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Launch of national test bed brings new dimension to online education

CALGARY – Students and educators may soon be using web sites, video conferencing, and interactive multimedia as part of coursework, according to organizers of a national test bed project for online education being launched today in Calgary.

“There is so much information on the web that could be considered educational, but it is impossible to search effectively, difficult to judge in terms of quality, and a burden to download without high-performance networks – all making it unappealing for educators and students to use,” explains Douglas MacLeod, Director of Projects for Netera Alliance, which is leading the project. “We are trying to overcome these barriers.”

This test bed project, called BELLE (Broadband Enabled Lifelong Learning Environment), is a national, \$3.4 million cost-shared initiative to support use of high-speed networks for lifelong learning that includes the CANARIE Learning Program, Netera Alliance and ten post-secondary institutions.

Using Canada’s national advanced Internet, CA*net3, the BELLE project connects post-secondary institutions across Canada, including the Banff Centre for the Arts, McGill University, Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, Seneca@York, Sheridan College, University of Alberta, University of British Columbia, University of Calgary, University of Lethbridge and Vancouver Film School.

These partners are exploring ways to create and catalogue educational objects, develop instructional models for using them, and institute a peer review system. Participating institutions have access to repositories of multimedia educational materials through standardized client workstations. These workstations, or Client Learning Environments, also allow video conferencing with multiple sites and make it simple to share files and stream video in a collaborative environment. Project participants are also involved in evaluating and supporting the test bed as a whole.

“The BELLE project demonstrates how an understanding of user needs is integral to the success of network-enabled education,” says Ken Hewitt, President of Netera Alliance. “Collaborative integrated projects like this are excellent examples of how technology can be most effectively put to work for users.”

The test bed launch is taking place as part of CANARIE’s annual advanced Internet conference, Net 2001, held this year in Calgary. Netera Alliance is a not-for-profit organization whose primary role is to develop and manage the advanced Internet in Alberta.

For more information: www.netera.ca/belle

Douglas MacLeod, BELLE Project Director (403) 609-3642 doug_macleod@netera.ca

Mary Anne Moser, Netera Communications (403) 949-3306 moser@netera.ca

Lisa Willemse, BELLE Communications and Training (403) 220-2593 lawillem@netera.ca