



## ICTs in minority French-language schools

by Bernard Manzerolle

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) entered the school system some 30 years ago. In many French-language schools in Canada, these technologies were initially used only in English. In addition to the need for these new tools in French, their rapid development made incorporating them into educational practices yet another challenge to the issues involved in teaching in a minority setting.

The subject of the survey is the development of ICTs in schools generally. It nevertheless specifically covers not only the challenges, but also the benefits that minority French-language schools can gain from the use of technology.

### The only constant: change

When computers were first introduced, you might say that it was “new for everyone”. Both teachers and students were dealing with a device whose capabilities were almost completely unknown. Once the Internet entered the picture, the classroom was suddenly linked to the whole world and people predicted that it would be transformed forever.

Students changed as well. They changed from a generation that understood the potential of the technology to a new generation of students that has grown up surrounded by technology. The former often discovered the computer at the same time as the teachers, whereas the students attending our schools today arrive with an often impressive knowledge of technology.

Something even more typical of 21<sup>st</sup> century students – who are sometimes called “technological natives” – is the fact that they are very active on social networks. They become introduced very young to MSN, Piczo, Hotmail, Facebook, MySpace and many other sites through which they can talk with and meet friends. They are probably more “sociable” than ever in this virtual world. Most young people have developed a “virtual identity”, but it is not necessarily Francophone.

The current generation of teachers has been described as technological “migrants”, who have had to adapt to technology over the years.

### From chalk to ICTs

Whether in French, mathematics or science classes, students now need to acquire skills that will enable them to develop their knowledge and also to become increasingly responsible for their learning. In other words, the modern classroom needs to go beyond the walls of the school to enable students to enhance their skills.

Likewise, the classroom teaching setting needs to keep pace with ICTs and give students the opportunity to learn in the modern way that is already familiar to them. The main challenge of integrating ICTs into the classroom is clearly to make using the new tools straightforward and relevant.

Initial efforts to adapt to the massive introduction of such tools in schools involved setting up laboratory classrooms where teachers would go with their students to work on various projects in different subject areas. Classrooms were also encouraged to add a “computer corner”, where students could go to do work at times suggested by the teacher. The survey also notes that a number of government initiatives – such as the purchase of computer equipment and laptops – were introduced to encourage teachers to incorporate ICTs into their learning activities.

### Francophones: visitors or contributors?

The survey found that Internet resources and ICTs have evolved much more quickly than their mastery in minority Francophone schools. Generally speaking, Francophone communities are still “visitors” rather than “contributors” to Web content, a fact that raises many questions. Current estimates show that fewer than 15% of sites available on the Web are in French.

Yet, in education, considerable efforts are being made to collect and produce Francophone content. Because of the shortage of information available in French, or simply because people don't know where to go and look for it, some decide to use English-language resources. This leads to the important question of whether or not to allow students to use resources in English because they appear to be easier to find and are often better presented than available resources in French. Should ICTs be considered a learning tool without regard to the language used?

The generation of “technological natives” is already in the schools; we definitely must enable them to pursue their learning by giving them the means to communicate, create and share openly with the world. On the other hand, the language issue requires vigilance, particularly in minority Francophone communities.

### **Significant learning avenues**

Laptops appear to have breathed new life into the use of ICTs in schools. In provinces that are currently experimenting with a laptop for each student, it has been found that students are much more actively involved in their learning. The equipment cost may be significant, but this approach is perhaps the best way of creating an environment that is flexible and motivates students. Various Francophone school boards have very small high schools: a laptop for each student could be an exciting way to facilitate learning for students, who often feel isolated.

Furthermore, in most jurisdictions, school boards have been exploring various ways of delivering courses online. Online learning is seen as a way of varying school programming for students. It also allows small French language schools to break out of their isolation and to offer courses that they could not otherwise deliver because of a shortage of specialized teaching staff.

While it was often predicted that videoconferencing would be replaced by online learning, it continues to be of interest in educational settings, no doubt because of its ability to create a social environment similar to that in the classroom.

Web 2.0 is more than anything else a concept for sharing information. Whereas the first virtual communities were rather static environments, this second generation encourages sharing among Internet users as well as creativity. This is what collaborative spaces are all about. Wikis, blogs and social networking sites like Facebook are examples of Web 2.0 applications that can be useful for young people learning in a minority setting.

### **Schools need to be proactive**

The schools of the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to reflect the multimedia world in which young people live every day. Teachers are being asked to respect individual differences and learning rates. This is where ICTs can play a key role in preparing and delivering quality learning activities in the classroom, and in improving student engagement in their own learning.

Whether people are “technological natives” or “digital migrants”, adaptation is needed and schools will have to meet the needs of a clientele that is increasingly open to the world. Schools can no longer wait to react to technological currents, and need to be more proactive. The time has come to provide our students with rich and stimulating learning environments so that they can make their way and play a role on the World Wide Web while retaining their cultural identity.

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Bernard Manzerolle has worked in education for more than 25 years. When computers first appeared in schools in his part of the country in 1984, he was one of the first to take an interest. From the moment he came into contact with a keyboard and a monitor, he knew that computers would have an important role to play. Ever since, he has had computers to work with in every position he has held, whether as a teacher, working in school administration in various parts of New Brunswick, or working for the Nova Scotia Department of Education as an educational consultant in technology integration. He continues to be an interested observer of major information technology and communication trends, and in this article he has shared his point of view with us about the use of computers in a minority Francophone environment. For five years now, he has been an information technology and communication mentor in School District No. 11 on the eastern coast of New Brunswick.

To read the complete survey, go to: [www.ctf-fce.ca/frenquetes](http://www.ctf-fce.ca/frenquetes)



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