

Chapter 3

What are Alberta's K–12 Students Saying about Learning with Technologies?

Bette Gray

Alberta Education, Canada

Karen Andrews

Alberta Education, Canada

Susan Schroeder

Learning Cultures Consulting Inc., Canada

ABSTRACT

Students in Alberta, Canada expect rich opportunities to learn with technologies—opportunities that allow them to use technologies to improve their productivity when learning; to facilitate more complex, collaborative and authentic learning experiences; and to personalize their learning with respect to location, time and pace. While students in schools in Alberta share common expectations for learning with technologies, they do not report common experiences, citing individual preferences and/or contexts as their reasons. These findings derive from an analysis of student voice data collected through research projects and student engagement activities conducted in the province's K-12 community from 2006 to 2010. In this chapter the authors summarize the collected data and discuss themes common to students' expectations for learning with technologies as well as reasons why students' experiences using technologies for learning differ. The authors also outline ways in which Alberta's K-12 community is evolving to meet students' expectations for learning with technologies. In closing, the authors challenge the reader to consider what can be done to ensure that students have a voice in designing relevant, technology-rich learning environments that meet their expectations.

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INTRODUCTION

Alberta Education¹ and the K-12 community routinely collaborate to support the continuous improvement of public education in Alberta, Canada. Alberta Education is the government department responsible for K-12 education in the province. Stakeholder groups with whom the Department collaborates include school boards, professional development providers, faculties of education, and researchers. Alberta's K-12 public education system currently serves approximately 585,000 K-12 students and employs almost 45,000 teachers in 2,133 schools.

In an effort to expand their understanding about effective uses of technologies for learning, Alberta's K-12 community have participated in three research projects and a stakeholder engagement initiative over the past four years. The broad educational goals for the research initiatives included investigating the educational benefits of learning with technologies, determining levels of readiness among jurisdictions to integrate technologies, determining the technical requirements and implementation issues associated with integrating technologies for learning, gathering feedback from various education stakeholders, and disseminating lessons learned. The gathering of students' views regarding learning with technologies was an important component of each of these research initiatives. The engagement initiative also sought to involve students as well as other education stakeholders (e.g., parents, teachers, administrators) in conversations about the current and future state of education in Alberta. These initiatives employed student surveys, interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations to collect data about students' experiences and expectations regarding their use of technologies for learning.

Planning for the first two research projects, the *Emergent One-to-One Laptop Learning Project* (2006-2010) and the *Technology and High School Success Project* (2007-2010), involved reviewing

current literature about the integration of technologies for learning. The literature spoke of several educational benefits and successful implementation approaches. For example, preliminary studies of one-to-one laptop implementations in schools in Canada, the U.S. and Australia reported educational benefits such as: (a) increased student motivation, engagement, interest, organization and self-directed learning; (b) improved student attendance; and (c) reduced student attrition (Alberta Education, August 2006). Similarly, classroom technology use was shown to: (a) improve the relevancy and richness of students' learning experiences, (b) improve levels of independent learning among students, (c) motivate and engage students, and (d) offer students choice and flexibility (Alberta Education, June 2007). The literature also indicated that successful implementations of one-to-one computing involved taking holistic approaches with an emphasis on educational goals and engaging school and community members (Alberta Education, August 2006).

Participation in the third research initiative, the *Speak Up National Research Project* (2009), provided another opportunity to gather student feedback about learning with technologies. For the past seven years, this U.S.-based initiative has employed quantitative surveys to elicit a variety of education stakeholders' beliefs about learning with technologies. *Speak Up* researchers report that,

students, regardless of community demographics, socio-economic backgrounds, gender and grade, tell us year after year that the lack of sophisticated use of emerging technology tools in school is, in fact, holding back their education and in many ways, disengaging them from learning. (Project Tomorrow, March 2010, p.1)

Project Tomorrow, the non-profit organization that leads the *Speak Up* initiative, believes that the voices of stakeholders, including students, should be included in national and local discussions about education.

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