



SIDES: bringing students and teachers together with engaging distance learning

Bringing distance education closer to home with personalized learning

Serving thousands of students aged five to eighteen in British Columbia, South Island Distance Education School (SIDES) strives to make distance and virtual learning just as engaging as classroom teaching. D2L's Brightspace platform helps SIDES build high-quality course content easily, freeing teachers to focus on empowering each student and personalizing the learning experience.

AT A GLANCE

Student Number: 3,000

Interviewees:

- Karen Fello, Principal
- Sally Morgan, Course Development Coordinator
- Bev Bastness, Distributed Learning Systems Coordinator



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Karen Fello, Principal, SIDES

SUMMARY

When British Columbia introduced a new curriculum, SIDES faced a major challenge: nearly all its courses needed to be revised, and some of its older paper-based materials needed to be rewritten for online delivery. SIDES used the Brightspace platform from D2L to create a new set of flexible and engaging courses fast, enabling teachers to provide the right level of content to meet each student’s needs.

QUICK FACTS

- Course creation rate has more than doubled, enabling SIDES to create 50 new courses in the same time it used to take to create just 20.
- Reduces administrative workload, enabling teachers to focus on connecting with students.
- Supports learners of all levels by enabling teachers to customize lessons and activities to the needs and ability of each student.
- Empowers teachers and course designers to create fun, engaging content without needing technical support.

A REAL ALTERNATIVE TO CLASSROOM-BASED LEARNING

Unlike many schools in British Columbia, SIDES serves students from many different districts, using its high-quality distance learning courses to help thousands of students achieve their goals. The school is dedicated to providing the best possible content to engage students, many of whom are home-schooled, and seeks to involve parents in the learning process as much as possible.

“We’re proud that so many students choose our distance learning program,” says Karen Fello, Principal of SIDES.

“We want to stay true to our vision of quality and authenticity, and we totally support the province’s increasing focus on indigenous content and Indigenous ways of learning. Our mission is to prove that distance learning is just as effective as classroom teaching for students from every background and ability level.”

Karen Fello, Principal, SIDES

DELIVERING A NEW CURRICULUM ONLINE

When the time came for schools across British Columbia to change to a new curriculum, SIDES embraced the challenge of creating totally new content for its students and saw this as an opportunity to shift the last of its paper-based courses to an online system.



Sally Morgan, Course Development Coordinator at SIDES, comments. “Many of the classes between Kindergarten and Grade 8 were offline, with home facilitators working from paper-based resources. We wanted the opportunity to create more engaging, interactive teaching content.”

SMOOTHING OUT CONTINUOUS ENROLLMENT

Part of the school's flexible distance learning service involves year-round, continuous enrollment for grades 9 through 12, which allows students to start their courses at any time of the year. Delivering this flexibility was a challenge for SIDES, because its main teaching staff work to a standard ten-month academic year with a summer break.

Bev Bastness, Distributed Learning Systems Coordinator for SIDES, picks up the story. “Unlike most schools, our courses don't necessarily end in June—so in terms of teaching, we don't have any down time. If a different teacher needs to take over while a student's usual teacher is away, we want to keep that transition as smooth as we possibly can.

Continuous enrollment also made moving to the new curriculum more challenging, because SIDES had to continue teaching the old course to students who had already enrolled, while simultaneously offering the new

curriculum to new starters. The need to run different versions of each course in parallel during the transition period increased complexity significantly.

ACCELERATING CREATION OF NEW COURSES

SIDES found that D2L's Brightspace platform was the comprehensive learning management system they needed. Brightspace enabled the SIDES team to create a complete set of revised courses and deliver them seamlessly to new students, while still providing courses from the older curriculum to students who had enrolled before the transition began.

“Working with D2L has made the process much quicker and easier than we expected,” Flelo remarks. “Previously, we were able to build maybe six to eight courses in a year. With the Brightspace platform, we have created 50 new and revised courses in around two-and-a-half years.”

The reliability of the platform has enabled SIDES to build courses extremely quickly while maintaining the quality of the learning experience. When asked for feedback on a new course, one student, Kazuo, was impressed by the complete absence of technical issues, and commented: “Brightspace is light-years ahead of the platforms I've used in my other classes.”

PROVIDING FLEXIBILITY FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

“The D2L team is incredibly helpful and responsive”, Morgan adds. “Any time we mention a problem or give feedback, they take it on board, and we often see an enhancement within the next few release cycles.

“A recent highlight for us is the improved Rubrics feature—every teacher at SIDES appreciates it and thanks you for it. One of our physics teachers is due to retire in six months, but he still asked us to show him how to use Rubrics in his courses, because it’s such a good way of assessing students’ progress in a consistent way and giving them useful feedback.”

Sally Morgan, Course Development Coordinator, SIDES

From the perspective of the students, Discussions has been another popular feature, because it creates an engaging, socially interactive learning environment. Since many of SIDES students are home-schooled, they may not have the opportunity to spend as much time with other children as students in a classroom would—so the ability to interact with other students online is very important.

“The elementary discussion boards are unbelievably vibrant and fun to visit,” says Morgan. “The students are posting videos of their little science projects and encouraging each other, which is great to see. It means that students not only engage in learning more, but also get another valuable opportunity for both social and academic contact with their peers.”

One student, Jeina, comments: “My History 12 course was so interesting to me that I often stayed up late at night to do my coursework. The content of it was something that I looked forward to studying, which I have never encountered with any other course I have taken.”

“I doubted my math skills at the beginning but this course has gotten me enjoying math and finding it exciting and fun. It is a great feeling to change my mind about something I’ve struggled with and disliked for my entire life!”

Michaela, SIDES Student

CREATING ENGAGING CONTENT AND DESIGNS

Part of what has made Brightspace features such as the discussion boards attractive to students is the engaging, tailored designs. The platform enables teachers and the graphics team to tweak templates and quickly customize content to students’ needs.

“We’ve introduced beautiful templates for all of our courses,” Morgan remarks. “We have graphic designers who work with the content, but teachers also find it very simple to make changes themselves. Most of our course developers feel comfortable using the course-builder features to adjust existing content and create new units, and some even write content directly into the Brightspace platform. This ease-of-use has allowed us to create truly engaging content for our students, with audio, videos and interactive features that help students learn in an active way.”

The screenshot shows the SIDES Science 9 course interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'SIDES Science 9' and icons for grid, mail, and chat. Below that is a secondary navigation bar with links for 'Content', 'Assignments', 'Grades', 'Quizzes', 'Class Progress', 'Awards', 'Calendar', 'Chat', 'Checklist', and 'Classlist'. The main content area shows a breadcrumb trail: 'Table of Contents > Biology > Chapter 1 - Cells & the Nucleus** (FROM OC) > U1 Ch1 Lesson 1 Cell Types'. The lesson title is 'U1 Ch1 Lesson 1 Cell Types'. Below the title is a decorative banner image of a green leaf with a white cell diagram. The 'Get Started' section contains introductory text about the unit's focus on cell derivation and learning objectives. At the bottom, there's a video player titled 'Introduction to Cells' with a 'Share' button.

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Abby, Grade 9 SIDES Student

According to Abby, a student in grade 9: “The website is neatly organized and easy to navigate. I can easily find my grades, assignments, feedback, resources and lessons.”

REACHING ALL LEARNERS AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

The Brightspace platform also makes it easy to support each child, no matter their ability.

“Every child is different, and one of the greatest challenges of teaching a group of students is working to every different child’s ability—making sure nobody gets left behind, without letting anyone feel bored or unchallenged,” Bastness says.

That’s why SIDES has started exploring the Learning Object Repository (LOR) in Brightspace. The LOR allows teachers and course designers to create different activities and resources within each course. Different grade levels can pull more lessons down if a student needs additional support on a given topic, or if the student is ready to move faster, they can access enrichment activities at a higher level.

“Attending SIDES has given me a more flexible schedule, and due to working at my own pace, my grades have gone up,” says Abby. “The platform feels so personalized to each student.”

FOCUSING ON WHAT MATTERS

Most importantly, D2L’s Brightspace platform is enabling teachers to spend more time engaging with students.

“Because Brightspace is such a comprehensive learning management system, teachers can spend less time on administrative tasks, and more time connecting with the students, giving them detailed feedback to drive their learning.”

Sally Morgan, Course Development Coordinator, SIDES

The Brightspace platform also makes it easy for a new teacher to take over without disrupting the student’s education. They can use the platform to track each student’s progress and achievement levels, so they can immediately pick up where their colleague had left off.

Flello concludes: “With our content on the Brightspace platform, we can smooth the transition between different teachers and courses, for students starting at different times throughout the year. We can create and develop fun, interactive content that keeps our students engaged with the course and with each other, no matter what their level, and keep track of their progress easily. Brightspace has helped us to unlock everything that is great about distance learning, so we can truly provide a first-class alternative to classroom-based education.”