

In a virtual classroom, it's OK to pass notes

NorQuest College adds adult upgrading courses to its distance-learning program

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STONY PLAIN

As an adult finishing Grade 12, Kayla Johnston finds that the "virtual classroom" in Stony Plain, where she studies, writes exams and receives instructions over a computer screen, is almost as good as the real thing.

"It's just like having a teacher right here but instead he's in Edmonton," says the 21-year-old single mother, who hopes to eventually become an accountant.

Classmate Chris Brierley, 24, says the human interaction with the other students is the same as if they were all in the same room - except they're spread across Alberta.

"We get together twice a semester and we feel like we all know each other, even though we have never met in person before," he explains.

Enrolled in NorQuest College's adult upgrading program, they are part of a distance-learning program that links students from across the province by computer into a "virtual classroom" via the Internet.

Although most colleges and universities offer online instruction, Edmonton-based NorQuest boasts of having the most comprehensive, flexible program. It not only brings the classroom to the student but offers teaching resources that aren't available in the traditional classroom setting.

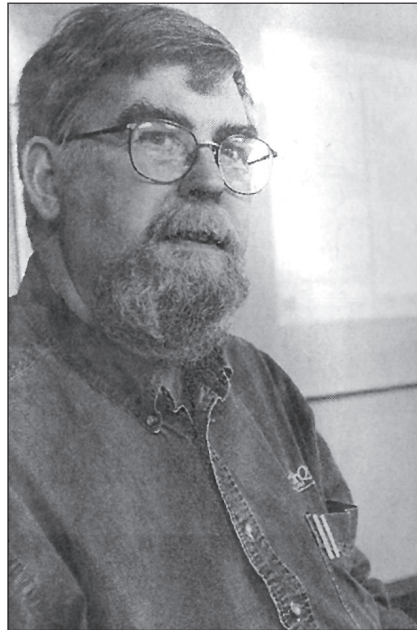
More than 200 students at the college's 13 classroom locations gather in front of computers to receive instructions, to study and to write their exams.

They hear the voice of their teacher but never see him or her. Instead, the computer screen has a "white board," where the teacher writes out mathematical equations, chemical formulas or other information pertaining to the subject.

The computer screen also allows the teacher and students to share documents, graphics and pictures, or to play instructional video clips.

Students can ask questions over the two-way speaker system, but first have to hit a command on their keyboard, similar to putting up a hand, before the microphone is activated.

Unlike in a regular classroom, pass-



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Andy Whyte teaches a class in Stony Plain and Wetaskiwin simultaneously.

ing notes is allowed and encouraged. Students can correspond with each other and with the teacher through a chat room or e-mail.

They can also test their knowledge as they go along by calling up multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank quizzes, which grade them and provide the correct answers immediately.

Another advantage over a regular classroom is that all lessons are recorded.

"If you miss a class or want to go back and review something, all you have to do is call it up," says Brierley, who plans to study architecture at the University of Calgary after graduation next June.

NorQuest has been using the "virtual class" technology for its practical nursing program since 1998. It was developed for the nursing program because it is difficult to teach the course solely with books and written correspondence.

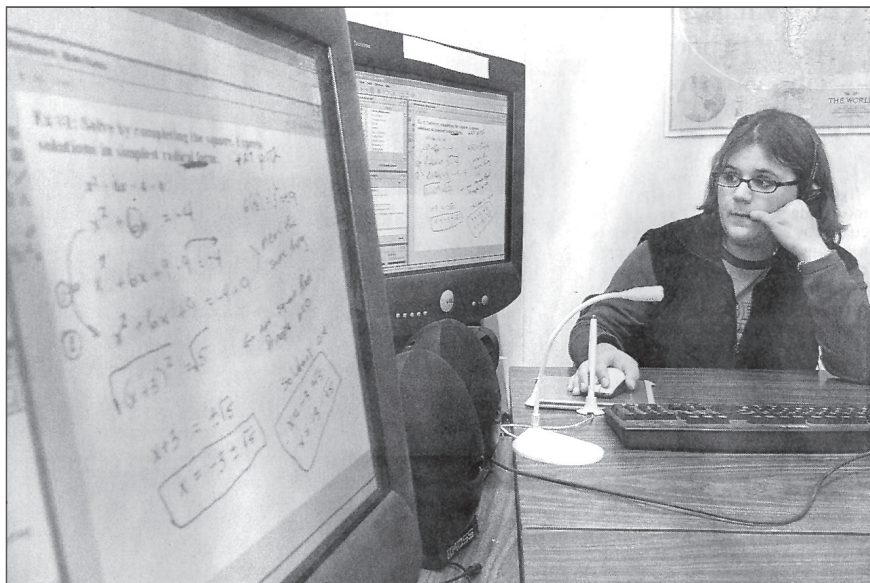
The online course material includes video clips of patients being examined and symptoms that can be recognized by sight and sound but are difficult to describe on paper. Nursing students are still required to do practicums at hospitals during the two-year course.

The virtual-classroom technology expanded to the adult upgrading program last year.

"We can teach classes with only a couple of students in each location, which would otherwise be impractical," says Bryan Shepherd, dean of learning resources.

"This type of learning attracts students who are highly motivated. It has a high success rate."

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Kayla Johnston views math problems via the online white board for her Math 20 studies.