changing the way that we socialize (Boyd, 2003).

Boyd (2003) additionally explains that social software is a tool, "that depend more on social conversation than on software features to facilitate interaction, collaboration" (Boyd, 2003). It is software built around one or more premise:

- support for conversational interaction between individuals or groups – whether synchronous or asynchronous
- support for social feedback, often leading to the development of a 'digital' reputation
- support for social networks – to explicitly create and manage a digital expression of people's personal relationships, and to help them build new relationships.

"It's not some crass marketing gimmick, although it will certainly be used for that. Rather it's the best way we have for helping an industry come to grips with trends that are unmistakable" (Windley, 2003). The popularity of social software is not solely for personal use, but is also spreading into the business world.

> "Online business or personal network systems like Ryze, Friendster, Meetup, and LinkIn are exploding in use, often adding tens of thousands of new users every week, because they provide the key elements of social software: conversational interaction, social feedback leading to digital reputation and explicit representation of 'equaintance'" (Boyd 2003).

Boyd (2003) speculates that social software will increasingly impact the way businesses access their markets, changing the way people collaborate and communicate with one another and the customer. In the workplace, collaboration and the tools currently available

are making coordination and collaboration among employees easier. It enables members to post questions, work jointly on documents, schedule meetings, and track progress (Kirsner, 2001). Unless people are not trained and/or encouraged to use the vast potential of these tools in cooperation of others, the tools become of little use, and at times may even hamper productivity.

> Global competency is seen as key to a strong citizenry and competent business leaders, yet less than 1% of college age students travel to study abroad. The knowledge, skills and attitudes required to appropriately manoeuvre an international, multicultural and multilingual world are best gained through direct experience with people of other cultures. Technology offers the opportunity for post-secondary institutions to provide students cross-cultural experiences using information and communication technologies linked to cross-cultural communities (Scarafiotti & Cleveland-Innes, 2006).

In order to ensure that the education system facilitates the socialization process in the growing global community, students are going to need to be able to learn in the moment (on the spot) and adapt to situations in real time – the here and now. The people who will 'survive' will be those who can transfer that knowledge learned within education systems to the real and international marketplace (Staudt, 2001). The students of today will need to have the ability to come in contact with other people from different social, cultural, economic, and experiential backgrounds, resulting in new knowledge. This requires social skills that will allow them to communicate and collaborate with widely dispersed people whom they may never have met (or will ever meet) in a face-to-face situation (Sherry, 1996).

This change is not only a factor for the common worker. For those whose talents and aspirations are for leadership within a company, the roles of managers, supervisors and top administrators have also changed due to Web and Internet capabilities. As managers of teams in the information age, one is no longer isolated as in days past. The new manager is a team leader who needs to share information, to communicate, to persuade, and to assume the responsibility for decisions – all skills gained through learning how to deal with people in society (Staudt, 2001; Bates, 1995).

The global shift has created a new set of skills for all levels of business. The soft skills, as identified by the Conference Board of Canada, that are required in this evolving work-force include:

- good communication skills (reading/writing/speaking/listening)
- social skills: ethics; positive attitudes; responsibility
- team work
- an ability to adapt to changing circumstances (Bates, 1995).

Of these skills, Staudt (2001) emphasizes the importance of two fundamental abilities that will be of importance in an informational-based society: the ability to ask the right question (good communication skills), and the ability to team resources and work cooperatively (team work and social skills). “Alliances and partnerships [will] gain more and more importance” (Bates, 1995). These alliances will cross not only the global community, but also within the variety of departments within the internal structure of a company.

> More and more employees have to understand … they have to integrate the partner in their own strategies. They have to be diplomats of the partner. And on the other hand they have to best possibly represent their own company to

> the partner in the best possible way. And they have to handle a situation, where the objectives of the company clash with the interests of the partner (Bates, 1995).

Learners will need inter-personal communication, the opportunity to question and/or challenge, and discuss ideas and issues. This means the learning must also be collaborative, both asynchronously and synchronously. The learning of students today needs to be as much a social activity as an individual learning activity (Bates, 1995).

So, Are We Preparing Them?

Soft skill development, through socialization in education, is not only a concern in Canada, but across North America (NACOL, 2006). A shortage of these skills will continue as new forms of communication and different ways to socialize become an integral and everyday part of the workplace (Ally & Cleveland-Innes, 2007). According to Ian Ferguson, the President and CEO of WCG International (a company who provides for skills training), "the majority of small businesses we work with every day tell us they want to hire for attitudes, and train for hard skills" (Conference Board of Canada, 2003, ¶2). If the Canadian business and market place needs soft skilled workers, they hold the expectation of, and will look to, the training of these skills within our education systems.

In a poll that was conducted in 2003 for Alberta Learning, only 59% of the public expressed that they thought students were prepared for citizenship. According to Horvath (2005), of the 20 desirable outcomes listed in *Alberta's Education's Guide to Education,* only six are measured in provincial standardized tests. These tests are primarily designed to test academic requirements for university. "However, much knowledge and ability that are not tested but occur in fine arts, practical arts and beyond specific curricula – fluency in

speaking and listening, creative thinking, working with others, and loving to learn – are critically needed too, especially by the vast majority of students who never go to university (Horvath, 2005).

In a background paper, *Accountability on Education*, the Alberta Teachers' Association [ATA] (2005) commented that the priorities of the Alberta government to test core academic subject areas (mathematics, English language arts, sciences, and social studies) in Alberta has created a focus that excludes many of those skills and qualities that businesses today value. While few soft skill principles are built-into the provincial curriculum (the Program of Studies), the provincial-wide standardized tests administered to those students in grades 3, 6, 9 and 12 (commonly known as *Provincial Achievement Tests*, or PATs), do not measure the areas of student ability to, "speak clearly, accurately, and appropriately for the context, manage time and other resources to complete a task, demonstrate initiative, leadership, flexibility, and persistence, or have the desire and realize the need for lifelong learning" (ATA, 2005, p. 51). Rather, because of the pressures and importance placed on the results of this exam, teachers feel forced to drive the classroom instruction towards the content on the exam and knowledge based learning to ensure high achievement. The resulting effect of these exams has placed pressures on teachers to ensure that students are ready for the exam and teachers 'teach to the exam', creating limited opportunities for students to practice inquiry learning, group work, and those other skills not measured in a pencil-and-paper test (ATA, 2005). Hence, the active and conscious teaching of soft skill acquisition is often 'left in the dust'.

CEO's of the top 500 companies have stated that they look to traditional classrooms to teach and prepare students with the skills necessary to work. The two most important they

listed were loyalty and interpersonal communication skills. Businesses, community leaders, educators and parents are all agreed that the needs of the students would be better served by an educational base that is broader than the core subject area and knowledge acquisition, as emphasized by the standardized testing. Accountability systems must be evolved to measure what society values, not valuing what is measured (ATA, 2005). "The complexities of the 21st-century society and the unpredictability of the forces acting upon it require citizens to become more engaged in democratic institutions … to address the full range of educational goals is greater than ever" (ATA, 2005, p. 54). As stated by one businessman, ways to measure learning that reflects future needs, not the past, is what is needed today (ATA, 2005).

Two studies of early virtual schools in Alberta were completed in 1998-1999. (At the time of the study, the schools had been operational for less than 5 years.) The studies revealed that parents, students, and teachers were generally satisfied with the interaction, collaboration, communication, and socialization that their respective schools were providing (Smith, 2000; Alberta Online Consortium [AOC], 2000). Most of the parents surveyed were satisfied with the online student collaboration and the social and collaborative time that was allowed for children. However, some teachers in the schools surveyed expressed some concern with the limits of online socialization and the limited time in face-to-face experiences. One teacher stated, "True strength, however, resides in our social skills where we learn how to relate to others, to be interdependent. Online learning does not build essential social skills" (AOC, 2000, p. 55). Another teacher stated that a lack of verbal communication and group work means social skills and speaking skills may not be learned. However the online education

could still meet these objectives through call backs and chat line sessions, or if the student was in a combined program with a traditional school (AOC, 2000).

With socialization a vital part of the learning a child experiences in their formal schooling years, it is concerning that the thinking of social development is not being achieved in online distance education settings. Furthermore, the basis for most knowledge of why this shortage of soft skilled workers exists has been limited to theoretical rhetoric and casual observation. A lack of research in the area of distance education at the time was a limitation in both the AOC's (2000) and Smith's (2000) studies. Even in the span of time since these two studies were completed, little still has been studied in terms of affective outcomes and the socialization process that students learn through online distance schooling, especially in the areas of secondary education (middle and senior years). Evidence is limited in its ability to accurately describe whether good practices of teaching soft skills are, in fact, being actively included into curriculum and are being taught and modeled in the day-to-day practices. Even less evidence is the availability of the measures of how well students are able to develop soft skills in an online course.

Only through the study and measure of soft skill acquisition will we begin to see the possible reasons for this shortage and distance education's contribution to the problem that is currently expressed in the Canadian working society.

Summary

Socialization skills are an important process of ensuring norms and behavioural patterns are valued and followed within a community. Educational systems have always played an important role in the socialization of the young within a community. However, because of the stresses placed on the modern day family, the educational system is being increasingly

required to ensure the necessary skills are being taught and adopted. In order to ensure this adaptation of skill occurs, good practice says that teachers should model such behaviours as well as create learning environments that allow for the practice of socialization skills in safe and caring environments.

While traditional education continues to be the mainstay of educational practice for a majority of today's youth, the numbers of students entering online distance education programs, whether in part-time or full-time studies, is increasing at a steady rate. If this trend continues, it will be only a matter of time before online distance education becomes the mainstay and traditional education passé (Saba, 2005). The impetus for online education means that, "educators must learn to manipulate technology to build community and a conversation within a community to teach today's computer-savvy students" (Rogers, 1998, p.2). Students must begin to prepare for a global world, built within this Information Age. This preparation would include interaction between people they may never meet face-to-face, yet be able to work cooperatively with in order to achieve a desirable conclusion of a common goal. This may mean forming relationships via electronic media.

In order to fully understand the acquisition of soft skills via online distance education, two essential questions need to be answered. First and foremost, teaching methodologies employed by the educational institution will need to be identified and compared to the literature's classification of good practices. Are distance educational instructors consciously planning, teaching, and modeling pro-social skills in their course as mandated in the given Program of Studies? What strategies and practices are currently being used to meet the development of soft skills and socialization of the student? Is it an absence of soft skill

training and development strategies within the curriculum in online courses that is contributing to the soft skill deficiency in the Canadian workplace?

Based upon the information revealed in the first question, a second essential question and measurement of the levels of soft skills and affective outcomes needs to be completed. Such measures will need to be taken keeping in mind the confidence students feel with:

- their effectiveness to communicate with others via several media
- their ability to be flexible
- their problem-solving skills (creatively and reflectively)
- their cooperative skills and ability to accomplish tasks in a team environment.

Is it possible to aptly train students in soft skills and affective outcomes via online distance education? If so, to what levels is this accomplishment possible?

The current soft skill shortages in Canada and the notion of 'teaching to an exam' suggest that soft skills are not presently being actively taught in schools, especially within the traditional classroom. Additionally, with the emergent global economy based on electronic media, distance education could have the upper hand at teaching students to be comfortable and confident in this universal society. While varying theories exist about the levels of success in social skill acquisition, there are limited studies of the success at a secondary schooling level. This comparison study will more concretely answer these questions as it pertains to secondary students within the province of Alberta.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Methodology

While much literature explains the necessary inclusion of soft skill instruction in distance education, empirical evidence of its permeation and levels of success is limited. A mixed mode method (also known as multimethodology) was planned to be used for the collection and analysis of data. This allowed for strategies of inquiry that involved collecting data simultaneously to best understand the research problem through the collection of numerical data as well as textual information (Creswell, 2003). "...the strenghth of almost every measure is flawed in some way or other, and therefore research dsignes and strategies can be offset by counter balancing strengths from one to another" (Watkins, 2003, p. 78-79). This approach allows a more adequate view of the social world, "where the two methods are used in completmentary ways" (Watkins, ibid.).

This study was to utilize a case study research design with elements of comparison design incorporated throughout the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data.

> Case study research design is defined as non-experimental as it does not include any manipulation or control, is inductive, and does not seek to predict. Rather, its aim is to offer an explanation or description of events or phenomena, [as they exist in the society], in response to the questions 'how' and 'why' … It is particularly regarded as a useful method to gather basic information when little is known about the phenomenon of interest (Taylor, 1998, p. 27).

These studies lead to the indepth exploration of a program, the events and/or activities that occur within it, the processes that are followed, and its individuals ‘in action’. The case study is bound by time and the specific activity to identify patterns and emerging themes from the data (Creswell, 2003).

Comparative research design, as defined by Mauch and Park (2003), would also allow for the comparison of two existing situations, the online or virtual distance student with the traditional student, which are then studied to determine their likenesses and differences. Through the sampling and comparison of social skill acquisition between these two types of educated students, a clearer understanding would be drawn of how effective online education is in learning and practicing these social skills.

By conducting this study in its natural setting, the researcher was able to look for the natural and/or regular involvement of partcipants in the development of social skills with minimal interference to the participants. Through the planned collection and integration of both quantitative and qualitative data, a clearer picture of soft skill acquisition within the sample could be drawn and a comparison to traditional soft skill acquistion made.

Specific Mixed Mode Procedure

A concurrent triangulation approach was used in an attempt to cross-validate or corroborate findings with this case/comparison study design. “This traditional mixed methods model is advantageous because it is familiar to most researchers and can result in well-validated and substantiated findings” (Creswell, 2003, p. 217). As well, this data collection method would allow for a shorter data collection period, an estimated three month period for this study, as looked upon favorably by those participants at the school levels.

To determine preliminary interest in the study and feasibility in conducting the study at the school level, the researcher conducted phone calls to various directors and principals of online schools in Alberta. Preliminary commitments and interest were shown enough to conclude that the following method of data collection for this study was possible.

Upon approval of the study from Athabasca University Research Ethics board, formal permission and cooperation was granted from the school districts (superintendents and, in the case of two school boards, the research coordinators) to conduct the study in both their online school and a partnered traditional class. Due to issues related to the Freedom of Information and Privacy Act (FOIP), students involved in the study were required to have parent/guardian permission forms signed and returned to the researcher.

A self-test/pre-test survey was developed by the researcher, based on the adult test developed by Cleveland-Innes and Ally (2007, p. 15-16), using a 5-point Likert Scale and two open-ended questions. The survey was administered to estimate soft skill competencies of the sample at the beginning of the study. The resulting data were to be used to compare online and traditionally educated students, as well as serve as a baseline from which to compare post-test data.

During the time of the study, samples of online transcripts (both asynchronous postings and synchronous chat) were taken from the online distance classes. These transcripts were analyzed and rated for demonstration of social skill application and growth. Coding of the transcripts was to be based on a rubric developed from those required soft skills as set out by the literature review and based on the soft skill and affective domain stages set out by Cleveland-Innes and Ally (2007).:

- listening skills and analytical thinking (receiving)

- ability to communicate effectively, leadership skills, problem-solving (responding)
- diplomacy and flexibility (valuing)
- change-readiness and team-building skills (organizing)
- self-awareness and creativity (characterization)

Interviews of teachers (both online and traditional classes) were also conducted face-to-face at the end of the study. The questions of the study were based on literature findings and would allow the researcher to acquire a more in-depth view of the school (history), the role the school sees in teaching social skills, current practices and policies involving social skill development, and other emergent issues as they developed.

At the conclusion of the study timeline, a final self-assessment/post-test and social skill awareness examination was administered to the same student sample (online and traditionally educated students), similar to that of the pre-test/self-assessment given at the beginning of the study. Data collected from the study was analyzed and compared for a deeper understanding of social skill acquisition in online education settings at the senior high levels of education.

This particular study was bound to those activities for the duration of three months – April, May, and June (2007).

Research Sampling

The research sample was taken from three school districts within Northern Alberta. In order to meet the needs of the study, the school district required to house an online distance school, with classes at the high school level. Volunteers were initially approached via telephone, and received formal consent from the superintendent of their respective school board. Once a class was chosen at the online school, an age and/or grade level match was

made to a traditional class within the district. This match was made through the recommendation of the online school teacher, principal and/or superintendent.

Student participation was facilitated by the teachers of the respective classes. In the case of online students, students sent their consent to participate directly to the researcher via Canada Post. Traditional teachers collected the consent in sealed envelopes which were then retrieved by the researcher.

Initially, four school boards consented to the study. However, due to problems of schedules and communication, only three of the four completed the study. Two of the three school boards are located in urban populations, while the other was in a rural location of Alberta.

Student participation was accessed through the teachers of each participating class – both in the online distance schools and the traditional classrooms. The researcher had difficulty procuring participation in the student sample of the online school classes. Teachers of the distance schools were supportive and sent out two or three messages and/or requests to participate in the study.

For the purpose of this study, the population represented here is all high school students in Alberta within a publicly funded school, either enrolled in an online distance education program and/or attending a traditional school setting. In total, the sample consisted of 33 student participants and five teacher/administrator interviews. Specifically, the students partaking of this study were:

- 2 students from the rural online school setting
- 2 students from the first urban online school setting
- 2 students from the second urban online school setting

- 12 students from the rural traditional school setting
- No (0) student from the first urban traditional setting
- 15 students from the second urban traditional setting

The teacher/administrative participants in this study were:

- 1 teacher, who was also the principal, in the rural online school
- 1 teacher and 1 director of the first urban online school
- 1 teacher of the second urban online school
- 1 teacher in the rural traditional school
- No (0) teachers from the first urban traditional school
- 1 teacher in the second urban school

Because the nature of the study was to measure soft skill acquisition in distance educational settings, the lack of online student participation did not allow for a quantitative measure and comparison, as data collected would be inconclusive due to actual sample size of online participants.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through three main means: analysis of student conversations (transcripts), interviews, and a pre-test/post-test self-analysis. Data collection focused on online educational settings.

Quantitative data were collected through the use of a pre-test self-assessment and a post-test examination and self-assessment. Questions included in the assessments were closed responses, based on a Likert 5-point scale model. The post-test examination included both closed and open responses.

Qualitative data included the analysis of transcripts produced through the variety of CMC applications (synchronous chat and asynchronous postings where applicable) in use within the course and/or school, as well as the interviews of teachers by the researcher.

Transcripts were coded according to a predetermined/pre-developed rubric and grouped according to the patterns of soft skill development that emerge from the CMC. With this observational technique, unusual aspects were detected if and when they may have occurred (Creswell, 2003). Interviews with participants were generally open and guided by the responses given by the participants. Interview data were to be used by the researcher to understand principles of soft skill education employed by the participating schools, as well as to verify those findings within the transcript analysis. Limitations to the interview that must be noted here are that responses given in an interview were not within the natural field setting and may have presented some bias as to responses (e.g. participants answering in a fashion that they believe is favorable to the interviewer).

A sample of convenience was used in this study. Sampling was limited to those schools (and their respective classes) that agreed to participate. Information that was obtained through the research was treated with the utmost confidentiality and used for the sole purpose of the research. This researcher discussed coding with each individual sampling site and the participating students, thus ensuring confidentiality of the students participating.

Treatment of the Data and Validation Procedures

Data analysis in this study comprises the analysis of qualitative data due to the lack of quantitative data available. Analyses of qualitative data were based upon the interpretation of the researcher and the emergent themes and/or patterns that come from the analyses. With the use of a coding process, a description of the participants, setting, and emergent themes and/or

patterns of soft skill development was developed and further analyzed. After considerable review and reflection, interpretations, or meaning, of the data were made (Creswell, 2003).

While reliability and generalizability play a minor role in qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2003), there are some 'checks and balances' that were employed in the data analysis procedure. With a detailed description of this sample, this study can be generalized to those populations sharing similar demographics. Reliability can be checked as to the consistent patterns or themes that developed, as well as to similar studies, if available. Internal validity of the data is clear with the use of narrative dissemination filled with, "rich, thick description to convey the findings" (Creswell, 2003, p. 196), and is to be compared to those findings evolving from the study of transcripts. As well, the data obtained from the differing locations were triangulated to ensure a coherent justification for themes (Creswell, ibid).

Due to the lack of participants in the online student sample, comparisons between quantitative and qualitative data were not possible in this study. However, analysis of the qualitative findings of the interview process allowed for a deeper understanding of social skill acquisition in online educational settings.

Summary

The study of soft skill development will be of value to those directly involved in the educating of society's youth (parents, teachers, administrators, curriculum developers, software developers), but may also be of interest to companies who will be the future employers of these students. Furthermore, governmental agencies can benefit from this study and the use of this information for further curricular changes and/or developments.

All endeavors have been taken to inform the student and teacher samples of the purpose of the study and to protect the confidentiality of the subjects participating in the study. Approval

was gained from the Research Ethics Board (Athabasca University) and from the educational boards from which the sample was drawn. Under the Freedom of Information and Privacy Act (FOIP), students received written permission from a parent/guardian in order to be considered a part of this study. Information was used for the sole purpose of this study, with data collection/records being securely stored for a limited time (7 years). These will be destroyed at the end of the required time.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Demographics of Study and Program Set-up

Three school districts participated in this study. Of the three, two districts are in a large urban centre. The third district is located in a rural, farming district. All three distance education schools serve their district as an alternate educational medium. Two of the schools offered online programs for students in junior high and high school. The other program was offered only at the high school level. Concentration of this study was on those students enrolled in high school level courses. Curriculum of the teachers interviewed included high school level Social Studies, English Language Arts, Religion, and Career and Life Management (CALM).

Students enrolled in the online programs have the option of full-time or part-time studies/programming. Reasons reported by each school for full-time studies varied. However, a majority of full-time students were unable to fit within or attend a traditional school. This includes students who were:

- a part of the legal system
- students who were required to work 20-40 hours per week to support themselves and/or families
- students who had exhausted all avenues of traditional and alternative educational programs within their respective district
- students who had been scarred by bullying in traditional schools and/or felt high levels of anxiety within the traditional classroom setting.

All school districts reported a small percentage of full-time students who in an area of sports which required excessive amounts of travel and time away from a local traditional school.

Part-time students were classified as those taking only part of their high school credits via distance educational programming. Students in this category were generally those students who required a single course in order to meet high school graduation requirements but did not have the space in their traditional school timetable. Subjects reported included all core subject areas (English, Social Studies, any of the sciences, and Mathematics), Career and Life Management (CALM), and Religion (a required course in the Catholic school districts of Alberta). Students also accessed online distance learning programs in order to upgrade or repeat courses that were not completed successfully within the traditional schools. Students repeated classes in order to meet prerequisites of other courses in their traditional school setting (example, upgrading a Religion 15 course to meet the requirements of Religion 25).

Programming for both part-time and full-time students enrolled in optional classes (such as Art, any Career and Technology Studies (CTS) strand, career apprenticeship programs, etc.) varied between districts. The distance school in the rural area set up option courses to be project-based, whereby students could submit journals (video recordings, pictures, written) and final projects electronically and via regular ‘snail’ mail (Canada Post). In some instances, a student would work as an apprentice with a local business. Once a required number of work hours and other specified duties were fulfilled, the supervisor would sign a statement vouching for the successful completion of requirements by the student. As in the rural districts, urban online schools adapted curriculum requirements to meet the distant student’s learning. In some circumstances, distance schools in the urban areas had the opportunity to partner with traditional schools of their district to allow students to complete

some course options within a traditional class setting (for example, instrumental music classes). These adaptations and partnerships were of particular importance to full-time students in order to meet the diploma requirements within Alberta.

Accommodations made for some part-time students included time within class schedules to work ‘in house’ on online courses. In one district, traditional schools were allowing students additional preparation time (often referred to as a prep period) to work in school computer labs on distance learning courses. In some cases, the online teacher was also within the traditional school as the student, which allowed for face-to-face contact. In other traditional schools, a designated teacher would be appointed time in their teaching schedule to coordinate student timetables and work with those students enrolled in distance learning courses as face-to-face tutorial support.

It is interesting to note that one of the distance schools was implementing what they called hybrid online programming (a partnership between the district’s distance programming and two traditional high schools). This program is based on the premise that group collaboration works better when the pacing of materials is given and the students are in the same physical location as that of the traditional classroom setting. However, students would still have the flexibility to schedule their actual work time similar to the distance programming. This approach was initially used in the CALM and Religion courses of two high schools of the district with high success rates in its infancy. The fact that the teacher and the students were in the same physical location allowed for students to complete work in their own time, but allowed for students to meet in seminar type settings once a week, work physically in small groups where time allowed, and meet with the teacher when issues of clarification arose. In the first semester of implementation, the distance school recorded only

three of approximately 130 students unsuccessfully meeting course requirements; the highest rate of successful completion in the traditional school's experience to date.

Soft-Skill Development and School Approaches

A commonly reported problem with the measurement of soft skill development in both traditional and online distance school settings was that current curriculum standards (and allowable measures of students success) within Alberta *do not* allow for the active measure of soft skill development. Because of this disallowance, no formal assessment or summative measure of the acquisition of soft skills in high school courses was completed. School staff interviewed agreed newly developed curriculum is making greater allowance for the greater measure of soft-skills, particularly within the new Social Studies program. However, these changes were seen to be reactionary with not enough time to put into practice. These changes also require teachers to change their teaching methods from the older notion of lectures and multiple choice exams, to the exploration and development of cooperative and discussion-based learning - processes that required additional time to develop and hone. One teacher remarked that the process was exploratory, requiring constant reflection, and would need further time to develop newer teaching styles, all within an already hectic pace.

Because assessment of social-skill development is not permissible in much of the curriculum at the time of this study's data collection, the seriousness of acquiring such skills was viewed by the student body as unimportant or irrelevant. In other words, the acquisition of soft skills had lost its value because there was no attached mark to enforce it. Thus, the teachers interviewed often employed other means to encourage the acquisition of those soft skills within their classes.

Most teachers interviewed use peer assessment and reflective exercises to encourage students to recognize and value soft skills as a part of their learning. In one distance school, students were given multiple intelligence tests to highlight individual student learning strengths (kinaesthetic, aural, etc.) for both student and teacher. For the duration of the course, teachers then gave periodic formative feedback to students on their exhibited skills. At the end of the course or semester, students were then presented with a summative record of their growth as a learner throughout the course, both academically and in soft-skill acquisition. The ideology behind this highlighting of skills is based on the current educational movement of Assessment for Learning (formative assessments) within the district and province (AFL is an approach to balance formative evaluation and the development of skills with summative measures – Assessment *of* Learning – of a final product.)

The teacher as a role model was highly valued in the teaching of soft-skills in both educational settings. The caring attitude towards students and the early establishment of expectations allowed for a trust to be built between students and their teacher, resulting in the building of a student community. This community was established through those activities that allowed students to acquaint themselves with one another (i.e. ice-breakers). Harmony among the members was maintained by the teacher often acting as a mediator throughout the advancement of time in the course. Once this relationship between students and their teacher was formed and a sense of community established, students were found to emulate the teacher, especially in their communication with one another. However, the teacher had to remain engaged in activities throughout the time of the course. Teachers unanimously reported that if they were not fully engaged at all times, student participation waned and

dropped off, especially in any discussion-type activities (whether asynchronously, synchronously, or face-to-face).

One of the teachers in the distance educational setting commented that the relationship between students and their teacher was more intimate than experienced in the traditional classroom experience, thus allowing for a stronger learning experience. A formal approach to the learning and a positive learning environment resulted in a very positive and fulfilling school experience for students. Teachers were thanked by students more with the sentiment being more sincere than teachers had experienced in a traditional classroom setting. Through this intimate relationship and community building is soft skill development sustained.

Additional elements and guidelines used by teachers in the distance learning settings for the promotion and modeling of good soft skills were the prompt reply to student inquiries, consistent parental communication, and positive, encouraging, and reflective feedback to students. Most distance schools had a policy to reply to student enquiries within 24 hours – whether it was to fully answer the question or a note of recognition to receiving the question with a more in-depth reply to follow in a timely fashion. Teachers were prompted to contact students and parents (via phone and/or e-mail) when students failed to log into school systems on a daily basis. Student questions would be answered in a similar manner depending on the nature of the problem (usually via phone). The more complex the problem, the more likely the teacher would phone a student to work through the problem rather than relying on electronic formats (e-mail and/or chat). In the rare case, one teacher reported meeting with students at local libraries or coffee houses to give additional tutorial support.

Teacher modeling and soft-skill learning in traditional classrooms was seen as ‘second nature’. Teachers’ enforcement and modeling was often an unconscious action and not given

much forethought. When unacceptable actions or comments were made in classes, the teacher was able to stop and immediately address the problem due to the face-to-face nature of the class. The degree of soft skill modeling and practice was dependant upon the teacher and the student role. Like their distance counterparts, teachers had to be fully engaged in discussions and act as mediators in order to maintain discussions within the traditional classes. Often, teachers would need to be conscious of ensuring that all students were drawn into the conversation, especially the shier students. In terms of availability, students had access to talk to their teachers during school hours only. Parental contact was usually made when a need arose and/or during parent/teacher interview times.

Findings

Based on those soft skills identified by the Conference Board of Canada (2003), teachers interviewed were asked on their school's policy and individual techniques teaching effective communication, working cooperatively in groups, acting responsibly, flexibility in learning, and creative problem-solving skills. Interviews were held with both online distance education and traditional school settings so that comparisons of methodology of soft skill teaching/modeling could be made.

Effective Communication

Effective communication was seen as an important aspect of all education, with its degree of success largely based upon the community built and encouraged at the beginning of each semester. Teachers interviewed noted that the more comfortable the student felt with their peers and teacher, the more willingness shown by the student to share ideas and contribute to discussions (no matter which medium was used). Hence, building a safe and accepting

community at the beginning of a course was viewed as important to the teachers and an integral part of the experience for the student.

Community building occurred in the first classes of the semester. Students spend time sharing as much personal information as they felt comfortable. Teacher modeling and clearly communicated expectations (protocol) for addressing one another was used by teachers to give students the formal structure, supported by exemplars, to confidently contribute to conversations and debates in an effective and socially acceptable manner. As students progressed through their course, teachers would continue to participate in the discussions, guiding students to phrase things in a concise, thorough (deeper and more reflective thinking), and inclusive manner.

Those teachers who were willing to share personal stories and information of themselves found students to be more involved within course conversations. The honesty and openness of the teacher was seen by students as a caring teacher and connected them more intimately with the teacher. Conversely, the less interest and/or participation shown by the teacher, the less participation was given by the students in general. This applied to both distance learning and traditional classes.

Another important means of communication with students, as reported by teachers, was the written feedback on assignments. Teachers used this as a way to communicate to students those areas of weakness within assignments. However, a majority of the teachers struggled with this form of communication. The delay in time due to the labour intensity involved in marking essays and other longer assignment forms was an issue. Furthermore, many students appeared to take their marks at face value with little concern for the written remarks made by the teacher. Teachers reported some frustration and were struggling with ways to effectively

communicate expectations in writing to individual students, especially when the students appeared only pay attention to the mark attached. Few students were said to be motivated to ask for clarification on assignment marks or to find ways to improve their achievement in classes, whether in the traditional or distance classroom. Teachers felt that a majority of the students would not look at comments, hence, not learn from their errors and omissions for future assignments and assessments.

A final similarity in teaching effective communication skills mentioned by both distance and traditional teachers was the importance of basing conversations around relevant topics and/or connected to the student's life in some manner. The more real-life connection a student could make to a given topic, the more forthcoming the student was in adding to threads of discussion, whether electronically or in a face-to-face environment. Because of the lack of ability by curriculum to measure communication skills, teachers relied heavily upon drawing students in through relevant questions and relating the subject material to students' lives. At times, teachers struggled with making connections with students due to what was viewed as out-dated curriculum. For example, one teacher expressed that relating some historical events was problematic because students lacked a personal point of reference to relate the new information. All teachers mentioned that new curricula, especially in Social Studies, is moving towards the allowance of more distinct discussion - both through relevancy of topics discussed and through the evaluation of skills as part of the assessment practice.

Several differences were also noted in teaching effective communication skills between traditional and distance educational settings. The most obvious difference between students in distance learning programs is the separation of students and their teacher by location and

time. Students within traditional classes held discussions and debates in a face-to-face set up, where all students present in class were able to see and hear speakers partaking in the discussion. Speaking with the teacher was also mainly done in a face-to-face setting, whether in and around class times or by seeking the teacher outside of class time but during the regular school day. Of the teachers interviewed in traditional settings, none reported using electronic media (such as e-mail) as a way to communicate with their students.

Students in the distance programs most often used electronic mail, asynchronous discussion threads, synchronous chat sites hosted by the school, and telephone to communicate with one another and their teacher(s). Discussion components varied depending on the topic of discussion, the relevancy to the student, and the type of course. (For example, a Mathematics course often yielded less discussion, whereas a Religion course typically yielded more.) Teachers of distance programs felt they offered more individual access to their students due to the any time/any place communication of electronic media. When a student had a question, students were able to pose questions to the teacher at any time of day without having to rely on memory until such a point of seeing the teacher. This afforded teachers the time to reflect on the posed question and give a thorough answer, as well as time to follow up and check for students' understanding.

Software used by one school district allowed students to view which classmates were simultaneously online. Students could then 'page' one another to communicate ideas or arrange other ways to converse. Students, especially in urban areas, desire the synchronous communication because they are used to and expect the immediacy of today's communication technology. This is especially prevalent with the use of the 'texting' function of most cellular phones and wireless fidelity (Wi-Fi) capabilities in other personal and

gaming devices (for example, the iPod® Touch). Electronic mail appears to no longer be an attracting factor that it once was, say, ten years ago. One administrator noted that when distance education started using electronic media as a means of communication, it was a novelty for students to have an e-mail account. Today (in the twenty-first century), students readily have access to their own e-mail through various hosts (Hotmail, Yahoo, etc.) and see the technology as a part of everyday life.

The desire and need for face-to-face contact with students in distance programs was largely reliant upon the distance between members of the group. In the rural setting, a full day would be arranged for students to meet face-to-face while parents were invited to meet with the teachers in an interview-type meetings. The location chosen was central to the participants, depending on the location of students' homes during the semester. These meetings were often held once or twice per semester. Teachers of the one urban distance school felt that students did not see this type of face-to-face meeting as a necessity. Days formerly set up for meeting and socializing were generally poorly attended and the school discontinued them. Rather, students and parents were invited to contact and arrange time with the individuals of the school (administrator, course teacher(s), counsellor, etc.) as they saw fit.

Teachers in the distance programs reported that their main communication with their students and their parents, other than e-mail, was through phone contact. This medium allowed the teachers to clarify information students requested electronically with as little hassle and time possible for both parties. One teacher interviewed reported that contact with students early in the course was done frequently over the phone to really get to know the student and to build the trust of the student that they often lack (usually due to life's

circumstances). Within the first ten days of the class, the teacher would call at least twice to build a working relationship with the student. However, this same class of students continued to feel uncomfortable initiating discussions with their teacher, often relying on other electronic media (e-mail, paging, etc.).

Students within the distance schools were encouraged and/or required (depending on the course) to keep journals, reflecting on their learning. These journals were then occasionally shared (in part holistically) with the teacher. However, the function of these journals varied from teacher to teacher, and from school to school.

While various provisions allowed for soft-skill development in communication, student assessment was limited to the presentation of ideas in assignment format. Students were guided on how to communicate with one another and teachers offered feedback on their conveying of ideas. Teachers generally did not measure this skill or recorded its growth over time due to the lack of allowable measures within curriculum standards. Rather, teachers set up structures, facilitated learning experiences, and offered guidance to help students learn the desired communication skills.

Acting Responsibly

The main student responsibilities in both traditional and distance classes reported by teachers were to regularly ’attend‘ classes (physically in the traditional classroom and logging into the school server in distance education classes) and complete assignments in the timeline allotted. Students were also held accountable for the ideas put forth and the manner in which they were expressed in conversations/discussions (whether synchronous, asynchronous, or face-to-face).

Students (and their parents) were held accountable for the student's attendance within their classes. In the traditional classroom, this was through attendance of physical presence. Those students absent from class without notification and/or a valid reason had calls placed to their parents from the central school office. In the distance setting, attendance was taken through the mandatory sign-in or log-in requirements set up by each school. Those students who did not log-in and/or send a valid reason for the absence would be contacted by the school (both student and parent). In extreme cases where students were continually absent from their school requirements, students were reported to the Attendance Board for truancy, in accordance to the Alberta School Act. This was particularly true or accurate for full-time students in the distance education classes.

Teachers reported that timelines for assignments and exams were routinely given to students. Some scaffolding of assignment completion was also used with students on larger assignments to allow for student success. For example, one teacher used mini-deadlines for each step of a research essay in Social Studies to ensure that students were completing the steps in a timely fashion (rather than on the night prior) as well as to ensure that students were spending the time equivalent to the marks earned. (This teacher reported that students would spend enormous amounts of time on small assignments that may only be equivalent to a small percentage in the overall marking scheme.)

Accountability to deadlines varied between teachers and the school sites. Traditional teachers reported that a lot of scaffolding was required to ensure student success. Through the set-up of mini-deadlines, emphasis of time-on-task, and 'walking through' an assignment as a class prior to individual project work beginning, students experienced greater success with the step-by-step process but relied greatly on the teacher's lead.

Timelines were also used for course work in distance classes. Because students were offered guidance on structuring studies (daily timelines, setting up calendars, making daily goals, etc.) upon entering the school and with each course, teachers felt they spent less time on scaffolding during the remaining part of the semester. When an assignment was missed or late, dialogue between parents, the student, and the teacher was initiated. All three distance schools reported differences on dealing with missed or late assignments. Assignments with an inexcusable lateness or absence were generally replaced with an alternate, or 'make-up', assignment or test.

Because of the physical separation of teacher and student, teachers in distance classes often felt they generally needed to request greater amounts of work in from students than when these teachers taught in a traditional classroom. As one teacher compared, it is not like a homework check in a traditional class where students can sometimes hide the fact that they may not be done their homework. If students are not expected to hand in an assignment, they will generally skip over it. For this reason, all work that was assigned to be completed was usually taken in for some level of evaluation (formative or summative) by the distance teacher.

The manner of dealing with accountability and responsibility in discussions differed between traditional and distance educational settings. Because of the face-to-face presence in the traditional setting, student discipline was immediate and often reflective in nature. Students were constantly encouraged to think before speaking or voicing their ideas. Within the distance conversations, students and parents were aware that all conversations (asynchronous and synchronous) were monitored by school staff. Students who were felt to be misusing school discussion sites were contacted by the monitoring teacher or

administrator and cautioned about their use of the public and class discussion areas. No extreme cases or measures of action regarding electronic discussions were mentioned by any of the distance education teachers interviewed.

Measures of responsibility were readily recorded through daily attendance logs (as required by provincial law) and assignment completion records ('mark books'). However, responsibility to meeting assignment deadlines varied between teachers and between school sites, creating a variation in measurements made. While situations were noted of irresponsible behaviours at all school sites, none reported the behaviours to e representative of the school sample.

Flexibility

Flexibility is seen to be normal within the delivery of online/distance programming. Online distance education staff expressed that students can take the assignments and adapt them to his/her learning preference and/or style. Students can adapt class work through project choices, having some lessons available in audio, hands-on type projects, documentation of project work through video and/or still photography, self-evaluation, evaluations by individuals in the student's immediate location (for example, work experience and General Apprentice Program - GAP), and/or final project submission through regular mail. The support of the one-on-one teacher/student contact (via synchronous and asynchronous communication) helps meet the individualistic needs of each student to fit an assigned task to his/her learning needs and/or learning style.

The flexibility of contacting and interacting with teachers (and other students) at any time is also an inherent part of the online distance learning program. There are student-teacher interactions occurring at any given time of day, rather than relying on class time or during the

school day as is found in the traditional setting. Students are able to contact their teachers and other students using a variety of asynchronous media (bulletin postings and e-mail being the most common). Some software also allows students to know who is simultaneously online, therefore allowing contact through synchronous media ('chat-lines', paging, etc.). Traditionally educated students continue to rely on the interaction with their classmates and teachers in class time, but generally are available to meet and discuss with one another during the school day. Occasionally, students will dialogue via electronic means if there is a friendship built between one another.

Flexibility of scheduling and course availability is also a part of the premise of distance learning. Online schools find ways to build in and allow for the inclusion of a various course offerings by overcoming physical distance through the use journals, partnerships within the community, video-taping and photography, and/or submission of final projects via mail. In the traditional settings, class time-tables and course offerings are restricted to what is available at the given time, as well as the priority of the student's course requirements to graduate and/or meet the entrance requirements of post-secondary education.

Students in the distance setting are also afforded flexibility in the timeline they may create for themselves to meet deadlines. Students can choose when and where they will complete their assignments for their course requirements. While course material is generally released at regular and specific times by each distance school (often with guidelines to the student of the time involved to complete each component of the assignment), students are free to choose what time they will use specifically for completing assignments. This was especially true for those students required to work to support a family or those elite athletes who balance their schedule of practices and training sessions with school work.

In traditional classes, students still learn a majority of the material during scheduled class time, which is a part of the daily routine set up at the beginning of each semester. Traditionally, timelines and assignment deadlines are set within the class schedule and the number of classes available within the semester. As well, much of the work on assignments is encouraged to be completed during the class time.

Unlike distance education, where students rely on reading, interacting via various communication methods and assignment submission, traditional classroom practices continue to be the lecture based, essay writing and multiple choice exams for assessment measures. While this protocol is slowly changing, it still remains the common practice of the traditional classroom.

Problem-Solving Skills

The greatest requirement to encourage use and growth in problem-solving skills mentioned by all teachers and administrators of both educational settings was the importance of student 'buy-in'. Relevancy of the task to the students' lives and the connection that students can make from their own personal experiences makes for a stronger connection to the subject matter, engaging them more in the work of solving a problem. As one teacher pointed out, with a lack of connection to the student's own world, the responses given (in this case, within a distance program) are of the absolute minimum requirement. Teachers were conscious to choose questions and topics (where curriculum allowed) that 'hooked' students' interest and engaged them in 'real-world' issues relevant to the students and their immediate future. A successful question or 'hook' was determined to be one that produced lively conversation (synchronously, asynchronously, or face-to-face), which often led to conversations outside of the timeline of the class. (This success would be represented by

continued conversations outside of class time in the traditional school and multi-threads of discussion in the distance school.)

Teachers were also quick to mention that finding a productive 'hook' for students was sometimes difficult, particularly in curriculum that was based on historical thinking. Students viewed these topics and issues, such as many of the historical wars in Social Studies, as irrelevant to their lives. The hope for many teachers is that newer and updated curriculum changes (especially with the topic of globalization as a theme) will allow for topics that are relevant to the students and their view of the world in the twenty-first century.

Once a discussion began, teachers encouraged students to push their thinking farther and to encourage deeper thinking into the subject matter. This was done through questioning techniques. Occasionally, teachers would use self-reflection (metacognition) activities to have students explain how they came to a particular conclusion at the end of a discussion and/or assignment.

Self-reflection activities in conjunction with group activities encouraged students to think about the processes used by the group and the contribution of each group member (particularly the individual student himself/herself) towards the assigned goal. It created opportunities for students to see how their behaviours and actions (or lack of) contributed to the overall group dynamic and the level of success in meeting the objective of the activity. This was as a way to encourage students to engrain their solving skill so that it could be applied to a new problem later. This also allowed the teacher to get a glimpse of how students viewed their own abilities, how to best help the individual student in future assignments, and to structure future assignments (especially within the group setting.

Scaffolding of assignments and the amount of information given in a step-by-step manner was instrumental to students' success, whether traditional or distance education. The levels of scaffolding, however, varied between traditional and distance courses. Traditional classroom teachers reported that time on projects and steps required to reach a successful end was greatly scaffolded. Students were often given step-by-step instructions and interim deadlines (mini-deadlines) toward a project's completions. Traditional teachers felt that if these mini-deadlines and scaffolding were not in place, students would either spend exorbitant amounts of time on projects (usually worth little in the overall scheme of the total marks) or would leave a bulk of the work to be completed too close to the final project deadline. A bulk of the work, especially for summative assignments, was expected to be completed in class, partly to ensure the project being the student's own work.

Online distance education teachers used scaffolding also with their students. Students were generally given scaffolding tips when they signed up for any online course. This generally included how to set up a typical day and the amounts of time to spend per day on a given course. Teachers re-enforced this within their own particular courses at the beginning of each semester. Younger students (especially junior high age) or those new to online distance education received greater amounts of scaffolding in their individual classes and further support (most often via telephone conversations) from their teachers. As the students matured, became more comfortable with the online distance educational format, and as the course progressed in time, less scaffolding was required to encourage student independence in their problem-solving skills.

In terms of problem solving skills for Science and Math, the distance schools reported that a conscious step-by-step approach was taken by moving from the more concrete (hands-on)

principles to those that were more abstract. In Mathematics courses, students started with tangibles that could physically manipulate, moved to pictorial representations, and the inclusion of more abstract thinking. In Science classes, students would perform labs in their homes using materials commonly found in the home. When labs were too complex or required specialty items, students often viewed these experiments in videos or interacted with web-based simulations. In some cases where possible, teachers would meet face-to-face in a public setting to tutor the student through problems they have encountered. In most cases, these sessions would last one to one-and-a-half hours.

Accomplishing Tasks in a Team Environment

Accomplishing a team-oriented task is often taught and practiced through what students call ‘group work’. With a movement towards Assessment for Learning (AFL) by the province, many changes are being brought into the curricula to encourage more team approaches to activities and learning. This often curtails guiding the students with formative information throughout a project and/or course, concluding with a summative evaluation – both in written comments and numerical grades. As one teacher commented, college requirements seem to be moving more to discussion and cooperative learning, so students need to be prepared for that kind of environment upon graduation.

Group work is used in varying amounts based on the nature of the student, the program delivery and the curriculum being taught. Generally, those subjects labelled as non-core used group work more regularly than those listed as core subjects. For example, one traditional site stated that they used a lot of group work within the Religion program because it is seen generally as a discussion and reflective based course. Once a community was established and students felt comfortable with one another, a teacher would start with small groups and

partners in the early parts of the semester. As the particular learning community strengthened over time, groups would become larger, culminating in a final whole-class project at semester's end.

In the traditional classroom setting, teachers encouraged a 'we' approach to the students; that the teacher and the students are a team together, all supporting one another's learning. The teacher was an active participant in the activities along with the students. As long as there was a solid establishment of the task, thorough discussion of the topic and the use of exemplars, group work was successful. Because of the change in pedagogy through AFL, teachers are becoming more conscious of including group work and projects within their class, but readily admit that it is still slow to happen, especially in the core subject areas.

While group work was more readily accepted in the traditional classroom, it was reported to be an ill-favoured part of the distance learning experience. The main problem reported was related to the background experiences of the students. Students who are in the distance schools due to an inability to fit within a traditional classroom are leery to participate in group work due to their negative experiences usually linked to the traditional classroom. Another problem arises where there is only one student enrolled in a class. One school found that the asynchronous nature of the learning led to unsuccessful group work, especially among part-time students, because students were not able to replicate the face-to-face group environment or found the technologies lacking an immediacy they desired.

While students are more leery in the distance program, there was a reported movement to include some project work (at minimum, one per semester) as a way to encourage students to work with another person on a project. In some cases, these students were given the choice to work with another student, a staff member at the distance school, or a person in the student's

physical community that they felt comfortable working with. To encourage equal participation, one teacher reported using student reflections to have students reflect upon their level of involvement and to compare it to the involvement of the other members of their group.

Teacher's Perception of Student Response to Soft Skill Acquisition

When asked how students respond to those aspects of soft skill acquisition in teachers' lessons, teachers of both educational settings commented on similar reactions by the students. First and foremost, a general consensus was reached by teachers interviewed that students will only perform those tasks that are assessed and applied towards a final mark. Otherwise, students ignore those parts or entire 'chunks' of assigned tasks that will remain unmarked. In distance programs, this meant teachers felt their marking load was much heavier than in a traditional class setting. If a teacher wanted to ensure practice/formative-type tasks were completed, they felt it had to be evaluated to motivate students to complete it. One traditional teacher commented the general student population is self-interested (concerned with their own jobs and making their own money) and tended to be apathetic towards their learning, hence requiring great amounts of scaffolding to ensure task completion. Without the use of mini-deadlines to meet designated stages of an assignment, most students would complete the entire project the night prior to its assigned deadline.

Because of this perceived apathy and self-interest, teachers felt that they must be very involved in all aspects of learning. Teachers felt they must be involved in all discussions, both traditionally and within the distance learning medium. If the teacher were to decrease his/her involvement, students lost interest and would generally lessen their involvement to the absolute minimum required. The teacher's involvement and prompting keeps the students

engaged. The more interest a teacher shows in the student and his/her learning, the greater the trust of the student, hence, the greater the involvement in the course.

In the distance schools, most of the active learning was through the work of building the relationship with the student by the teacher. Once the student saw that the teacher really cared for them, the students tended to want to participate. Because many of the distance education students are 'loners' by nature and/or have a fear related to the experiences of not fitting within the traditional school setting, there is a lack of trust. The student becomes filled with hesitancy (due to the lack of face-to-face exposure, distance, etc.) resulting in a less willing student to opening up and taking chances. As one teacher/administrator commented, "They crave the social setting, but at the same time are scared by it." Using one-on-one personal communication, either through phone or e-mails, was very effective to encouraging student participation in distance education. When that connection is made between student and teacher, the student metaphorically believes the teacher is somewhere in their monitor and are available to be reached whenever the moment or need arises.

Teachers also mentioned that they struggle with the feedback given to students on summative assignments for two reasons: time-delay and time intensity required to assess by the teacher, and the acceptance of the mark at face-value by the student. Written feedback is usually delayed due to the time intensity of marking. Teachers feel the need to communicate specifics with the students through a running dialogue on the paper being marked. However the time and the perceived affects seem to be minimal because students, generally, will just look at the mark. Few students will question the mark or request further explanation to feedback given. One teacher reportedly continues to look for ways to reach the students in summative assessments.

Students generally need to have a ‘hook’ to become fully engaged in the learning of each activity. Questioning techniques that relate to the knowledge outcomes of curriculum and to the students’ lives encourage students to become more involved. Carefully selected questioning techniques are then used to push the students’ thinking deeper. Without it, students tend to become disengaged and apathy becomes apparent. In cases where courses were pre-built by the district and handed to the course teacher for the semester (specifically in the distance learning setting), teachers found building that relevancy sometimes challenging, mainly because the course material was not of their own creation.

Teachers from the distance schools (all who have taught in a traditional classroom at one time) reported they see more lasting affects of soft skills in those students they teach in their online classrooms. As long as a teacher was a positive role model and genuinely showed concern for their students, students in distance education reciprocated those skills and attitudes.

Student friendships were reported to develop more so in the distance classes than in the traditional classes. This was especially true in the rural setting and/or for those students enrolled in full-time studies. These friendships were reported to be more lasting when compared to the urban settings and/or part-time students. In the traditional settings, students were reported as being accepting of one another already. However, it was unknown as to how far these friendships and/or acquaintances developed outside of the class time (such as into the hallways, after school, extra-curricular, etc.).

Distance schools found higher rates of completion and overall student satisfaction. This may be due in part to the teacher’s willingness to be more open and willingness to bring their own experiences into the learning. Students and parents of distance programs were generally

more forthcoming about late assignments and absences than the distance teachers had experienced in their traditional classrooms.

Finally, in terms of time management, one traditional teacher commented that time management seems to be inherent of the student's personality. Those with excellent time management in class will do well in keeping pace on projects and assignments. In contrast, those who struggle with time management will continue to struggle with the absence of mini-deadlines and scaffolding.

When asked what they perceived as being the strengths and weaknesses of distance education, teachers (both traditional and distance educators) agreed that distance education allowed students to:

- have richer integration of information and technological skills
- be more advanced technologically than their traditional counterparts
- be more motivated and be better self-starters, especially when it came to assessment pieces
- be more independent learners
- be more self-directed (having a clear understanding and knowing what they want and how to get there)
- have better reading comprehension and writing skills
- have more advanced research skills, especially in electronic media
- have better communication skills due to the increased opportunity to communicate one-on-one with one another and their teacher

Distance education teachers stated that students in their programs were at a disadvantage (weak) compared to their traditional school counterparts when it came to face-to-face social

interaction. This was especially true of those students who did not have opportunities outside of school to be in face-to-face, extracurricular settings. Students were also subject to feeling overwhelmed with course material if they were unable to prioritize their learning and/or were weak in time management skills. Students were subject to feeling isolated. As well, students in distance programs could face having their programs disrupted, especially in cases where parents, as reported by one district, disconnected internet connections due to improper use by a family member other than the student.

Traditional teachers perceived distance education students as being weak in face-to-face interaction and settings as well. As one teacher experienced, it is worrisome in regards to those students whose lives have been centered on doing their schooling solely at home. These students, who were home schooled or enrolled in distance programs and often attend traditional schools for the first time in high school, are unsure of how to interact or lack the common etiquette that has already been instilled in the traditionally educated child in their earlier years of education.

Summary of Results

Students receiving their education in full time studies through an online distance school often do so because of an inability to attend a traditional school setting, whether for physical, social or psychological reasons. Part-time students often take one or two classes per semester through the distance setting to meet required high school credits, either for reasons of trying to achieve a higher mark or to access a course that would not work within a traditional high school time table. Course delivery in the distance classes varied, depending on the course and its requirements. Generally, students submitted assignments electronically, participated in some asynchronous and/or synchronous discussion, and were in different physical locations

for the majority of the semester. In some instances, particularly the distance programs centered in urban locations, teachers and/or students could be in the same traditional school, allowing for some face-to-face contact. Courses that required more 'hands-on' skills (Art, any strand of CTS, registered apprenticeship programs - RAP, etc.) were accommodated by using journals (including pictures and video) and/or the use of a member of the student's business community to act as facilitators/teachers for the accreditation of a course (work experience programs).

Teachers did report soft skills inclusion in their everyday practices. Teachers saw the value and necessity of these skills, especially in the changing light of education at post-secondary levels. Teachers included use of community building (especially in early parts of a course), scaffolding of assignments, reflective exercises, peer assessments, group work (where curriculum facilitated it), formative and summative types of feedback (both verbally and in written forms), and modeling as ways of ensuring soft skill development for their students. Those teachers who remained positive and consistently involved with their class(es) and demonstrated true care for their pupils reported positive soft skills reciprocated in the student's involvement for the duration of the course. However, teachers were unsure if these skills transferred outside of their classroom – whether in the traditional school or in the distance education classes.

Teachers reported struggling with effectively communicating assessment feedback with students. First, teachers recognized the delay and time required in getting feedback to students who, in today's day and age, are used to the immediacy, especially with today's media ('texting', cellular phones, e-mail, chat, etc.). Second, teachers felt that students take their assignment grades at face value with little attention to the feedback provided to them.

Few students were prompted or motivated to further clarify and discuss the feedback with their teacher.

Flexibility is an inherent part of the distance learning experience. Students are afforded the options to contact their teachers at any moment of the day via synchronous and/or asynchronous media. Learning styles and the ability to choose how to meet the expectations of the curriculum were also met through the various deliveries of information, a variety of methods to complete assignment expectations, as well as the choice to schedule their course within their own timeline of daily activities. Conversely, traditional classroom practices of evaluation generally continue to focus on teacher lectures, essay assignments, and multiple choice type tests.

The greater the connection of an issue or problem to a student's own life, the greater the student involvement in applying himself or herself to the solution of a given problem. Without that connection, teachers reported student involvement became the minimum required to achieve the grades desired. Scaffolding of assignments allowed for greater student success, so that students were directly led step-by-step through to the solution of a problem. Levels and amounts of scaffolding varied from course to course, teacher to teacher, and between traditional and distance education.

Group work and a community approach were two commonly reported ways of teaching students to accomplish tasks in a team environment. Depending on the nature of the curriculum and the particular subject matter being taught, teachers were able to build in varying amounts of group tasks. Traditional teachers reported success in using some group work in their classrooms as long as there was a solid establishment of the task, thorough discussion of the topic and the use of exemplars. Distance teachers generally found group

work and group projects to be less favoured by students, either because of the students' own personal experiences or because of a lack of immediacy desired. Because the measurement of this skill is often not a part of the curriculum, teachers relied on student self-evaluation and formative measures as ways to encourage the evaluation of commitment and participation within a group.

Teacher perception of student responses indicated that students were generally willing to do only what was perceived to be important. This judgment by students was generally a measure of the related marks towards the final grade of the course. Teachers felt that students were generally self-interested and showed a general apathy towards their learning. However, the more interested, caring, and dedicated a teacher was towards the students' learning, the more positively involved students became. The building of community and the relationship with the teacher was felt to be of great value towards the success of students. As long as teachers modeled what was expected of students, students generally reciprocated those skill back, both towards one another and the teacher. Teachers were unsure if these skills carried outside the 'walls' of their classroom into the other aspects of the students' lives.

New curriculum is being developed, older curriculum is being updated and some accommodation is being made for some soft skill measurements. Social Studies teachers expressed that new curriculum is allowing for more of these soft skill practices and skill evaluation. Teachers were in agreement that these changes are slow to occur and require teachers to accommodate their lessons for new assessments.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Canada is facing a shortage of people possessing effective soft skills for the emerging global economy (Conference Board of Canada, 2003). Some fingers are pointing to the primary and secondary institutions for failing to aptly prepare future employees with those skills of affectively communicating, acting responsibly, being flexible, creative problem-solving, and cooperative task completion. Others blame provincial testing which causes teaching to be directed to curriculum outcomes of knowledge acquisition ('teaching to the test') rather than testing skills beyond fact and recall. This testing is aimed at university entrance, which may fail the approximately fifty percent of graduates from grade twelve who currently do not enter a post-secondary school directly upon graduation (Horvath, 2005; Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007).

However, the results of this study suggest that there is awareness, recognition, and teaching of soft skills within Alberta schools, or at minimum, at the high school level (grades 10 through 12). Through the building of community and other specific key teaching practices, this study suggests that students in Alberta high schools are using and practicing affective outcomes in their classes. Specifically within online distance education programs, students are being modelled to, are practicing through use in online classes, and acquiring soft skills in their secondary educational experience, possibly to a greater degree than their traditionally educated counterparts.

Three questions were addressed in this study of affective outcomes in Alberta's secondary school populations: 1) to what extent is it possible to effectively teach soft skills at a

distance, 2) which practices allow for the acquisition of soft skills in the distance setting, and 3) to what levels are soft skills being acquired in online settings when compared to traditional settings and acquisition. Through these three questions, an understanding and acknowledgement of problems identified in Canadian employees can be made.

Research Question #1: To what extent is it possible to effectively teach soft skills via distance education?

Review of the literature indicates that socialization through electronic media is becoming more prevalent in today's society. Whether at work or 'at play', people are communicating in new ways just as fast as technological advancements are being made. This is creating an emerging global community, where people form friendships worlds away, never to meet in a face-to-face setting. Nothing is truer than the teenage population where teenagers are more comfortable with this same media. In part, this comfort is due to growing up with the technology, the inclusion of it within their everyday lives (Scarafiotti & Cleveland-Innes, 2006) and because they have little fear of it. Therefore, today's students are able to apply it to their educational needs and their social wants.

Based on the results of the study, soft skill acquisition is possible at a distance. The teaching of soft skills is closely connected to best practices, which both teachers and literature suggest. The degree of successful attainment is dependant upon the strength of the community formed early in the course in conjunction with the careful planning and constant support of the teacher. Students in distance educational settings are being exposed to, are taught, are modelled to, are practicing, and are reflecting upon appropriate soft skills within their educational experiences.

A direct correlation is present. The stronger the community established, the stronger the acquisition of soft skills in the distance setting. Community building is essential to allow for the comfort and trust of students to make contributions within the class. It appears full-time students, especially in rural populations, build stronger communities with their peers and teachers because of the reliance upon the distance school for their academic learning *and* social interactions. Rural students generally do not have the daily face-to-face interactions that their traditional counterparts have, and tend to use these skills on a more consistent basis. Part-time students, especially those in urban population, rely less on the community because of the options readily available to them through their traditional schooling (face-to-face setting) and the greater opportunity and greater ease of meeting with friends in social settings (i.e. accessible transportation, relatively short distance between homes, greater choice of extra-curricular activities to meet interests outside school, etc.).

The strength of the community also depends largely upon the degree of involvement of the teacher. The more personable the teacher is, the greater the involvement of the students. The more personally revealing (within acceptable teaching practices), the more involved the students appear. This involvement and personal sharing translates to students as ‘my teacher cares about me and wants the best for me’. This personalization creates an intimacy that may not be present in a traditional classroom. This sense of caring also creates an atmosphere of safety and trust whereby students feel comfortable in contributing and are afforded a voice in discussions. This is not always the case in a traditional class. Additionally, students are able to reflect on their statements before contributing, adding to the secure feeling. Students are encouraged to think about their thinking (metacognition) and students can ensure they are being clear with their words and ‘politically correct’ about their statements.

The flexibility of distance courses allows students to acquire and practice time management skills. While some students are generally weak in time management and may never experience total success, the set up and guidance by the school upon enrolment, along with the guidance of each teacher, creates experiences for students to build skills in managing projects and course workloads. This flexibility and guidance encourages independence. This is usually opposite to traditional classes, where greater reliance upon the teacher occurs through scaffolding of assignments and prompting by the teacher.

The acquisition of individual responsibility is largely dependant upon the expectations and follow-up by the distance school and/or the teacher's response to student behaviour. Attendance requirements were generally met by all students through the regular and required daily logging in to school servers. Students were generally consistent in letting their teachers know when they were unable to log-in for various (often personal) reasons. While there were rare cases of absenteeism, these rarities were consistent with problems associated with students taking distance courses as a last resort after failed attempts in traditional and other alternate schooling options within their board. These particular students were recommended to Alberta's truancy board as required by law. The consistency and openness by students with teachers and their cohorts suggests that students are not only comfortable, but enjoy their distance community and feel a responsibility towards the community (do not want to let the community down).

Students in distance courses generally met deadlines set by their teachers, however this was largely dependant upon the school's policy and/or teacher's response to late assignments. Those schools and/or teachers with more stringent policies and/or response to tardiness had fewer assignments consistently late (without valid reason). Those schools that

generally accepted any assignment at any time, even though a deadline was set, had greater problems with lateness. In one particular case, a student was reported to have handed in a majority of assignments on the last possible date of the course with the expectation (by both the school administration and the student) that it would be marked.

While there are apparent strengths, there are also weaknesses, not only in the distance medium, but in the overall teaching of soft skills. Soft skill teaching and incorporation is not generally part of the Alberta high school curriculum, therefore, summative assessment of these skills is not required or typically allowed (meaning this measurement would not stand as valid with auditing measures done by Alberta Education in high school course credits). Unless the distance school mandates some inclusion of these skills and/or the teacher is conscious of the inclusion of soft skills, there is a question of consistency and continuity of soft skill teaching throughout Alberta. While some progress is being made to include soft skills in Alberta's curriculum (usually addressed under "Skills" in the Program of Studies), the progress to include these changes is slow. The load on a teacher's day continues to grow, and soft skill inclusion is seen by many teachers as another 'thing' in an already hectic work place. Again, this questions the conscious and consistent inclusion of soft skills within the past practices in a knowledge-based curriculum.

Additional problems to the lack of assessment of soft skills are that students generally pay little attention to tasks that have little or no apparent value to their final mark. With a lack of this incentive, students generally ignore those components, often which soft skills are a part. This leaves the teacher needing to find other means of drawing students into practicing and using soft skills within their classes.

Group work, or working cooperatively, to complete a task is not met with large success in the distance medium. With a portion of the full-time distance population enrolled due to an inability to fit within the traditional school, students are generally shy and tend to be more reclusive. While students, through teacher encouragement and the building of a safe community, eventually learn to contribute to class discussions, group work remains an area of reluctance. These students tend to shy away from working with other classmates, largely due to the negative experiences they had in prior schooling. This does not allow for the learning experience(s) of working cooperatively in groups of people outside the students' secure relationships (i.e. family and/or close friendships). In urban student populations, particularly those students enrolled in part-time studies, students feel 'let down' by the lack of immediacy in the communication and what they have come to expect through experiences working in face-to-face settings in the traditional school. This translates to projects that are done because of requirement, but not necessarily as whole-heartedly as it appears with the full-time student population. The weakness in cooperative work questions the independence and the practice of gaining leadership, as suggested by Oren, Mioduser, and Nachmias (2002).

There is also a general weakness in a student's ability to practice some of their soft skills in a face-to-face setting, especially with the full-time student. Because much of the communication is done in written formats, the verbal component seems to be lacking. While teachers do address some of the verbal components of soft skills by communicating through telephone, students are hesitant to call their instructors, relying on electronic means to initiate contact and have the teacher call them in reply. According to the teachers, students rarely initiate telephone conversations with one another. This questions where and if students are

gaining valuable practice in face-to-face situations. Unless the distance student is involved in extra-curricular and community activities, the practice of soft skills in face-to-face situations will go unpractised, especially for the full-time distance student.

When key practices are apart of the learning environment (as set up by the teacher), students reciprocate what they see in their teacher(s), facilitator(s) and fellow cohorts. Through the effective and best practices of teaching in the online distance setting, students do acquire the affective outcomes they will need to be effective and valued employees in the future.

Research Questions #2: What practices best accommodate for the learning of soft skills in distance education?

As the literature states, more and more people are using electronic media as a method of meeting people and to form communities of interest (Chenault, 1996). If schools are being looked to to teach Canada's youth the soft skills required in their employable future, schools and curriculum need to include the skills that will allow for success in the twenty-first century. Currently, the primary problem in teaching and acquisition of soft skills in Alberta schools is the inability to assign a mark or grade to soft skill practices. Students tend to care about the mark attached to any work. Therefore, students generally will skip over or put little effort into tasks that are of no numerical value towards their final grade. This has created circumstances where teachers must find other means to build soft skill acquisition into courses. Through various teaching techniques (student questioning, role modelling, positive engagement and learning experiences, prompt communication, formative assessments and feedback, building of community and peer-/self-evaluation), teachers are able to negate the barrier set up by curriculum to facilitate soft skill acquisition in Alberta's distance education

at secondary levels. Through these means, often working in conjunction with one another, teachers are able to meet the soft skill requirements set out as missing by the employment sector: effective communication, acting responsibly, being flexible, creative problem solving, and working cooperatively within a group.

Community. The building of a community with the students is of foremost importance in order to ensure the learning of affective outcomes. By building a non-threatening environment, building familiarity with one another, and allowing adequate time to become acquainted, successful communities can be built (Warner, 2003). The more connectivity the students feel with one another and their teacher, the more they are willing to share with the group. The more students share, the stronger the community, the more they share, etc.

This community is largely initiated and sustained through the facilitation of the teacher. The teacher acts as a mediator and facilitator for the students (Wood, 2005), as well as develops their own relationship with the students (hence creating a safe environment for students – Oren, Mioduser, and Nachmias, 2002). A correlation is evident here. The more the teacher is a part of the community; the more involved the student body. The more personable the teacher is (personal anecdotes and the sharing of personal experiences), the more intimate the relationship between the members of the particular learning community. Conversely, the less the teacher is involved, the less involved students become, to the point of students 'dropping out' or becoming non-existent in conversations and dialogue. Therefore, once the community is built, the teacher must remain an active and willing participant, acting as a catalyst to discussion as well as keeping the community alive and strong. This is contrary to some of the literature where decreasing teacher involvement is recommended as the course progresses and community if formed (Oren, Mioduser, and Nachmias, 2006).

Another practice used by teachers to keep students participating in the community (or class), is through student 'buy-in' (Velayo, 2001). By basing lessons on the interests and desires of youth today and the individuals within the class, teachers are able to build relevancy to the curriculum. However, this is not always an easy task as some of the curriculum (particularly curriculum based on historical fact) is seen by the students to dated and not relevant to their current lives. For this reason, teachers struggle to build the relevancy that is so important. While some curriculum changing, it is slow to occur.

When community is built and a safe environment is formed, the community built by the teacher in the distance education setting is described as intimate. This is because students are afforded an equal voice in a safe and caring place. This is especially true of those students who would, within the traditional classroom, sit back and say little (or nothing) in front of their peers for fear of being ridiculed or ostracized. With the use of electronic media (both asynchronous and synchronous types), students ensure they are clearly communicating their opinions or questions as well as paying head to expressing themselves in an appropriate and inclusive manner. This intimacy is built because of the person-to-person communication. Students have direct access to the teacher (and other students) at any given time and at any given place (barring the technology is present to be the vehicle of the message). This allows students a voice when they are on task rather than waiting for class, as in the traditional setting.

Communication. Once a community is built among the students and teacher, communication is facilitated by the safety felt within. The safer the student feels, the more willingness shown to communicate with members of the group.

Promptness in communication is highly valued and encouraged in online distance education settings. Each school's policy was for staff to reply to student and parent concerns within a set period of time, usually one working day. Today's students have become used to the immediacy of today's technology. Web-based chat lines, web-based socialization pages, and text functions of current cellular technology have led to students desiring instant communication and fast answers. The promptness in contacting students not only allows students to have their concerns and questions addressed in a prompt manner, but also allows a teacher to facilitate and help solve problems before they become overwhelming to the student. This prompt feedback additionally sends a message that teachers care about their students and the teacher is there to support the student.

Students are given opportunity to socialize with one another through both synchronous and asynchronous discussions. Open areas of discussion were available at the schools studied. However, the use and the user of socializing areas varied from school to school, from part-time student versus full-time student, and urban student versus rural student. Because these open social sites required excessive amounts of time to monitor, and with a small portion of the population using them, some schools felt the sites were not utilized enough to continue operation and were discontinued. This suggests that students are more comfortable with the technology that they are used to socializing by other means, including online (*Nexopia*, *Facebook*, *My Space*, etc.) and other electronic messaging (MSN, cellular texting, etc.)

Teacher modeling and exemplars are crucial to students learning communication skills. Students see the example of the teacher and emulate this in their own communication. As long as the teacher remains involved, the students will continue to model, practice, and

engrain communication skills. However, it is apparent from the data that if the teacher begins to remove themselves from the course (in hopes of building independency), students read this as a lack of interest and begin to wane in their own responses, often to the point of becoming uninvolved.

One weakness on the part of the student is the lack of interest in written feedback. While teachers will give copious amounts of feedback to better students' understanding and learning, students seem to look to the final mark of the assignment. This is consistent with the students' interest in those tasks that will get them the final grade they desire and consistent with paying little heed to those things that would further their understanding if they took the time to carry out such tasks.

Acting Responsibly. Accountability and responsibility for one's actions is in part naturally set up in the distance education delivery. Because most communication is in written form, most students appeared to understand their comments are traceable and open for all members to see (whether lesson based or within open social areas). Students understood they are being monitored on the various communication tools used by the school, and that if they abuse or misuse these tools, they will be faced with consequences. This is evident in the one reported case of a student who required one warning to cease undesirable behaviour(s) exhibited.

Expectations of attendance is monitored daily and followed up by parental contact. The general consensus was that students 'log into' the school server or school system each and every day of the week (Monday through Friday, excluding holidays) at some time during the day. Teachers checked this attendance and were prompt in notifying parents if the absence was not reported prior. In cases where attendance requirements were not met, absentee students were reported to the Truancy Board. In this study, students and/or their parents were

generally forthcoming when they (the student) could not meet the requirements at a given time (appointments, family matters, vacation, etc.).

Little is mentioned in the literature regarding the encouragement of assignment accountability. The meeting and missing of assignment deadlines varied from school to school. While some schools allowed for students to hand in assignments whenever they completed them (even if there was a deadline set), it was those schools who had in place a practice of not accepting late assignments (without a valid reason) had more success with students meeting deadlines. (Students, in some cases, were allowed to 'make up' assignments through alternate assignments when faced with an inexcusable late.) Teachers also felt that in order to ensure students were completing all the necessary steps, they had to build in a system of 'homework checks'. This entailed collecting a great deal of student work to ensure completion. However, this also allowed teachers to make formative assessments of the student's learning.

Scaffolding for students facilitated students' ability to meet deadlines. Generally newer students to the distance medium required more scaffolding due to the newness of the medium and form of the delivery for their education. However, because of the nature of the medium (anytime, anyplace) used in distance education and the tutorial support students receive when they first enter the distance school, teachers found that scaffolding of lessons decreased as time in the course progressed.

Flexibility. The inherent flexibility of distance learning (anytime/anywhere learning) leads to the practice and solidification of time management skills. The distance learning medium allows students to devise and follow their own daily schedule as well as meet the deadlines at their own pace. Again, the scaffolding of setting up a daily routine, goal setting, and

suggested timelines of each teacher helped to teach students the time management required for learning in online studies.

Students within the distance courses were generally able to practice flexibility through choice of learning styles and assignment adaptations. In some cases, students became consciously aware of their learning style through learning inventories done at the beginning of the course. Teachers typically allowed students to adapt the assignment to meet student learning needs, either through project choices, audio and video lessons, kinaesthetic work, pictorial representations and journaling exercises. This was largely due to the one-on-one communication that students were afforded by electronic means and facilitated by teacher suggestions.

Creative Problem-Solving. The best practice to encourage student problem-solving shown in this study was through student 'buy in', scaffolding, and self-reflection. By building relevancy of curriculum subjects to students' lives, students are more engaged and willing to participate in the learning and/or assignments. Students show interest and are motivated to take part in the learning experience because the knowledge or skill is seen as valuable and one that can be readily used, whether in their current lives or immediate future. Without that 'buy in', students generally give minimal answers and meet minimal expectations to obtain the desired mark. Simply stated, without the relevancy and 'buy in' of students' interest, there is little learning that occurs and students disengage from the learning experiences set up for them.

Scaffolding of student learning early in courses suggests that students experience success early on, which encourages students to continue applying those skills to new problems. Teachers continue to encourage students to think more in-depth and facilitate students'

problem solving skills through the questions they ask. Again, this continued teacher involvement, along with the one-on-one encouragement and support, promotes student learning in a caring and safe atmosphere.

Scaffolding of courses in Math and Science are generally effective when they are approached through a process of working with materials and objects (manipulatives) first. As a course proceeds, manipulatives are replaced by pictures, and with further time, pictures are replaced with abstract concepts. In cases where a student safety may be at risk or students cannot access certain learning samples (i.e. chemicals), video feed is used to accommodate student learning. While not a tactile approach to learning, student learning is still accommodated by visually seeing the experiment, with supplementary audio commentary, further supplementing the reading that is the basis of most lessons and assignments.

Teachers will use self-reflection (metacognition) as a means of encouraging students to solidify their problem solving skills. Students reflect and on the processes used to solve the problem, what worked, what did not work, and what could have been done differently. This reflection encourages students to apply what they learned within the current learning context to future situations.

Working Cooperatively. Cooperative work (or group work) is recognized by distance education as a necessary skill required in today's global society. This seems to be the case with a growing recognition and inclusion of Assessment for Learning practices and movement of universities towards cooperative tasks.

However, group work has been met with limited success in the online distance medium. Reasons appear to be two-fold: the nature of the student and the fit of the curriculum to accommodate cooperative situations. In the first case, some students' experiences do not

allow to comfortably work in group situations. This is often the case of the student who is enrolled as a full-time student because of an inability to attend traditional schools (usually because of a negative and life altering experience). Yet, this challenge is being met through various accommodations and modifications that encourage students to work within some sort of grouping. Accommodations include finding a partner they are comfortable working with outside of the class participants. Students still are able to learn to work in a cooperative setting through partnerships set up with another staff member or a member in the student's community (a relative or friend). As the student becomes more comfortable, teachers can encourage students to choose partnerships that allow the student to take more personal risks in group settings but at a much smaller and slower rate ('baby steps').

In some situations, students' expectations of group work are not met by the lack of immediacy in the technology used. Students, particularly part-time students, find the methods of communicating and completing projects as tedious and more work than is necessary. This suggests that students are completing the necessary group projects within their class, but only doing what is necessary to obtain the desired mark. Again, accommodations are being made to meet this challenge through the building of partnerships in the districts' traditional schools. Students may be at the same place during the school day and/or have the opportunity to build time into their schedules to work together during a convenient time in the traditional school day. Teachers are also accommodating group work by building eLive sessions and group folders on school servers to allow students to interact and complete projects cooperatively.

It is of interest that a hybrid program is being introduced into one of the district's programs through a partnership built with the traditional high schools, most often for part-time studies. This program's intent is to help accommodate those students requiring specific

courses towards graduation that do not fit in a student's traditional school schedule. In this partnership, students receive their core work through the usual means of distance programming; however, the students are in the same physical location as the other students and the teacher during the traditional school day. Students are usually allowed some prep time within their schedule to work on their hybrid distant class. The fact that students are in the same physical location during the traditional school day, allows the teacher to meet in seminar type sessions when required and to facilitate group work. In the one semester that this particular district ran the hybrid program (at the time of the interview), traditional schools reported the highest and most successful completion rate in the traditional schools' experience.

The other barrier to cooperative work is the curriculum itself. Teachers' expression of the inability to always find a fit between curriculum, student 'buy-in', and group work leaves some teachers frustrated with trying to incorporate other learning techniques, such as group work. Where teachers seem to recognize the importance of working cooperatively, student apathy and/or disinterest creates periodic negative learning atmospheres. In some cases, where safety may be of issue or basic skills must be taught and mastered first, group work is not a learning match to acquiring the necessary skill. This may be true of courses such as science labs and/or a set of basic math concepts. As curriculum is updated and introduced into current Programs of Study, accommodations are being made for some soft skill acquisition. Again, the process is slow to change and the teacher is required to include new teaching methods within an already hectic schedule.

Lasting Friendships. Friendships do develop in the distance schools, as reported by the teachers interviewed. However, data suggests the lasting effect of these relationships is

dependant upon whether the student is a full-time or part-time student, and whether the student lives in a rural area or an urban area. Friendships among full-time students appear to be more lasting than those formed between part-time students. School tends to be the basis of where students meet and make their friends. Since full-time students are rarely in the same place at the same time, the students rely on electronic media for their friendships. Full-time students are also in many of the same courses and tend to get to know one another through the facilitation of different distance classes and different teachers. This commonality creates a greater number of opportunities to learn more about one another.

Friendships among rural students appear to be more prevalent than in the urban areas. Due to the physical distance between people in more remote areas, students come to rely on other means of communication to meet and keep friendships. In the urban areas, students are often neighbours and/or have the transportation readily available to meet one another at the mall or to see one another at their homes. As with friendships, the desire of students to meet in the face-to-face setting was also reliant upon the setting of the school and the student's personal life. Full-time students in the rural settings appear to be more interested in meeting with one another. Opposite to that, part-time urban students were less likely to partake in face-to-face opportunities, getting their socialization through other avenues and activities (particularly their traditional schooling).

It is worthy to note that curriculum changes are slowly being made to allow for some summative measures of some affective outcomes. Because curriculum changes take time, these are generally seen as reactive and slow to implement. Teachers then need to take the necessary time and reflection to incorporate these skills into well established teaching practices. This is not a single, one time occurrence. Rather, it takes the teacher a series of

times and trials to practice and hone the skill into a viable and workable teaching practice. In a field where more and more is being expected of the primary and secondary teacher because of the changing demands on families (NASP, 2002), teachers feel that this is *another* item to add to an already overwhelming job description - one that may not get the required time and/or thought it necessarily deserves.

Research Question #3: How does the acquisition of soft skills in distance education students compare with the acquisition of soft skills in traditionally educated students?

Comparison of the acquisition of soft skills between traditional and distance students varies among skills. Because there seems to be more variables that are in play with the distance student, degrees of success are reliant upon those variables that are a part of the student's environment. For example, acquisition in the distance learning situation will be affected by the number of credits enrolled in an online course (full-time studies versus part-time studies). The more courses in the distance setting by a student, the greater the reliance on the distance school for soft skill acquisition. Where a student resides will affect how the student views the distance setting as a meeting of educational needs and social wants. A rurally situated student appears to be more reliant upon the school community for their social interactions and their learning needs. In contrast, the urban student seems to see the function of the school community for mainly that purpose, as a means of receiving the desired or required education. Social wants can be met in alternate ways for these students.

In terms of teacher practices, it is suggested that the levels of conscious soft skill teaching is greater in the distance schools. Teachers in the traditional schools readily admit that a lot of their soft skill approaches are second nature, meaning that teachers are less conscious about the inclusion of soft skills within teaching practices. In the distance school setting,

teachers were more aware of those practices that would be required to draw students into the learning community and were conscious to plan for opportunities that allowed students to practice soft skills. For this reason, the consistency and consciousness of soft skill inclusion in teaching was more prevalent in the distance schools.

Both traditional and distance schools built community in their classroom (particularly in the early stages of the course), had teachers acting as facilitators and disseminators of knowledge, and were sure to give plenty of verbal and written feedback. However, the intimacy and convenience of the distance communication appears to allow for greater acquisition of communication skills, particularly in the written format. Because students are able to reflect on their responses before submitting, along with the greater opportunity for one-to-one conversations with the teacher, students were more likely to contribute to discussions and converse with the teacher than in the regular classroom. All students were afforded a voice in addition to accessing their teachers through electronic media. Students in the traditional classes generally were limited to those times they were in school, but most chose to discuss items with their teachers during the class time. (None of the traditional teachers interviewed mentioned that they use e-mail as a way to communicate with their students outside of class time.)

One area of communication that distant students appear to be lacking in is the acquisition of expressing oneself in face-to-face situations. Because of the lack of practice and time in the face-to-face setting, distance students tend to be more reserved, shier, and more withdrawn when compared to their traditional counterparts who are exposed to the verbal, face-to-face situation on a near daily basis.

Accountability for attendance and assignments is consistent in both traditional and distance schools. Students are responsible for how they present their ideas and are counselled in proper ‘classroom’ behaviours. Students are responsible to hand in the assignments, however, the response to due dates appears to be largely dependant upon the response and the flexibility exhibited by the teacher and/or school policy. It appears the more lax the requirements to meet deadlines, the more irregular students are about handing in assignments. Conversely, the more stringent teachers and/or school policy are about meeting deadlines, the more punctual the assignments are received.

Other differences in teaching accountability are the levels of scaffolding and the workload of the teacher. Traditional students appear to require more scaffolding in their assignments in order for them to meet the requirements with success. Because distance students usually receive tutorials and support information when they first register in the distance school, students to show more independence and the requirement of less scaffolding, especially as time progresses within a class or in the online distance setting. This independence also shows for distance students in the ability to research and formulate ideas into written forms of communication. However, the work load of a distance teacher is greater because teachers feel they must collect more work than in the traditional classroom setting. Because students will generally skip over those items not deemed for a mark (usually formative measures), teachers will collect the work to ensure that the practice is being done. In traditional classroom settings, where the work, the student and the teacher are in the same location, a traditional teacher can perform a homework check whereby they look at the students’ assignments in class to ensure completeness (or assign an immediate and corresponding consequence for incomplete work).

Student correction for inappropriate behaviours is also more immediate in the traditional classroom, and may be more lasting because the consequence is immediate to the behaviour that needs to be corrected. Thus, students connect the behaviour with the consequence immediately. While students in the distance setting are monitored and are readily contacted for reasons of misuse of school communication, inappropriate comments, etc., this correction has some time delay and may not have as much of an impact on the students because of the separation of time between the misdemeanour and the consequence.

Flexibility is natural to the distance education setting, hence, is strongly taught through the distance medium. The mere fact that students in distance classes can contact their teachers and fellow students at any time of their choosing and at any place that has the means to communicate (usually electronically), students are allowed the freedom to make choices that affect his or her learning. Because students are free to choose the times that they focus on particular curriculum, students can schedule their day according to whatever else may be apart of the daily routine or life circumstances. The freedom to choose the work times of specific subjects also frees-up the student's ability to choose the classes that they desire in order to meet their graduation requirements (barring the course is available through their distance learning institution). Students are also free to set up their learning experiences to meet the needs of their individual learning style – whether through reading, audio lessons, video and pictorial representations or other media available to them in the community or on the internet.

In contrast, traditional students are generally limited to contacting their teacher during the school day, and many of them appear to leave contact to the specific class times. Students are restricted to receiving their lesson material in the times they are with the teacher in class, as

set up by a schedule given at the beginning of the year or semester. These schedules are further dependant upon what times the courses are available and whether or not specific courses, in combination, will work for the student. Students are also subject to the learning styles presented by the teacher (usually auditory and sometime visual), which is generally still lecture and discussion, and assessed through multiple choice exams.

Creative problem solving was equally matched in terms of levels of acquisition. Both types of education relied on building relevancy between curriculum and students' lives to ensure student 'buy-in'. Teachers became facilitators to the learning, often through supplemental instruction and encouraging students to push their thinking further with questioning and prompting techniques. To have student reflect on their methods, successes, and not so successful moments, teachers used metacognitive exercises (usually through reflection questions) to encourage students think through and solidify what worked and what did not in problem solving activities.

Support for the students is apparent in both types of schools. However, the means to meet the end is different because of the set-up of the school. Much of the support in traditional schools was done in a face-to-face setting where students and teachers were in the same place at the same time. This was either in class time, around class times (just prior to or immediately following), or through appointments during the school day. In contrast, the support in distance schools was at any time and would vary depending on the technology available to the school and the student (whiteboard, synchronous and asynchronous communication, video and audio conferences, etc.). Most relied upon telephone conversations to support the student in solving problems. In some extreme cases, students met with their teacher in public settings to work in the face-to-face setting.

One difference in supporting creative problem solving is the use of scaffolding by teachers in their lessons. Because distance students are typically more independent and versed in making decisions that affect their learning (often learned in the tutorials set up upon the first time entering the distance school), teachers are required to do less scaffolding of assignments in order for students to meet the end requirements. In traditional schools, the opposite seems true. Teachers use mini-deadlines, discussions, prompting, mini-lessons on using technology, etc. in order for students to aptly and successfully meet the requirements of an assignment. For the most part, the assignment is often the same – an essay or class presentation.

Working within cooperative group settings is somewhat a stronger skill in the traditional school setting. Because students have a familiarity with one another in a face-to-face setting, students appear to be more forthcoming about working with one another. However, in the traditional setting, group work is only starting to grow in use, where the mainstay was lecture, notes, peppered with discussion.

Acquisition of cooperative skills in distance education is often challenged, primarily by the nature of the student. Life experiences of the student does not always allow for enough trust to work in a group situation. While these students grow in their comfort and ability to discuss in the various communications available at their school, they are still timid and hesitant to form a trusting and working relationship with a fellow student. Sometimes the experience, seemingly for those part-time students, does not measure up to the experiences within the traditional classroom. Students become less interested in group work and tend to express their dislike for the lack of immediacy. While distance schools make

accommodations for some students, the skill of being able to work in settings that are not of their choosing is not being met with the greatest of success.

Summary

From evidence gathered in the interviews, the general student population is common to educational settings and is only interested in performing those tasks that are a part of a final or summative grade value at the end of the course. Students appear to lack the motivation or drive to do those tasks that will ultimately solidify learning and make them better learners. They generally disregard those activities that may relate to practicing a skill before being evaluated on it. As well, students rarely challenge the marks that they receive and do not ask teachers for further clarification of comments and feedback when written and graded work is returned. This suggests that students are indeed becoming more self-interested and seem to have a general attitude of "what's in it for me?" The learning is often approached with an apathetic view, and seemingly more so in light of the current economic boom within Alberta. Students, especially in the general high school population, appear to be more concerned with being employed so they have the disposable cash to spend on their wants. With companies offering high wages (and luring teens away from high school, often before graduating) and a current trend of approximately 50% of students graduating attending a post-secondary institution after high school, it leads one to wonder if students are not putting in the effort because they have no goal of attending a learning institution upon graduation.

A problem specific to the distance setting is that of a lack of positive learning experiences, especially while they attended a traditional school setting. Students are hesitant to trust other people, are harder to involve, and are often withdrawn from the general population. The lack

of positive experience leaves them feeling apprehensive about people that are outside of their secure relationships.

Even with its problems and weaknesses, students appear to acquire greater soft skills and retain them for longer periods of time when solid teaching practices are employed. Evidence of higher satisfaction rates among students and higher completion rates within distance courses (when compared to their traditional counterparts), shows distance education is a positive learning experience. This may be in part due to the facilitation of the teachers and the students, but can also be attributed to the consistent use over the period of the course and the ability to reflect before submitting items for evaluation. Students in the distance setting generally have better technological skills due to their constant use as a mode of communication and research. However, students need to learn to become more independent and self-directed in order to succeed in the distance school. Therefore, those students learn to set goals for themselves and to budget their time accordingly to get projects, assignments, and other lesson materials finished.

Because lessons are generally print based, students must rely on reading skills to gain understanding, hence, their reading comprehension improves with continued practice and consistent use. These students communicate their ideas in writing; therefore, become stronger writers with continued practice. However, these same students may also be weak in using their social skills in a face-to-face environment because of the lesser degree of usage when compare to the traditional student. Students who have trouble adapting to the distance learning experience may also feel overwhelmed with the workload and/or may feel isolated with a problem. This may be due to the fact there is no one readily available to share their ideas or to voice the concern. Finally, students may have the learning disrupted in a distance

setting when families are faced with in inability to supply the technology for the student, usually to family or other life circumstances.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The whole education of a child is becoming reliant upon the school. With the complexities of families in the twenty-first century, schools are being looked to by business to aptly train their future employees – not only in academic fact, but to have and use skills that allow for successful cooperation, motivation, and accountability within the company. Current Canadian trends tell that these skills are generally lacking (Conference Board of Canada, 2003); therefore, business sees education as not meeting their needs and as failing to completely educate students. While there is much theory in print, little pertains to the actual measure and study of the primary and secondary schooling years. Soft skill measures of teaching, acquisition, and attainment is not a part of the typical assessments in school. Little data is found to identify where the break in educational need and education practice exists.

Specific to distance education, a lack of measurable data in the ability to teach soft skills in an electronically based atmosphere and a lack of face-to-face environments questions the ability to teach soft skill in this medium. A measure needs to be made in order to define whether or not distance educators are contributing to the problem of a lack of soft skilled employees. By studying and drawing measurable comparisons between traditional and distance schools, we can begin to understand whether primary and secondary schooling, particularly in online distance education, are apart of the problem professed by the business sector.

Conclusions Based on Findings

Based on the findings and interpretations from this study of soft skill acquisition in secondary schools in online distance educational settings, soft skills are being taught and acquired at a distance with the employment of best practices which is suggested in much of the literature.

First, the acquisition of soft skills is reliant upon the building and maintaining of a community between students. The stronger the community, the safer the students feel to contribute to the community. Within the community, the teacher is expected by the students to act as the facilitator, the referee, contributor and catalyst to ensuring the safety of the community's participants and to ensure the longevity of the community's existence for the required duration of time. The more involved the teacher is, the more involved the students are. The opposite is also true. Additionally, the more students are reliant upon the distance schooling for their education and socialization, the more students become involved in the community to meet both academic and social needs and/or wants.

Soft skills are not a measurable skill according to the Alberta curriculum which dictates what teachers must teach and what assessments are allowed in each curricular area. Because of a lack of possible measure combined with the students' goals towards a final mark, students will often ignore or skim over those tasks that are not related to the final numerical grade. This limits teacher's abilities to encourage soft skill acquisition and practice. While curriculum does change and is modified to meet the needs of the larger society, these changes are slow to implement. Therefore, the effects of these changes will be slow to come into fruition hence a delay in meeting the business sector's current needs. Nevertheless, teachers that are conscious of the soft skills necessary in today's society are finding ways to teach soft skills and to incorporate them into their teaching in a variety of other ways.

Second, the acquisition of soft skills is reliant upon the building of relevancy of the subject matter and skill to the students' lives. Because students' goals are generally aimed at those assessments contributing to the final mark of a course, students will generally only do what they have to in order to meet the requirements and their desired level of achievement, including participation within the community. Students are less likely to participate and actively seek out exercises and activities that are of no immediate value towards their final grade. This appears to be true even of those activities meant to practice skills for application in a future, and usually summative, activity. By building relevancy (or 'buy-in') into the learning, students become more engaged in the learning and are motivated to become more involved in the lesson. Relevancy allows the student to see the learning of a skill worthy of acquiring due to its future possible uses. With this engagement, students are more actively learning, thus, the acquisition of the soft skills. However, it is not always possible to build relevancy for all students in all parts of the curriculum, and teachers continue to struggle with certain topics and skills as they teach.

Soft skills are practiced regularly in the online distance setting. Communication through writing encourages students to reflect upon their contributions prior to posting to ensure appropriateness and is reflective of the teacher's modelling. Due to the independent nature of the distance school and the necessity of the student to become more independent, students learn to be self-motivated and practice time management skills in order to meet their expected levels within the course. These students learn to accomplish the assigned work through the flexibility in setting up their own scaffolding of steps and in their own adaptation of the assignments to their particular strengths and learning needs.

Because of a lack of face-to-face interaction, teachers in distance education tend to take in more assignments and other student work than typically found in the traditional classroom. By doing so, teachers are able to give formative feedback to students that can be reflected upon by the students (metacognition) and applied to new learning situations. Consequences for late assignments and absences, as well as assignment completion and submission, instil the accountability of students to do the tasks that are set before them. The more stringent the consequence for a late assignment, the smaller the percentage of students who will submit assignments late (without a valid reason).

The main weakness in the acquisition of soft skills is in the cooperative skill practice within the distance education environment. The reason for this, as suggested by this study, is one of two reasons. Full-time students in the distance programs within Alberta are often there because of an inability to attend a traditional school. Many of these students have been emotionally scarred by their experiences in the traditional and face-to-face setting. While the teacher may be able to draw these students into the learning community, these students are still hesitant in working cooperatively with another classmate. This creates situations where teachers need to adapt group work experiences in order to practice skills that fall under the category of cooperative learning. In terms of a second group, part-time students in the distance programs are often there because of a need to fulfill course requirements (usually one course) in order to meet graduation requirements within their traditional high school. These students are used to the immediacy of the face-to-face environment to complete tasks within groups. The reliance upon electronic media to complete group tasks is seen as slow and cumbersome. Again, accommodations and modifications to the class procedures are being made by the schools and their teachers in order to allow for cooperative skill learning

while in the distance course – whether it be by matching people with partners from the same traditional school, or the building of 'hybrid' programs (students and teachers in the same location, but use the distance environment or method to allow a fit within the students' timetables).

Soft skill acquisition appears to be stronger in the distance education setting, primarily due to continual access to the community and the reflection-time allowed to students during the time of the schooling. First and foremost, the one-on-one access to the teacher by students is greater in the distance setting. Students have direct contact to their teachers and other students at any time and in any place through electronic media as a communication tool. This affords a voice for even those students who are shy and/or less likely to contribute to a discussion in a face-to-face setting. As well, the students have the ability to reflect on their questions and comments before sending them to the receiver(s). This reflection allows students to continually practice and create a habit forming skill. Conversely in a traditional classroom, students have limited access to their teachers (usually during the school day and particularly in class time) and are limited in reflection to the pacing of discussion and work, often led by the teacher.

The teaching of soft skills is approached more consciously by the distance education teachers. Teachers must carefully plan out their activities to fit the media used within the school. Whereas, the teachers of traditional classes admitted that their teaching and modelling of soft skills was second nature with little conscious thought went the inclusion of soft skills while teaching.

Students in the distance setting learn to become independent learners and generally require less scaffolding. Distance education creates flexible situations where students

scaffold their learning on a daily basis and, in order to succeed in this medium, quickly learn that time management is a necessity. Students in the traditional setting often have their learning and projects highly scaffolded to ensure that students are completing 'chunks' of assignments in a timely fashion and so that students are only spending the required time equal to the assessment marking given to the task. Students are also faced with their rigid timetables in the traditional schools; hence, students are forced to learn in the moment they are scheduled. In the distance course, students choose what time of the day they will complete their work, allowing the students to work when they are at their optimal learning potential and/or their daily schedules allow (particularly in terms of the elite athletes or those working to support families or themselves).

While much of the soft skill measures in distance education suggest strength is this medium, distance education does not greatly contribute to the learning and use of soft skills in the face-to-face setting. While some schools do facilitate days where students can meet in the same physical space, these are often shied upon by students, especially those who have traumatic experiences in their earlier education (usually in a traditional setting). Unless these distance students are actively involved in other extra-curricular activities within their community, many of the soft skills associated with face-to-face environments go unpractised.

Alternative Explanations for the Findings

Two possible situations may explain the findings within this study: the limited random picking of teachers interviewed and emotional state of human beings.

The teachers involved in this study were chosen in two ways. The first method of teacher selection was through the volunteering when approached by the principal and/or director. The second method of selection was through the identification as a strong teacher of the

distance medium, again by the principal or director of the school. Because of this less than random selection of interviewees, teachers involved in this study could conceivably be those teachers well-versed in the distance methods, yielding high success rates and high course completion rates within their respective schools. Therefore, this study does not account for those teachers that may be new to the distance setting and/or struggling in teaching in this particular medium. It is conceivable that the teachers interviewed may be in fact not representative of the general population of teachers teaching at a distance.

It was felt by the interviewer that teachers interviewed were open, honest, and forthcoming with their ideas and experiences. However, teachers are humans, who in human-like fashion, are prone to emphasize those things that work well, while minimizing those items that are less desirable. Because the data of this study was reliant upon the views and experiences of the teachers interviewed, teachers' ideas of success and strengths are naturally emphasized in the course of the conversation. Meanwhile, those items that may be perceived by the teachers as a weakness may have been de-emphasized or minimized through the explanation as an area still undergoing development, and/or presented in a more positive light than may be actually occurring. In some circumstances, this study may also represent a situation where a lack of success is placed on the shoulders of the students rather than an instructional weakness. With a lack of student perceptions and measures within this data, there is limited evidence to prove such a notion.

Impact of this Study

Contrary to a belief or suggestion that soft skills are not acquired in an online distance learning setting, this study reveals, with the implementation and inclusion of key teaching and learning practices, the acquisition and development of soft skills is possible in the

distance education setting. These practices allow for the growth of reflective communication skills, growth in independence and independent learning, growth in time-management skills, and ability to mould a given task to a preferred learning style. Cooperative skills and working in groups is inclusive of this educational medium, however, with less degrees of success. This skill continues to be an area of growth, whereby accommodations and modifications to group work need to be made to ensure success.

This study also suggests that soft skills tend to be learned at greater levels and attained for longer periods of time than the general student population within the traditional setting. This may be due in part to the continual use of these skills throughout the course of time attending the distance school. It may also be due to the strength of the community built in conjunction with the one-on-one connectiveness students (both with the teacher and with fellow students) experience in the distance medium which encourages greater participation by all students.

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Limitations

This particular study of the acquisition of affective outcomes and soft skills opens the dialogue and begins to measure those skills required for future employees while they are currently in their secondary school settings. These measures allow us to see those practices that are successful in teaching our students in the distance setting in order to prepare them for their future – not only academically, but socially. It allows us to identify those aspects where distance education has strengths to the teaching of the whole child and identify areas that may be weak in accommodating the learning of soft skills. This study encourages a discussion towards finding ways and methods that meet the required needs within the distance school setting.

Three districts were included in this study's sample. The comparison of these locations and economic backgrounds of the students' communities allows us to begin to see the different needs of different populations. We can begin to understand the variances between student responses to the distance medium within the student demographics, particularly the part-time student versus the full-time student and/or rural versus urban settings.

While this study promotes the dialogue of soft skill acquisition in online distance education, there are inherent weaknesses and limitations. First and foremost, the lack of student involvement within this study does not allow for a balanced comparison between teacher perceptions and the concrete measures of student behaviours and perceptions within the classes (both in the traditional and distance settings). While teachers are professional and were seen to be honest, the lack of student involvement skews this particular study in favour of the teacher's perceptions and biases.

Of the three schools that partook of this study, all were within the geographical area of the northern half of Alberta. Therefore these results may be limited to similar kinds of population and circumstances, and may not be transferable to other situations and life-circumstances in other regions, whether within or outside the province of Alberta. The limited scope of the study does not allow for a generalization beyond the samples studied.

The limited randomness of choosing teachers and participants, particularly due to the issues of FOIP and the selection of schools through a volunteer process, limits the generalization to other populations. A lack of willingness on the part of the student, particularly in the distance medium, created a lack of verification and measurable data to support what teachers revealed within the interview process.

Implications and Recommendations for Professional Practice or Decision Making

Implications that can be drawn from this study relate to educators and administrators in the online distance education field, educators of future teachers, and educational policy makers - particularly those who build and/or modify current school curriculum and government policy makers (especially within the province of Alberta). As more and more students enrol in the distance medium as a means to completing their educational requirements for a grade twelve diploma, society needs to be cognisant of those factors and influences that will promote and allow for the growth of the whole child (or student) in light of today's shortage of soft skilled employees.

Educators and administrators of distance school sights need to be aware that particular teaching practices are vital to the growth of the learner in affective outcomes and soft skill acquisition. These practices (building a strong community, ensuring content relevancy, practicing immediacy, etc.) create learning environments and situations that bring forth skills required in today's business sector, specifically within Canada. Teachers need to be conscious of those practices that allow for the inclusion and growth of soft skills in combination with the teaching of academic knowledge. This includes the time to aptly develop their course and/or adapt a pre-existing course to meet the specific teaching style of the teacher. Teachers need the continued support of professional development opportunities to learn new teaching methods and support with understanding new and/or updated technologies as they become readily available and common place within businesses and residences. Administrators of schools need to create teaching loads that are balanced and ensure the inclusion of teaching practices no matter what level or type of course (i.e. optional programming verses core course work).

Interestingly, one of the administrators interviewed commented that while at an Alberta Education meeting regarding distant schools within Alberta, distance education schools are no longer fighting for students to enrol in their programs. Rather, boards are fighting to keep up with the students in their own districts and to keep up with the demands for the flexibility of courses in high school time tables. With this in mind, administrators of particular schools sights, as well as superintendents within each school district, need to be aware of cost allocation towards such programs to ensure that the support required for teachers is, at minimum, maintained at levels worthy to continue the successes that distance programs currently possess. As well, money and the other supports need to be continued to improve and experiment with those areas that continue to show weakness (particularly cooperative learning). Distance education is not going to disappear (Saba, 2005); therefore the level of time and resources for teachers to prepare and to develop as a professional need to be sustained. Administrators of particular school sites can pair teachers new to the medium with a 'seasoned' professional to be mentored, hence, sustaining and continuing those practices that promote the growth of the whole child. This pairing allows for valuable dialogue and learning experiences for the newer teacher, keeps veteran teachers exposed and open to new ideas, builds cohesiveness within the school staff, and ensures some consistency of expectations between all staff in the distance school.

With preliminary success reported in a 'hybrid' program, as mentioned in this study, districts may need to encourage traditional high schools and the distance school to work cooperatively wherever possible. This may be one way for districts to meet the growing needs of the distance schooling medium and for distance schools to encourage the growth of cooperative soft skill development. The cost sharing factor of hosting distance schools within

the traditional school may also be of interest to school boards where budgets are usually tight and excess money non-existent.

Universities and colleges that are responsible for the training of future teachers need to also be aware of the role of affective outcomes and those practices that encourage such skills in the classroom, whether traditional or at a distance. Teacher training needs to include theory and dialogue of soft skills and affective outcomes. This will then bring about the conscious thought and knowledge of those activities and classroom management techniques that facilitate the acquisition and growth of soft skills in the classroom. These institutions need to be cognisant and ensure that university students are gaining the tools they will practice and hone in the field, not only during their practical experiences as an apprentice student teacher, but once they are hired by the various school districts. With the field of distance teaching growing and becoming in more demand, these training institutions need to accommodate for the acquisition of knowledge and training in the distance medium, even going as far as to include distance education training as a major or minor area of study.

As Canada's economy continues to boom, particularly in those areas interconnected to the oil sector, government and educational policy makers will need to be aware of how current curriculum and assessment practices will reflect and encourage those skills that society require. While the revamping of curriculum is necessary after a given period of time, those who plan curriculum and/or review curriculum need to be cognisant of the employment needs and ensure timely adaptations and updates to current curricula are included and used within the educational system. As well, curriculum measures need to be more inclusive of those soft skills required and reflective of the student thinking. This means the inclusion of measures to test skills outside of the academic knowledge. Provincial testing that presently

occurs within Alberta needs to be modified to allow for a fairer or truer measure of those skills required for the current population (approximately 50% of high school graduates) that will not attend a post-secondary school, but be hired by businesses in Alberta's current economic boom. Governments also need to be aware of the costs involved with such practices and ensure that funding allows for the growth of education in the distance setting.

With an increased awareness of the role of soft skills in educational practices, students of the 21st century can learn (with or without their knowledge) the necessary skills to become valuable members of the Canadian society and the current economic and business trends.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research Studies

While this study is only the beginning of a dialogue on the acquisition of soft skills in Alberta's secondary schools, evidence is suggested that these skills are acquired in distance education schools/settings and are provided for by the teaching practices included as suggested by the literature. What is still unclear is the true measure of the degree of these skills in students. At what specific levels are students acquiring soft skills? How does this compare to a specific measure of soft skill acquisition in traditional schools? Student data needs to be gathered and measured to ensure that what teachers perceive is true.

This study also reveals students are generally not willing to partake in activities and exercises that do not contribute to an overall final grade. Application of this research study's original design of student measurement or similar measures would need to be made to ensure participation. This may be facilitated by a carefully, well thought-out, and well planned inclusion of students measures with the cooperation of the teacher to include measuring within an aspect of an existing course. The application could be applied to such course work as the CALM program, the Catholic school's Religion programs, statistical analysis in some

Mathematics courses, psychology options, etc. By including parts of the study into the requirements of the course (again with the cooperation of the class teacher), students would receive a reward in terms of a mark towards the final grade.

Studies are also needed to measure student attitudes towards education to find ways to entice students to continue with their life long learning journey, especially in the current economic boom in Alberta – where students are drawn away from learning by the money and abundance of jobs in the work world. Such a study may focus on the impact of economic prosperity on the desire and actual fulfilment of furthering one's education. The opposite also holds true, whereby measures of economic distress may also have an impact of secondary students' desire and fulfillment of furthering one's education.

With evidence suggesting a weakness of students participation in cooperative projects and activities at the distance setting, further research and studies into what students expect and desire would identify possible solutions to strengthen the current weakness in cooperative learning. As new technologies are developed, can the incorporation of some into teaching practices encourage cooperative skills? Are there different teaching approaches that can be tested and developed to fulfill this skill need? With the inclusion of web-cams in most computers today (especially laptops), is it possible to set up video conferencing to simulate the face-to-face social skills that are weak among many of the full-time students, as well as, compliment the learning done through a reading and comprehension based program?

The current success experienced with the 'hybrid' program in one of the school districts suggests that an integration and cooperation between distance and traditional high school programs may lead to the success of students and meet the desire of current Alberta students– a job to have the disposable income to buy the items they desire. Further research into

alternate programs using online distance education may also allow for the immediacy students desire in cooperative settings, but still allow for the flexibility and intimacy that distance education brings.

Other studies to further understand affective outcomes in the primary and/or secondary student would be to measure the longevity of students attaining the skills they acquire in their learning setting. Do these skills carry over to new situations, especially outside of the classroom environment? Are these skills transferable to a work environment, especially when one may be entering directly from high school? Could it be possible that students only use these skills in the classroom setting and, in fact, do not transfer them to real life situations?

Do class size and the number of students affect the quality of education and teaching moments for the teacher? Should classes in distance education be capped to a particular number of students to ensure learning, as is the contention in traditional education within Alberta today? Studies on the effectiveness of the teacher in relation to the number of students and/or the number of classes required to teach would ensure that the needs of the students are not lost upon an overload on the teacher's role and the expectations placed upon them?

Finally, the research is limited to a small sample of teachers teaching within a distance setting. Further research and application of a similar study to a larger diversity of student backgrounds would help to formulate a clearer picture of the success and weaknesses in teaching affective outcomes and soft skills in the distance education setting.

Summary

While there is a continued need to obtain student measures of soft skill acquisition in the online medium, this study concludes that students are acquiring the skills desired by

businesses in Canada. Preliminary comparisons of distance education and traditional education point to the online format being stronger overall in soft skill acquisition. This is, in part, due to the repetitive and continual use of communication, often in writing, in the electronic format. Students are also able to reflect upon their comments prior to submitting them. In the traditional classroom, students express themselves verbally at the pace of the class discussion with a group of the student population not contribute at all.

Independence and flexibility are an inherent part of the learning at a distance. Through this, students learn time management (to varying degrees) in order to meet the expectations of the distance school. This is not necessarily the case of the traditional class where seemingly a greater amount of scaffolding is required. Cooperative work is still a weakness within the online setting, however, distant school teachers and administration continue to look at ways to incorporate this skill within the teaching.

Different levels of the success of soft skill acquisition are related to the reliance of meeting educational needs on the online school setting. Part-time students, who with their peers in a traditional school for a majority of the time, rely on the online school to meet their social needs. Conversely, the student who relies solely on the distance school for their education also see the school as making friendships and other social wants.

While soft skill acquisition is successful to varying degrees in the online distance institution (and traditional classroom), it is unclear to what degree students take these skills outside of their classroom and school environment. With the access to distance programming on the rise (both in programs available and students accessing them), continued research will need to further the understanding of why these affective outcomes are not being seen in the Canadian workplace.

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APPENDIX A

LETTERS OF REQUEST TO PARTICIPATE

Letter of Request to School Districts

Dear {NAME}:

I am a graduate student at the University of Athabasca (Master or Distance Education – and a full-time junior high teacher), currently in the process of carrying out my thesis study. Under the direction and counsel of my advisor, Dr. Martha Cleveland-Innes, I am inviting school(s) to participate in my study – *Acquisition of Soft Skills and Affective Outcomes in Distance Education Situations: A Secondary School Study*.

Having informally talked to {NAME} at {VIRTUAL SCHOOL NAME}, interest is being shown in the participation of my study. Therefore, I am writing to request formal permission for the participation of some of your students in my thesis study.

The focus of my thesis is measuring and comparing the learning of soft skills (affective outcomes, pro-social skills, et. al.) in traditional education versus in online/distance education settings. The lack of skills is especially prevalent in today's Canadian society - a common complaint among the business sector being a lack of employees with highly developed soft skills. The measurement would consist of administering a pre-test/post-test (survey like) form and social skill final examination to both sets (a traditional and online class) of Junior and/or Senior High students within your school district. The traditional class will be of your choosing with the following requirement: that the selected class is of the same grade and/or age level to the selected online class. Where possible, I would invite involvement from a maximum of 4 different classes – an online and traditional class at the junior high level, and an online and traditional class at the senior high level.

The findings will be compared between the two groups – starting levels, ending levels and comparison of growth over time. To further understand the results of the self-assessments and test, I would then like to take a closer look at the online situation through the study of random sampling of transcripts associated with the online course (asynchronous/bulletin postings and/or synchronous/chat discussions) as further description and explanation to findings. Finally, where notable scores result and greater understanding is necessary, interviews with those participants (students, teachers, administration) would be conducted. Overall, all attempts will be made to ensure that there is minimum disruption to the educational setting that has already been established in your schools. This process is projected to initially occur over an approximate 4 month process (September to December), with interviews to follow accordingly.

All information will be held confidential, except when legislation or professional code of conduct requires that it be reported. All attempts to anonymity would be made to ensure

FOIP is adhered to. Coding of student names will be established with each site participating where necessary. Pseudonyms and/or aliases will be devised also where necessary to ensure that all participants and their respective schools are protected from the improper use of any data collected. Participants of the study will be asked to sign a letter (or their parent(s)/guardian(s) when under the age of 18) explaining the procedure and reasoning for this study, as well as, notified of their right to withdraw from parts or entire from the study process. All raw data will be accessible to my faculty advisor and myself only, and kept locked for the duration of 7 years, upon which it will be destroyed (shredded and/or incinerated).

Upon completion of this study, I would gladly share my results and reports with any of the participants interested in receiving them and/or discussing them with me. This study will become apart of Athabasca University's thesis collection, as well as, the subject of any presentation that I do in partnership with my faculty advisor, Dr. Cleveland-Innes.

I thank you for considering my request, especially at this busy time of year. If you have any questions or concerns about my study, please feel free to contact me at home (780-460-1732, please leave a message), or at either my home e-mail (jjtanguay@shaw.ca) or my work e-mail (hertleinj@ecsd.net). Unless I receive a reply from you sooner, I will be in contact with you next week to discuss this study further with you.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to talking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Jody L. Hertlein
Graduate Student, Athabasca University

Letter of Request to Online Participants

Dear Online Student and Parent(s)/Guardian(s):

I am a graduate student at the University of Athabasca (Master or Distance Education – and a full-time junior high teacher), currently in the process of carrying out my thesis study. Under the direction and counsel of my advisor, Dr. Martha Cleveland-Innes, I am inviting you to participate in my study – Acquisition of Soft Skills and Affective Outcomes in Distance Education Situations: A Secondary School Study. The focus of my thesis is measuring and comparing the learning of soft skills (pro-social skills, social etiquette, etc.) in regular classroom education versus in online/distance education settings. Social skills and affective outcomes include listening skills, analytical thinking, the ability to communicate effectively, leadership skills, problem-solving skills, diplomacy, flexibility, change-readiness, team-building skills, self-awareness, and creativity. (The lack of these skills is especially prevalent in today's society - a common complaint among the business sector being a lack of employees with highly developed soft skills.)

The student's involvement in this study would be minimal and would not take away from their regular class routine or studies. Students will be asked to fill out a brief questionnaire

regarding how they feel they behave or act in their online classes. (For example, how they get along with other students, how they feel other students perceive them, how they study and learn, etc.). As well, three or four discussions that students have online with their teachers (called transcripts) will be analyzed for evidence of social skill growth within the class, and for the purpose of evidence to those teacher methods that promote social skills in online settings. Finally, at the end of the study period, the students will be once again asked to complete a questionnaire reflecting on their social skill growth, as well as, a short 'etiquette' exam (multiple choice with some short answer). **This test would NOT be used for grading purposes. Results of any information collected by the researcher will be kept confidential to the researcher and her thesis advisor only.**

Once information has been collected and analyzed, resulting information and findings will be compared between the two groups (traditional students and online students) – starting levels of social skills, ending levels and comparison of growth over time. In those places where there is notable growth shown and a greater understanding is necessary, interviews with those specific participants will be conducted. *Overall, all attempts will be made to ensure that there is minimum disruption to the educational setting that has already been established in your school.*

This process is projected to occur over an approximate 3 month process (February to April), with interviews to follow accordingly in May or June. Students who are invited to be interviewed will be contacted. These interviews will be conduct in person, unless where time and/or distance do not allow, interviews may be conducted via telephone.

Students are invited and encouraged to partake in all aspects of the study, but may withdraw at anytime, in whole or in certain parts of the study, without prejudice. All information will be held confidential, except when legislation or professional code of conduct requires that it be reported. All attempts to anonymity will be made to ensure Freedom of Information and Privacy (FOIP) is adhered to. Pseudonyms and/or aliases will be devised where necessary to ensure that all participants and their respective schools are protected from the improper use of any data collected. All raw data will be accessible to my faculty advisor and myself only, and kept locked for the duration of 7 years, upon which it will be destroyed (shredded, erased, and/or incinerated).

Upon completion of this study, I would gladly share my results and reports with any of the participants interested in receiving them and/or discussing them with me. This study will become apart of Athabasca University's thesis collection, as well as, the subject of any presentation that I do in partnership with my faculty advisor, Dr. Cleveland-Innes.

In order to be apart of this very valuable study, please sign your consent below and return to the researcher in the supplied envelope by Wednesday, February 21st, 2007.

I thank you for considering my request. If you have any questions or concerns about my study, please feel free to contact me at the mailing address above or either my home e-mail (jjtanguay@shaw.ca) or my work e-mail (hertleinj@ecsd.net).

Sincerely,

Jody L. Hertlein
Graduate Student, Athabasca University

Cc Dr. Martha Cleveland-Innes (martic@athabascau.ca, or 1-800-788-9041, ext. 6426)

❒ YES, I am willing to be a participant in this study.

I _____ (print name of student) have read and understood the information contained in this letter, and I agree to participate in the study, on the understanding that I may refuse to answer certain questions, and I may withdraw anytime during the data collection period.

_____ (signature of student) Date: _____

I _____ (print name of parent for students under the age of 18) have read and understood the information contained in this letter, and I agree to allow my child to participate in the study, on the understanding that my child may refuse to answer certain questions, and my child may withdraw anytime during the data collection period.

_____ (signature of parent) Date: _____

My contact information is: _____ _____, AB _____
address town/city
postal code

(780) _____ _____@_____
phone e-mail

❒ NO, I am not willing or wanting to participate in this study at this time.

Letter of Request to Traditional Participants

Dear Student and Parent(s)/Guardian(s):

I am a graduate student at the University of Athabasca (Master or Distance Education – and a full-time junior high teacher), currently in the process of carrying out my thesis study. Under the direction and counsel of my advisor, Dr. Martha Cleveland-Innes, I am inviting you to participate in my study – Acquisition of Soft Skills and Affective Outcomes in Distance Education Situations: A Secondary School Study. The focus of my thesis is measuring and comparing the learning of soft skills (pro-social skills, social etiquette, etc.) in regular classroom education versus in online/distance education settings. Social skills and affective outcomes include listening skills, analytical thinking, the ability to communicate effectively,

leadership skills, problem-solving skills, diplomacy, flexibility, change-readiness, team-building skills, self-awareness, and creativity. (The lack of these skills is especially prevalent in today's society - a common complaint among the business sector being a lack of employees with highly developed soft skills.)

The student's involvement in this study would be minimal and would not take away from their regular class routine or studies. Students will be asked to fill out a brief questionnaire regarding how they feel they behave or act in their online classes. (For example, how they get along with other students, how they feel other students perceive them, how they study and learn, etc.). Finally, at the end of the study period, the students will be once again asked to complete a questionnaire reflecting on their social skill growth, as well as, a short 'etiquette' exam (multiple choice with some short answer). **This test would NOT be used for grading purposes. Results of any information collected by the researcher will be kept confidential to the researcher and her thesis advisor only.**

Once information has been collected and analyzed, resulting information and findings will be compared between the two groups (traditional students and online students) – starting levels of social skills, ending levels and comparison of growth over time. In those places where there is notable growth shown and a greater understanding is necessary, interviews with those specific participants will be conducted. *Overall, all attempts will be made to ensure that there is minimum disruption to the educational setting that has already been established in your school.*

This process is projected to occur over an approximate 3 month process (February to April), with interviews to follow accordingly in May or June. Students who are invited to be interviewed will be contacted. These interviews will be conduct in person, unless where time and/or distance do not allow, interviews may be conducted via telephone.

Students are invited and encouraged to partake in all aspects of the study, but may withdraw at anytime, in whole or in certain parts of the study, without prejudice. All information will be held confidential, except when legislation or professional code of conduct requires that it be reported. All attempts to anonymity will be made to ensure Freedom of Information and Privacy (FOIP) is adhered to. Pseudonyms and/or aliases will be devised where necessary to ensure that all participants and their respective schools are protected from the improper use of any data collected. All raw data will be accessible to my faculty advisor and myself only, and kept locked for the duration of 7 years, upon which it will be destroyed (shredded, erased, and/or incinerated).

Upon completion of this study, I would gladly share my results and reports with any of the participants interested in receiving them and/or discussing them with me. This study will become apart of Athabasca University's thesis collection, as well as, the subject of any presentation that I do in partnership with my faculty advisor, Dr. Cleveland-Innes.

In order to be apart of this very valuable study, please sign your consent below and return to your teacher/principal in a sealed envelope by Wednesday, February 21st, 2007.

I thank you for considering my request. If you have any questions or concerns about my study, please feel free to contact me at the mailing address above or either my home e-mail (jjtanguay@shaw.ca) or my work e-mail (hertleinj@ecsd.net).

Sincerely,

Jody L. Hertlein
Graduate Student, Athabasca University

Cc Dr. Martha Cleveland-Innes (martic@athabascau.ca, or 1-800-788-9041, ext. 6426)

❒ YES, I am willing to be a participant in this study.

I _____ (print name of student) have read and understood the information contained in this letter, and I agree to participate in the study, on the understanding that I may refuse to answer certain questions, and I may withdraw anytime during the data collection period.

_____ (signature of student) Date: _____

I _____ (print name of parent for students under the age of 18) have read and understood the information contained in this letter, and I agree to allow my child to participate in the study, on the understanding that my child may refuse to answer certain questions, and my child may withdraw anytime during the data collection period.

_____ (signature of parent) Date: _____

My contact information is: _____ _____, AB _____

address town/city postal code

(780) _____ _____@_____

phone e-mail

❒ NO, I am not willing or wanting to participate in this study at this time.

APPENDIX B

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS[1]

Student Pre and Post Self-Assessment Questionnaire

Self-Assessment

Please read each item carefully, keeping in mind this subject, and select the number that best identifies your behaviour.

		Always	Often	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Skill Assessment (will not be included in student copy)
1	I use a problem-solving model or solve problems the same way whenever faced with a new assignment or challenge.	5	4	3	2	1	PS
2	I try to understand other people's ideas through careful "listening" (including reading others' comments – for example, chat lines).	5	4	3	2	1	LiS
3	I think about my behaviour and how I communicate **as/while** I communicate with other people.	5	4	3	2	1	SA
4	When faced with a problem or challenge (such as a new assignment), I think of a number of possible ways to solve it before starting.	5	4	3	2	1	C
5A	I change or alter my responses and/or behaviour according to how people act towards me.	5	4	3	2	1	CR
5B	I change how I do things in order to successfully complete an assignment or to solve a problem.	5	4	3	2	1	CR
6	When I get frustrated working with other people, I allow my frustrations to show.	5	4	3	2	1	D
7	I solve problems and complete assignments the same way each time.	5	4	3	2	1	C
8	I recognize my strengths and weaknesses when working with other people.	5	4	3	2	1	SA
9	I am careful to read/review all information that is given to me while solving a problem or completing an assignment.	5	4	3	2	1	AT
10A	I have had no opportunity to change procedures	5	4	3	2	1	LeS

	(how things are done) or rules to make my group work better.						
10B	I do not take the opportunity to try to change procedures or rules to make my group work better.	5	4	3	2	1	LeS
11	I make sure that other people understand me and clearly know what I have tried to communicate to them. (Example: explain myself more; say what I mean in a different way, ask relevant questions of them, etc.).	5	4	3	2	1	AC

12	I present myself to other people in a positive way.	5	4	3	2	1	D
13	I understand the problem-solving process and know how to use on for solving problems.	5	4	3	2	1	PS
14	I divide complex problems and assignments into smaller, understandable, more manageable steps.	5	4	3	2	1	AT
15	I take my problems or assignments to the appropriate people to get help in solving them (another student, teacher, parent, etc.).	5	4	3	2	1	LeS
16	I present my ideas in a way that other people understand.	5	4	3	2	1	AC
17	I see assignments and/or team projects as an opportunity to problem solve and to successfully accomplish a task.	5	4	3	2	1	PS
18	I put myself in other people's position (try to see things from another person's point of view) when listening to their concerns to try to better understand their situation and feelings.	5	4	3	2	1	LiS
19	I understand and think about the cause-and-effect relationship in my approach to solving problems (Example: if I do step "A", then it will result in "B" happening).	5	4	3	2	1	AT
20	The words that I use to communicate an idea depend on who I am communicating with (Example: another student, teacher, parent, etc.).	5	4	3	2	1	AC
21	When working in a group or team, I take the first step and lead the group to working successfully through a problem or assignment.	5	4	3	2	1	LeS
22	I process information quickly in my head and find **no** need to make sure my understanding is the same as other people's understandings.	5	4	3	2	1	LiS
23	I brainstorm (create a list) of possible solutions with a variety of ideas and strategies.	5	4	3	2	1	C
24A	I speak politely and with respect when communicating with other students.	5	4	3	2	1	D
24B	I speak politely and with respect when communicating with teachers and school	5	4	3	2	1	D

	administration.						

		Always	Often	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Skill Assessment (will not be included in student copy)
25	I accept changes in rules and procedures (how things are done) as a normal part of working with other people.	5	4	3	2	1	CR
26	I recognize and change my behaviour when others people respond negatively to my behaviour and comments.	5	4	3	2	1	SA
27	When working in a group, I realize that "my way" of doing things may not be the only way or the best way of doings, and change for the better of the group.	5	4	3	2	1	CR
28	I adjust or change my own needs to fit in with the rules and expectations of my school.	5	4	3	2	1	CR
29	I am open to all people's ideas, no matter what their background.	5	4	3	2	1	D
30	I know or feel that I am an equal and valuable member of my class and/or team.	5	4	3	2	1	SA?
31	In a group or class discussion, I am encouraged to critique (analyze, comment on) other people's ideas and add my own ideas to discussions.	5	4	3	2	1	D?
32	I feel that my teacher or school administrators are quick to reply to my behaviour (both positive and negative behaviour).	5	4	3	2	1	SA?
33	I am responsible for my own learning and do not need prompting or reminders from others (parents, teacher) to complete my work.	5	4	3	2	1	LeS?
34	I do not complete my assigned duties or homework.	5	4	3	2	1	SA

PS – Problem Solving Skill Assessment LiS – Listening Skill Assessment SA – Self-Awareness Skill Assessment C – Creativity Skill Assessment CR – Change Readiness Skill Assessment	D – Diplomacy Skill Assessment AT – Analytical Thinking Skill Assessment LeS – Leadership Skill Assessment AC – Ability to Communicate Effectively Skill Assessment

40	I am a student in grade …				7	8	9	10	11	12
41	I am ___ years of age.	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	18+	
ONLINE STUDENTS ONLY										
42	This is my _____ course I have taken online.				1st	2nd	3rd	4th	More than 4	
43	I prefer to take classes online …				YES			NO		

43a) Please explain why or why not …

Final Quiz

Final Exam

NOT INTENDED FOR THE USE OF CREDIT PURPOSES OR EVALUATION OF STUDENT ABILITY

INSTRUCTIONS: Choose the BEST answer for the following situations.

1. When assigned to write an essay on the history of Canada, the first thing one should do is:
    a. Read as much information as possible.
    b. Look to the textbook for the answer.
    c. Start writing the essay right away.
    d. Clearly identify or pick one aspect of the problem.

2. In order to get the best possible mark on any assignment, _____ ensures that all possibilities, methods, and/or answers are considered.
    a. Brainstorming or creating a list
    b. Socializing or visiting with friends
    c. Thinking it over
    d. Sleeping on it for a night

3. When completing a challenging or hard math equation, one should:
    a. Look to the back of the book to find the answer.
    b. Look at other examples to help find the solution.
    c. Copy the answer from another student to get the mark.

4. Sidney is having trouble completing an assignment on a new theory the class has learned in Science. No matter how many times Sidney tries to answer the questions, Sidney cannot get the answers. Sidney should:
    a. Continue to struggle with trying to answer the questions.
    b. Ask the teacher or another student for extra help.
    c. Take a break and come back to the questions later.
    d. Give up and quit science class.

5. In order to get the best possible mark on a complicated and complex assignment, one should:
    a. Thoroughly review the information given.
    b. Divide the project into smaller parts and complete each smaller part.
    c. Ask questions of other students and the teacher for things not understood.
    d. All of the above.

6. You forgot your homework at home and your best friend is offering to let you copy from theirs. You should:

a. Copy it and save yourself punishment this one time.
b. Copy it, but make sure that you change some of the answers so you do not get caught.
c. Risk your friendship and let the teacher know that your friend offered you to copy the homework.
d. Refuse and explain to the teacher what happened, taking full responsibility for your actions.

7. Chris, Kelly, and Shannon are working on a group display about industries in Canada. While Chris is explaining a very good idea for their project, Kelly and Shannon continue to say that they do not understand what Chris is saying. Chris should:
    a. Get mad, call them "stupid", and change groups.
    b. Ask the teacher to change into a different group.
    c. Do the project alone.
    d. Ask Kelly and Shannon what they don't understand specifically.

8. Chris, Kelly, and Shannon cannot decide whose idea is the best way to complete their project on industries in Canada. They should:
    a. Each work on their own idea for the project alone.
    b. Play "rocks, paper, scissors" to decide whose idea to use.
    c. Decide whose idea will get them the best marks.
    d. Combine the best parts of all three ideas.

9. You should ask questions when you want to:
    a. Gather general information or expand a topic.
    b. Limit or narrow down information to a more specific topic.
    c. Get another person's telephone number to ask them on a date.

10. When trying to understand how someone feels, it is best to:
    a. Tell them that things could be worse.
    b. Tell them to "grow up".
    c. Smile and nod, but say nothing.
    d. Put one's self in the other's situation.

11. When expressing one's self, a person needs to be aware of:
    a. How people are reacting to them.
    b. How they are showing or expressing their feelings.
    c. To whom they are talking to.
    d. All of the above.

12. Mackenzie wants to be the head of the graduation committee. The head of the committee is nominated and elected by the rest of the committee. In order to be elected Mackenzie should:
    a. Bribe the other members to vote for Mackenzie.
    b. Wear the most fashionable clothes and hairstyle.
    c. Explain the plans and ideas Mackenzie has to the members.

d. Threaten and bully the other committee members to vote Mackenzie in.

13. While walking through a crowded hallway, one should:
    a. Tell people to move it.
    b. Push people out of the way.
    c. Say “excuse me” and wait for people to move.
    d. Say “excuse me” and push your way through.

14. When witnessing or seeing another person being bullied, one should:
    a. Tell an adult of another person of authority (i.e. police).
    b. Tell the bully to stop bullying.
    c. Be a friend and support to the person being bullied.
    d. All of the above.

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15. List the steps one should take in solving any problem.

FOOTNOTE

[1] The Self-Assessment and Final Quiz are adapted from the adult version by Ally and Cleveland-Innes (2007) to be administered to a high school student population. Data collected from the measurement tools were not reported in this thesis due to no point of comparison and the numbers being too disparate. The tools were included as a point of reference for the reader, as well as a possible use in a future study in other school samples.