

TEACHERS – THE ILC'S UNSUNG HEROES

BY MARAL MACLAGAN

Many may think distance learning is a solitary endeavour, but even without a classroom, teachers still have a tremendous impact on students. Just ask the current students and recent graduates from the Independent Learning Centre. "My success turned out to be a dream come true because of the supportive teachers at the ILC... I just want to thank them," remarked one happy graduate.

ILC students never see their teachers. The courses are mailed to the students who do the reading and practice questions on their own time. At the end of each unit, they submit their assignments by mail or by e-Journal (a time-saving tool that allows students to submit course work via the Internet). ILC teachers mark the work and provide extensive feedback.

"Although it is independent study, the students are not alone," affirms Sarah Irwin, managing director of the ILC. "ILC teachers have regular contact with students through written or electronic journals and by telephone through the Student Help Line. At **ilc.org**, students can access course information, career resources, and support such as the *Ask a Teacher* site – staffed by certified Ontario teachers – for free homework help. As one student put it, "*Ask a Teacher* is not just an educational website, but also a place where I know I can get help and succeed."

The hidden army of those supporting the ILC now numbers almost 250! The group is made up of not only teachers, but instructional designers (who work with teachers to develop effective distance education, independent study courses), as well as nearly 200 test supervisors across the province. Many of these tutors and teachers say it is an honour to be involved. It's clear that our teachers have an unfailing dedication to student success.

HONOURED TO BE HELPING STUDENTS

The ILC's Associate Teacher Unit (ATU) is a bustle of activity each day. Twenty-six associate teachers mark work from English-language students and six mark work submitted in French. Together, they evaluate more than 30,000 units a year. All are certified Ontario teachers: roughly half teach in the classroom full-time and the rest are now retired. The majority live in the Toronto area and come in to the ILC office on a rotating schedule two or three times a week to pick up assignments and any help-line inquiries. Most now also mark e-Journal submissions. Even though the ILC's standard turnaround is five days, one teacher commented that when an e-Journal

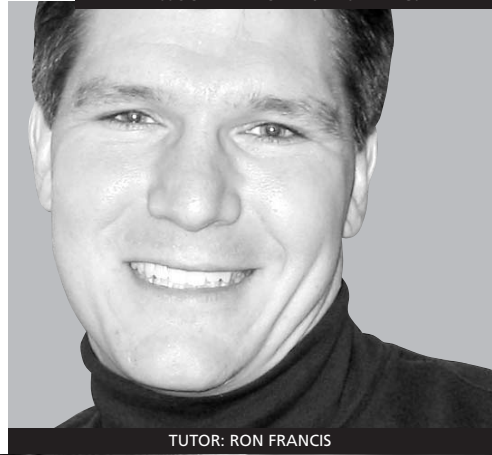
comes in, he usually marks it and sends it back the same day.

Janis Zibergs has been an associate teacher for over 30 years, marking that first assignment for \$2.00 a lesson. "The ILC has become a part of me," he says. Although the workload is demanding, he enjoys helping people. "I love seeing the transformation when students find the self-confidence within themselves and realize they can succeed." Janis estimates that he has evaluated the work of almost 10,000 students studying history, social sciences, law, and civics. Janis was one of several associate teachers honoured at the ILC's graduation ceremonies in 2003 for over 25 years of service with the ILC.

Distance education offers teachers an old-fashioned – but valuable – way of getting to know students: through their writing. One ILC English teacher compares it to the Victorian era when people communicated over distances through letters. To help bridge the gap and make up for the lack of visual cues, each ILC course includes a journal component. Students complete a "Student's Reflection," and an "Evaluation" and after receiving the teacher's evaluation, a "Student's Response." The teachers know their feedback must be as clear and succinct as possible. When students write that they have been accepted to college or university thanks to the ILC, teachers know their extra efforts have paid off. Teachers receive thank you cards all the time,



ASSOCIATE TEACHER: JANIS ZIBERGS



TUTOR: RON FRANCIS



TUTOR: NICOLE HAGLEY



When it comes to writing final tests, which all ILC students must pass in order to earn a credit, the ILC has 131 test supervisors on contract throughout the province to oversee the process. Testing centres are located in Toronto, Windsor, London, and Ottawa. For students living outside of these areas, a search by postal code determines the test supervisor located closest to the student. The test supervisor and student then arrange where and when the test will be written, usually at a public place such as local library.

CLASSROOM TEACHER BY DAY, MYSTERY SUPER-TUTOR BY NIGHT!

At *Ask a Teacher*, the ILC's homework help site, 44 tutors and one tutor monitor make the *Ask a Teacher* live chat a popular destination for students in Grades 9-12. Shyness, disapproval from peers, and the high cost of private tutoring often keep students from asking for help with their homework. At *Ask a Teacher*, students remain anonymous and can come back as often as they need for free.

Many tutors are classroom teachers by day and eagerly jump into the online arena at night. Tutors use screen names to ensure privacy and safety. Two shifts of teachers are on live during the chat hours of 5:30 pm to 9:30 pm Sunday to Thursday. "We currently have six to eight tutors per shift," says Jane Vanderwal, Content Co-ordinator for the site. More are added to meet increased demand, for example, before provincial standardized tests.

A monitor is online throughout the chats to ensure that all runs smoothly. This means getting the tutors logged on in time, finding replacement tutors if necessary, and handling technical issues. The monitor is also responsible for safety and watches for off-task students (students that misbehave, draw obscene pictures on the whiteboard, or use offensive language), although most students are very good about adhering to the posted chat rules.

As a math and science tutor, Nicole Hagley enjoys using the online interface, and the virtual whiteboard is a big plus. She believes technology can help "increase the understanding of a concept and the speed at which the curriculum can be delivered." The goal is not to do the

students' homework for them, but to make sure they have the tools they need to answer the questions on their own.

One of the rewards of online tutoring is being able to help *while* students are doing their homework. "They are so appreciative when you help to clarify a concept, or let them know they are on the right track." Nicole recalls a student who was having difficulty understanding the underlying concept in a homework problem, so she asked questions to get to the source of the misunderstanding, just as she would in the classroom. "It is so important to provide the students with another explanation to that of their teacher's. We all learn differently, and sometimes, just a different approach to the same concept is all that is needed for it to be understood."

Tutoring online as opposed to in the classroom poses few barriers. Nicole says, "The only real challenge is that you lack the eye-to-eye contact with the student, to truly know whether or not the concept is understood." Tutor Ron Francis agrees. "It's hard not being able to see their emotions, but students often use 'net language' such LOL for 'laughing out loud' to express themselves," he explains. Emoticons such as the smiley face, :-), show up regularly in the chats. Ron says that some students are so eager that they literally wait at his "chat room doorstep" hoping to be the first one in to "raise their hand" to ask a question. This and the constant appreciation, such as repeated THANK YOUs typed on screen, are some of the many rewards of being a tutor.

HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY TESTING

The General Educational Development (GED) testing service is another way that adults can complete high school. Those who pass the GED tests receive an Ontario High School Equivalency certificate. To make the test available in English or French for all potential candidates, 40 GED examiners and proctors are ready to spread out across the province. (The GED team, all of whom currently teach or are retired from teaching, also includes eight essay readers who mark the language arts writing component of the test.) About 180 testing sessions take place each year, most at permanent sites, but others at "off-sites," communities that request testing when they have at least 20 eligible candidates.

Terry Blake is a teacher at Sherbrooke School in Thunder Bay with 30 years of teaching under his belt. A few years ago, he also began working as a GED examiner on weekends. In addition to regular local testing sessions, Terry makes a 600 km road trip to Geraldton three times a year. He is also called upon to journey to Fort Hope, a fly-in Ojibwe community 350 km northeast of Thunder Bay once or twice a year for GED testing sessions. "We are invited to stay right in the community and experience life on the reserve first hand," explains Terry. Because of limited opportunities in Fort Hope, many write GED tests because they have realized that high school completion is the prerequisite for employment outside of the reserve. Terry says that reading the students' essays provides clues to their motivation for earning the GED credential. Often it is to set an example for school-age children, other times it is for a promotion at work. But then, "One student wrote that his father would not share part of a multimillion dollar lottery win unless he earned his diploma," laughs Terry. Most people who write the tests approach him to say "thanks" and shake his hand at the end of a session, but Terry is also gratified by the experience of giving all people, even those in remote communities such as Fort Hope, the chance at success that the GED does.

ILC teachers, tutors, and test supervisors may be out of sight, but they have proven time and time again their commitment to their students. Their students have no doubt added to their store of special teacher memories.

