

A DECADE OF DISTANCE LEARNING SUCCESS

In 1988, Trevor Owen founded a project called Writers In Electronic Residence (WIER) with the support of the special talents of Canadian writer and educator, Lionel Kearns and Dr. Gerri Sinclair, a well known educational telecommunications expert. The objectives of the project were twofold. The first was providing a unique opportunity for students from elementary through high school to learn writing skills by interfacing with teachers, each other and published Canadian writers. The second was to establish an opportunity to support Canadian literature and its writers through additional employment and promotion.

Now in its tenth year, WIER is perhaps one of the most outstanding success stories in the area of distance learning. The program has served over 300 schools and more than 20,000 students throughout diverse regions of Canada. It has employed more than 40 skilled writers to counsel those aspiring authors.

With Owen as its Director, WIER is operated by York University Faculty of Education in Ontario and The Writers' Development Trust, a national non-profit organization. Sponsorship support also is provided by a list of corporations and organizations with an interest in education and the arts from disparate regions across Canada.

FirstClass Intranet Server from SoftArc, Inc. has become a vital key in the success of the program. According to Owen, "FirstClass has given us the highly intuitive environment that we needed to gain the acceptance of our constituency. Teachers needn't be concerned with a steep learning curve of the technology. They can concentrate on the pedagogical aspects of the program rather than the technological ones." An important requirement of the software for this interactive educational community is to operate easily across platforms to accommodate either Mac or PC computers already in place at participating schools — and FirstClass delivers that capability.

Employing software that is easy for students and teachers alike, WIER now encompasses schools that are geographically dispersed across Canada. In fact, that is one of the strengths of the program. It allows students to interact with one another about the impact their differing environments have on the works they produce.

How Does WIER Work?

Supported by the Internet and SoftArc technology, WIER serves as a catalyst for learning to aspiring authors in elementary, middle and secondary schools. Conferences are organized for each level; Write For You (grades 1-6), Word For Word (grades 6-9) and Wired Writers (grade 9 and up). Usually, about 5 classes from varying geographic locations are grouped in "electronic literary salons." Then, each salon is grouped with at least one other to form a conference. One professional Canadian writer is assigned for every six classes participating and all writers interact with every salon in the conference. This provides the opportunity for the variety of exchange and input that makes the experience so rewarding for the student writers.

Every conference is moderated/facilitated by a teacher to make sure that discussions stay on course.

The important thing from the teachers' perspective is not letting technology get in the way of learning. "They love the idea that their students can connect with writers whose books they read," said Owen. "FirstClass makes good on the promise to make the technology intuitive so they can just point and click. Often, a teacher's greatest fear is that the technology will just wash over what they do."

The thing that has made WIER successful is the ability to deliver content design that is appropriate for the technology. Although not consciously recognized, that is the approach that has been taken to classroom learning for years. "We know intuitively that the classroom works well for events that benefit from having everyone together at the same time to experience something. An event that requires face-to-face sharing and immediate response is a candidate for success using the 'technology' of the classroom," says Owen. However, it is also true that having multiple students participate at one time in the classroom can lead to chaos. And the experience is limited to those people and things that can practically be assembled in one location.

Conversely, online technology allows a totally different type of participation. Many students can participate at one time without disrupting the learning experience. "Instead of immediate response, online learning is well suited to considered off-line reflection followed by written response," according to Owen. Successful distance learning programs are those that are designed to be undertaken over time. The advantages of involving students from all over Canada with professional writing mentors would not be possible without a program like WIER.

It is the careful attention to just this sort of pedagogical design that has allowed WIER to succeed with teachers, students and author/advisors. Here are excerpts from a typical dialogue that occurred through a WIER session:

A story submission from a 3rd grade author:

How I Got Lost

Early one sunny morning while Missy was playing outside, a near-sighted pelican swooped down and carried her off. The pelican headed for a wooded area and dropped Missy in a bunch of trees. A family of bears came along and took her to their home in a cave. They cared for her and . . .

A response from two 4th graders:

Dear Missy,

Does this story relate to a story told already? Did Missy's parents feel sad when Missy flew away with the pelican? We really enjoyed reading your story. You also have a good imagination.

Comments from the Canadian author assigned to this conference:

Missy, this is Ken. I love the opening sentence. It is wonderful. Aha! I notice that you do have the parents laugh and cry when Missy returns to them. I liked your story very much. You write extremely well. It is important to think like each character, trying to imagine how each one would react to a certain situation.

Supporting A Successful Distance Learning Program

WIER creates new work for writers in Canada and new learning opportunities for students and teachers. The support for those opportunities comes from school fees, sponsorships and non-profit fund raising.

Each participating school pays a flat fee of \$650 per class each term. However, this fee accounts for only about 30% of the cost of supporting the entire program. A long list of businesses as well as organizations representing education, government and the arts helps provide the balance of the funding necessary to cover the costs of running the WIER infrastructure.

The funding necessary to employ the participating writers in WIER is raised by The Writers' Development Trust (WDT). The WDT was incorporated in 1976 specifically to advance the interests of Canadian literature and support the development of its writers. The Trust sees its involvement in WIER as a natural extension of its mandate to promote Canadian writers to a new generation of readers. It also takes this as an opportunity to provide necessary financial support to Canadian writers by making a unique source of employment available.

Finally, WIER is an important facet of York University's Faculty of Education development of programs for the use of online learning in teacher education. According to Owen, WIER serves as an exemplar of a great success story. "It is a success because it embraces the ideas that people have, not just the technology." The program serves as a developmental lab for techniques that can be used to build other successful distance learning applications. Toward that end, the university is including WIER in a three year study under the auspices of The TeleLearning Network of Centres of Excellence.

What Are The Results?

According to the *Research Spotlight on National Networks of Learning*, "... (the) intent is to assess the effects, both intended and otherwise, of these innovations on teaching, learning and curriculum and to analyze implications for the in-service and pre-service education of teachers." The results of the study to date indicate that WIER students respond very well to the constructive input supplied by a "real" writer in addition to comments from their teacher. An intensive analysis of participating students showed that most showed a significant improvement in writing, directly attributable to the writers' interventions and subsequent interaction.

Software Support

An important facet of making the WIER program run smoothly is strong support from the software vendor. Ed Leslie, of E.A. Leslie and Associates Limited, has capably filled that need on behalf of SoftArc as an authorized SoftArc Reseller. According to Leslie, "A large part of my FirstClass administration experience is in the area of Distance Education, and I am what is affectionately known as the 'Support Guru-Human' for the Writers In Electronic Residence program. In that capacity, I worked closely with Trevor to merge my understanding of the technology and his understanding of the pedagogy, to develop the conferencing model used to deliver this exemplary online project."

For a closer look at Writers In Electronic Residence, visit <http://www.wier.yorku.ca/WIERHome/>

For detailed information about FirstClass, contact:

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Trevor Owen, founder and Director of Writers In Electronic Residence says the way people learn face to face is different than the way people learn online. And the two methodologies are complementary.



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