

# DISTANCE EDUCATION

## a virtual classroom

People often wish they could go back to school but find that they cannot devote any time to classes. The Rogers Communications Centre has come up with a solution. Since 1994, the RCC Online Education Initiative has offered module-based courses that allow students to learn through their home computers at times that they find most convenient. These courses were first offered through a CDROM application, but now the lessons can be taught without any special software. All you need is an Internet connection and a web browser. As a matter of fact, classes can be taught to anyone with a decent home computer.

The minimum requirements are a Pentium 100 computer, with 16MB of RAM, 60MB of hard drive space and Netscape Navigator or Microsoft Internet Explorer version 3.0 and up. It also requires you to use javascript in allowing interaction on some web pages. Then all that is needed are some hours to work and study from home.

While some courses have specific timelines to complete certain tasks, timing and scheduling is otherwise completely dependent on the student and his or her needs. Classes can start at 8 a.m., 8 p.m. or even 2 a.m. by simply logging on to the Internet and the appropriate web address.

Classes are offered in two streams: Retail Management Education and Voluntary/Non-Profit Sector Education. Within each program, several classes must be completed to work towards certification. For the Retail Management program there are classes such as Introduction to Retail Management Communication, Issues and Innovations, as well as Service and Professionalism. In the Voluntary/Non-Profit Sector program courses include Understanding the Voluntary/Nonprofit Sector and Understanding Financial Management in the Voluntary/Nonprofit Sector.

Each course has an outline of topics to be covered, questions that will be addressed and learning objectives to be completed.



*A screenshot from Retail Math, a Distance Education Course.*

The internet-based courses are much more than just text on a screen. In addition to having material to read, students can also interact with instructors and students through live chats, real audio broadcast interviews, bulletin boards to post messages, quizzes, audio clips and slide shows.

Students are also given access to Ryerson's extensive online periodical library to help with their research. The database includes full texts of major academic and trade publications that can be searched like Yahoo, AltaVista or any other search engine. The major plus is that searches retrieve relevant information from reputable sources.

Even though there is no personal, in-class environment, instructors are available for help and support by Email and telephone.

The program has been well received, and has garnered attention from both the Retail Council of Canada and the US-based National Retail Federation. In fact, the Retail Management program was honoured with a Special Recognition Award.

The Conference Board of Canada also selected the Retail Management program as the recipient of its University-Business Partnerships Award in 1996 for work between Ryerson, the Eaton School of Retailing, and the Canadian retail sector.

There are plans to expand the program by offering classes in both English and French in the coming year.