Bridging Distance

Promising Practices in Online Learning in the Canadian Literacy Community

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getting *online*
THE GO PROJECT

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Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

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Introduction

Hello and welcome to *Bridging Distance: Promising Practices in Online Learning.* The text you hold in your hands is one of the final products of our two year Getting Online project funded by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada and sponsored by Athabasca University.

Getting Online: Distance Education Promising Practices for Canadian Literacy Practitioners (or the GO Project for short) was an innovative national project designed to research trends, technologies and promising practices in online learning in Canada. The five member GO team, consisting of researchers from across Canada, investigated both existing and emerging trends in online learning and the use of online learning within the Canadian literacy community. The team also researched the broader application of online learning within colleges, universities, not-for profit-organizations and educational institutions.

The final products of this project include *A Research Report on Online Learning for Canadian Literacy Practitioners,* web-based self-study training modules, four newsletters, an *Introduction to Online Learning* course, and this promising practices manual. These products are available at the GO website at **www.nald.ca/gettingonline**.

All of the GO team members were actively involved in delivering online learning to literacy practitioners in their home provinces. The idea for this project came about from our own experiences with online learning and facilitation. We found ourselves continually asked by our peers about successes and challenges in online learning. Because we all had found some real potential in using technology for professional development amongst literacy practitioners, we wanted to explore promising practices in online learning in Canada so we could learn how to do it better and share those results with you.

The information contained in *Bridging Distance* came in part from research surveys and interviews conducted with the Canadian literacy community and similar fields of practice as documented in our research report. It is also the product of literature reviews, further in-depth research and the knowledge gained from creating and delivering three sessions of the GO *Introduction to Online Learning* course that was developed and delivered as part of this project.

Our team of five worked in a collaborative manner developing the topics to be explored in *Bridging Distance*. Team members assumed responsibility for researching and writing individual chapters with input from the rest of the team.

As with any promising practice there is always room for continuous improvement, and change is ongoing. We hope *Bridging Distance* serves as a valuable tool to initiate the conversation about how to best develop, deliver and learn online. You may choose to read this resource from cover to cover; you may also choose to simply dive in and only read the sections that are relevant to you. For this reason we have chosen to keep all references and resources within each chapter for easy access.

This manual consists of the following four chapters:

1 Being an Online Learner

2 Developing Online Learning Content

3 Exploring Online Learning Technology

4 Facilitating Online

In the first chapter, *Being an Online Learner,* Lynn Best explores the various issues and topics that we believe anyone embarking upon this type of learning would want to consider. The topics explored in this chapter include:

► How to Determine if Online Learning is for You

► Getting set up for Online Learning

► Being an Active Participant

► Working with Groups Online

► Contributing to an Online Learning Community

► Understanding Netiquette

In the second chapter, *Developing Online Learning Content,* Joanne Kaattari and Vicki Trottier introduce you to the process of planning, developing, and evaluating online content. Topics explored in this chapter include:

▶ Planning for Content Development

▶ Technology and Content Development

▶ Designing your Online Course

▶ Developing Online Learning Content

▶ Evaluation

In the third chapter, *Exploring Online Learning Technology,* the team of Joanne Kaattari and Vicki Trottier again join efforts and provide an overview of some of the common technologies that can be used for online learning. You will be exposed to numerous examples of what technologies are currently being used for online learning in Canada. To help you imagine how these technologies can be applied, they have created a section called *Technology in Action* to show you how each type of technology is currently being used both in the literacy field and elsewhere. In each description, there are a number of links that you can follow to extend your knowledge. Where possible, they have provided you with web links to live demonstrations of the technologies.

The final chapter, *Facilitating Online,* explores a key component of online learning: the role of the facilitator. In this chapter our entire team engaged in collaborative writing to pool our extensive and diverse facilitation skills to create a practical and user-friendly overview of facilitation. In this chapter we cover the following topics:

▶ Roles and Skill Set of the Facilitator

▶ Online Facilitation Strategies

▶ Facilitation and Technology

▶ Our Ten Top tips for Online Facilitation

▶ Case studies from CLO and the GO Course

We hope you find *Bridging Distance: Promising Practices in Online Learning* and the experiences from our online learning journeys to be a valuable resource as you begin your own adventure into the exciting world of online learning. Happy trails.

Bridging Distance

Promising Practices in Online Learning in the Canadian Literacy Community

1

Being an Online Learner

Introduction

Online learning provides exciting opportunities for accessible, varied, and unique learning experiences. New participants often approach online learning with the same curiosity and apprehension that we bring to other new life experiences. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce you to being an online learner and to help you have a successful experience with learning online. This chapter will explore:

► How to determine if online learning is for you

► Getting set up for online learning

► Being an active participant

► Working with groups online

► Contributing to an online learning community

► Understanding netiquette

You may find yourself in the role of an online learner or an online facilitator. This chapter will be helpful to you in both roles: If you are new to online learning or want to be a more effective online learner, this chapter will provide practical tools to assist you. If you are a facilitator of online learning, this information can help you to appreciate the needs and experiences of online participants so that, as a facilitator, you can help them become more effective online learners.

The information contained in this chapter has come from a variety of sources including my personal experiences as an online learner and facilitator, the experiences of other online learners and facilitators, as well as from research conducted in the Getting Online project and other sources.

Is Online Learning For You?

When considering engaging in any type of learning, many adult learners assess the appropriateness of the specific type of learning based on their own personalities, learning styles, and life style factors. Individuals new to online learning often ask, "What will this learning experience be like?"; "Will I be successful learning through an online environment?" and "Are my computer skills good enough?" These and other areas are important for participants new to online learning to explore. In this section, we will introduce you to many aspects of online learning. Each section contains a number of personal questions for your consideration and reflection.

Learning to Learn

When enrolling in online learning for the first time, we are faced with the experience of "learning to learn". Many of the traditional methods of learning we rely on in a face-to-face environment (such as seeing the instructor and other learners) may not be present in the online environment. Instead, we may encounter an unfamiliar learning platform, uncertainty about how learning happens using technology, and even a feeling of isolation from our fellow learners and instructors. We may need to acquire new skills and knowledge that will facilitate learning. For each learner, this experience will be unique and dependent on prior knowledge and skills, attitude, and resources.

I did figure it all out and all is well (how hard could my username be? It's my name for heaven's sake!!), but it made me realize how much I am at the mercy of the computer. And sometimes the computer and I don't get along 🙂
—Online learner in the GO course

Questions for you to consider:

► What personal learning skills do I already have that I bring to this new learning environment?

► How open am I to developing new learning strategies?

► How will developing new online learning strategies be helpful to me?

Personal Learning Style

Personal learning style is an important consideration when we engage in any type of learning. For those who like to learn through discussion, a lecture style learning experience might not be as effective as participating

in a group presentation followed by a question and answer session. Online learning has characteristics that may or may not be a match with our unique personality styles. These characteristics can vary depending on the technology that is used to offer the online learning. For example, some learners prefer to be reflective in their responses, taking time to compose and process their ideas; these learners may prefer an asynchronous discussion-based learning opportunity. Other learners may prefer to respond quickly and might prefer a live audio and visual-based learning event that involves real-time exchange of ideas. Some learners may prefer to learn independently, while others enjoy the camaraderie of the group discussion. Some learners may feel very isolated in an online environment, while others enjoy the interaction with fellow learners from a distance. Some learners like to learn through reading, while others prefer conversation, and/or activity. Undoubtedly, online learning attracts people with many different personality styles who choose online learning for a wide variety of reasons. As learners, we need to have at least some of our personal learning style preferences met in our learning experiences.

Here's a learning styles quiz you can take online: **www.georgebrown.ca/ saffairs/stusucc/learningstyles.aspx**

Questions for you to consider:

► What aspects of my learning style must be present for me to engage in learning?

► What aspects of online learning are aligned with my learning style?

► What activities outside of online learning could I explore to support my online experience?

Being Open to Learning Using Technology

Successful online learners have an accepting attitude towards using technology for learning. This is not to suggest every online learner is an ardent fan of technology, but we find that engaged online learners have a curiosity about how technology can facilitate learning. Learners accept that the technology may not be perfect and that there may be glitches to work out; they are willing to try new things using the learning tools provided by the course.

Questions for you to consider:

► How would I describe my attitude towards technology?

> ► How would I rate my level of curiosity about trying new ways of learning using technology?
>
> ► How do I usually handle technical glitches?

Self-Direction

Unlike traditional, synchronous learning that is often instructor-led, online learning may require an increased level of self-direction by the participant. Self-direction includes the ability to manage our own learning processes. In an asynchronous online environment, learners need to determine their own hours for checking in online, contributing to discussions, and arranging their personal schedules for submitting assignments. In a synchronous online environment, self-direction is also required as participants will be learning either at home or at their desk (as opposed to attending a face-to-face event well away from the distractions of home and work). Some learners thrive in this type of environment, whereas others, like the learner quoted below, find it can be disconcerting initially.

> *One thing I find here is that I don't know where to "be" with so many streams of activity going on and no one there to "direct" you to the next or most crucial task. It will take some practice and a whole different mindset.*
>
> —Online learner in the GO course

Questions for you to consider:

> ► How comfortable am I managing my own learning?
>
> ► In what past learning experiences have I been self-directed?
>
> ► Are there any obstacles I can foresee that would get in the way of managing my own learning?

Commitment

Learning in an online environment requires the same commitment as a face-to-face course. Some people might assume an online course requires less effort than other types of learning. It is wise to check out the expectations of the online course prior to enrolling in order to assess time commitments and expectations. This will help you to determine if you are able to make the commitment to the course and fulfill the expectations.

Like so many others, I think a bigger fear is fitting the time in to actually take the course. Life is always busy and I really want to know if online learning is a realistic option for me.

—Online learner in the GO course

Questions for you to consider:

► How can I determine the amount of time required for this course?

► Can I accommodate the time required in my personal schedule?

► Who can help me support this commitment?

Open to Sharing

In many kinds of online environments, a great deal of the learning occurs because of interactions between participants and course facilitators. Participants may be expected to share their thoughts, experiences, and reflections. This sharing can create a collaborative learning environment where participants and facilitators learn from and with each other. Active participation can help some online learners learn more effectively.

I feel as though I am beginning to know some people already. I find it helps me to have a "conversation" with them despite silences and all the other strange aspects that we may experience through this method of learning.

—Online learner in the GO course

Questions for you to consider:

► In what other types of learning environments have I shared ideas?

► How open am I to talking about my thoughts and ideas online?

► What are my feelings about sharing ideas and learning experiences online with people I've never met?

Comfort with Communicating by Writing and Reading

Asynchronous online learning often relies heavily on printed text and written responses. Many online learners express some hesitancy about putting their first post online, citing uncertainty about how it is written, if the ideas will be clearly understood, and how others will view their thoughts. One online learner writes about her experiences with writing online:

I am a bit of a traditionalist around communication...I rely on body language, tone, etc. when working with people so I think communicating online, unless it is just information exchange, will be a bit uncomfortable. I am sure it will get better with practice.

I am comfortable writing online...I use email, social networking and text messaging regularly...But I have to say, that you do have to learn how to write and read a different way for online chatting. Sarcasm and the like is best left for those who know you away from that medium and can picture how you would be saying things.

—Online learner in the GO course

In addition to writing online, there can be a significant amount of reading using the computer screen in an asynchronous online learning environment. Some people find reading large amounts of text from the computer screen tiring, while others are not affected.

Questions for you to consider:

► What is my current comfort level with posting thoughts and ideas online?

► Am I prepared to participate in learning that expects me to respond through online posts?

► How do I feel about reading text from the computer screen?

Speaking Up When Unsure

In a traditional, face-to-face learning environment, instructors have many ways to ensure the learner is comfortable with and understanding the course content; these include classroom conversations, facial expressions, and body language. In a virtual classroom setting, facilitators will often rely on the learner to communicate that he or she is experiencing difficulty, has a question, or is unsure about something. Often, when a learner asks for clarification, they learn that others had the same question. Being successful in online learning often requires the learner to be assertive with their learning needs, questions, and concerns.

Questions for you to consider:

► How comfortable am I asking for clarification or help?

► How have I voiced my learning needs in the past?

Access to Learning Technology

Online learning involves the use of learning technologies such as computers, various types of software, access to the Internet and more recently cell phones and even iPods. It is important to have the necessary technology required to access your particular online learning course. The technology requirements can be acquired from the course or technology provider. Ensuring the technical requirements are met prior to the start of the course can save a great deal of frustration. It is also important to know when and how you can use the technology you will need for the course. Be sure to ask your course provider for FAQ's (frequently asked questions) about the technology. If possible, arrange to have a practice session ahead of time to ensure you understand and can use the technological features.

Check out the *Exploring Online Learning Technologies* chapter of this resource for more information on this important topic.

Questions to consider:

► What technology do I currently have access to?

► What are the technical requirements of your online learning course? Do you meet these requirements? If not, are you willing to purchase and/or download what you need?

► How comfortable am I with technology and how might I increase my comfort level in preparation for online learning?

Access to Technical Support

Many learning technologies have evolved to be very user friendly. However, even the most experienced online learner can experience technical difficulties. Some providers of online learning will offer a level of technical support related to the course. Your computer equipment, however, is generally outside the realm of their support. In the event you need technical support, it is a good idea to have a technical support person who can be relied upon to assist you. It is interesting to note that many online learners help each other by sharing shortcuts and ideas regarding the use of computers and the learning platform. Take the time to explore the new technology ahead of time and ask your course facilitators or technical support people any technical questions prior to the start of your session. Also be sure to have the technical support contact information readily available, especially during your first online learning sessions.

Questions to consider:

► Who can support any technical issues I may have related to online learning?

► What has been my experience with troubleshooting computer issues I have had in the past?

► What steps can I take to ensure that I understand the technology and the technical support available to me?

Learning By Doing

Online learning is very active learning. Like a logo for a popular sports company, learning online requires us to "Just do it!" To develop the skills needed to participate in online learning, we have to take action. The actions we need to learn could include downloading software, establishing Internet connections, typing and posting messages, viewing podcasts and webcasts, connecting audio devices to our computers, joining blogs, participating in live online learning sessions, and figuring out learning platforms.

For those of us who have only experienced the traditional academic model of relying heavily on reading a textbook to acquire learning, this can represent a huge shift in our self-concept as a learner, which can create fears and anxieties related to learning in this way.

Some online learners report some anxieties related to technology and online learning.

Fear is getting in the way of me connecting with other people. It feels so public to post notes. I'm not sure I have anything of value to add to the conversations, and everyone else seems so much smarter and articulate than I am.

—Online learner in the GO course

The one thing I feel about using a computer is that it was like learning a whole new language when I was in my forties. It was a humbling experience for me because I never had too much difficulty learning in school and it has helped me to empathize with my students who are struggling with literacy issues. Do you all remember the panic of typing something onto the computer, a report or something similar that had taken ages to complete, and then the absolute panic when you "lost" it because you had failed to press

*the save key? Or equal panic when you only THOUGHT that you
might have lost your work?*

—Online learner in the GO course

People new to online learning sometimes express concerns about using
technology. In fact, for many online learners, their initial focus is usually
on the technology, with the course content being secondary. As the course
participants' confidence develops in the use of the technology, course
facilitators find they start to deal less with technology issues and begin to
see a shift of focus to the course content.

Just as it would be impossible to learn to swim on dry land, online
learners will only learn to be an online learner by wading into cyber
space and testing the waters. The most important lesson I have learned
about anxieties and fears related to online learning technologies is that
increasing a learner's experience with technology will decrease the learner's
anxiety.

Getting Set Up

When we enter a traditional learning environment, the organization or
person offering the course has probably arranged the physical set up of
the classroom. As online learners, it is our responsibility to set up our
own physical space. To be conducive to learning, the space must be
comfortable, free from distractions, have the necessary equipment, and be
ergonomically correct.

Physical Location

As an adult learner with a full life, sometimes the most unusual places
become my study space, including airports, my desk at work over lunch,
the dentist's office waiting room, and my car when I have waiting time.
While all of these locations have served the purpose at the time, it has
also been important to have a dedicated space that has all the materials
and equipment that I need to learn.

Choose a space that has the necessary degree of quiet you need to
concentrate. Pay attention to lighting, making sure there is adequate
lighting with no glare from overhead or windows. Going to a specific
space in our homes to learn can help us make a mental and physical shift
from our other life roles. If online learning takes place at your office,
ensure that your fellow co-workers know you are in an online learning

session and that you are not to be disturbed. Some online learners post a sign on their office door saying, "Do not disturb—online learning session in progress". For either home or office, make sure the space is physically comfortable and appealing, as we are more likely to spend time in surroundings that are comfortable.

Equipment Needed

To participate in online learning you will need a computer or some other device (such as a cell phone) that can connect to the Internet. It is desirable, where possible, to have a cable or fiber optic connection which will provide faster access and easier downloading of information from your course website. It can also be helpful to have a printer, particularly if you wish to print materials to keep for later reference. In addition, some courses have an audio component, which requires a headset with a built-in microphone (or a microphone and speakers combination). In addition to hardware, you may also need to access a web page where your course is set up. In some cases, you may have to download software to access your course. It is also helpful to have a supply of notepaper, pens, and other stationary supplies on hand as you would for any type of course.

Ergonomics

Having an ergonomically correct set up for work or study can prevent certain types of injuries. The US Safety and Health Administration (**www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/computerworkstations/positions.html**) has a series of guidelines for posture that include:

► Hands, wrists, and forearms are straight, in-line and roughly parallel to the floor.

► Head is level, or bent slightly forward, forward facing, and balanced. Generally it is in-line with the torso.

► Shoulders are relaxed and upper arms hang normally at the side of the body.

► Elbows stay in close to the body and are bent between 90 and 120 degrees.

► Feet are fully supported by the floor or a footrest may be used if the desk height is not adjustable.

► Back is fully supported with appropriate lumbar support when sitting vertical or leaning back slightly.

► Thighs and hips are supported by a well-padded seat and generally parallel to the floor.

► Knees are about the same height as the hips with the feet slightly forward.

Placement of equipment is important for proper posture. The US Safety and Health Administration (**www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/computerworkstations/positions.html**) recommends:

Chair:

► The seat and backrest of the chair should support a comfortable posture that allows frequent changing of the seating position.

► The seat-pan should accommodate you (not too big/small). It should be padded and have a rounded, "waterfall" edge. This will reduce contact stress to the back of the legs.

► The angle of the seat-pan is also important. A seat-pan with an adjustable tilt ensures the person is able to maintain proper support in different positions.

Monitor:

► Keep monitor directly in front of you.

► The topmost line of the screen should not be higher than your eyes.

► Screens that swivel horizontally and tilt or elevate vertically enable you to select a comfortable viewing angle.

Keyboard:

► Wrists should not be flexed up or down while typing; they should remain straight.

► Forearms should be parallel to the ground.

► Do not use arm or wrist rests excessively as this may block blood flow

These guidelines will help you create an appropriate physical environment that will provide a comfortable, welcoming space free from unnecessary distractions, which will help ensure your success as an online learner.

Active Participation

One of the challenges of online learning is knowing how to participate. Some online learners report they turn on their computers, open the web page and think, "Now what do I do?" Others note they are unsure how

often they should check in and how much they should post to their asynchronous online discussions. Learners participating in live online learning events may lack confidence about speaking aloud to the group. Although each course is different and has different expectations, here are some general guidelines that will assist your active participation in an online course.

Get to Know the Online Learning Technology

Most online learning technologies contain the information you will need to be successful in your online course. Familiarize yourself with the layout of the platform for the course content, and the various features of the online technology you will be using. In fact, it is helpful to play with the site, clicking on features to see how the platform is built and where information is contained. Check to see if there is a tutorial or other helpful "how-to" information about using the features of the technology. Many learning platforms allow learners to configure the page to suit their particular layout preferences. There may be features such as live chat, podcasts, webcams, online discussion groups, videos, photos, etc. If possible, take some time to explore the site before the course actually begins so that you'll be more comfortable and confident starting the course.

Stay Organized

Just like a face-to-face course, many online courses have start and end dates, assignment due dates, and course content schedules that are important things to know and keep organized. At the start of the course, record all the important dates and events for the course. There may be a feature in the course website to assist you with your organization; however it is your responsibility to ensure you progress through the course. Use whatever tools you find helpful, such as an electronic or paper planner, to help you keep track of important dates.

Check In

Your availability to check into an asynchronous online course discussion group will depend on your personal circumstances. It is important, however, to check in as regularly as you can, particularly while you are determining the course expectations and flow. As an online learner, I check in to the course website at least every couple of days to read and respond to posts and to make sure I am not missing any important discussions. In addition, I set aside a regular weekly time (just like a

class schedule) when I commit a couple of hours to the general course work that might include readings, research, or assignments. Checking in on a regular basis helps you stay current with the discussions. It can be overwhelming to check in after a longer absence and see dozens of unread messages in an online discussion group.

Social Presence

Social presence is the degree to which learners feel connected to each other (and the facilitator) and is described in greater detail later in this chapter. There are many ways to create social presence in an online learning environment. Some studies suggest that increased social presence may be related to learner satisfaction. Active participants create a social presence online which may enhance theirs and others' learning.

Share your Learning

Online learning presents an amazing opportunity to learn with and from your fellow classmates. After all, your classmates could be from around the globe or across the street. There is always plenty to learn and share! Key to creating this collaborative learning is sharing your knowledge, thoughts and ideas on the materials that are being presented and discussed. It is through this sharing (posting messages in the case of an asynchronous learning environment, by incorporating Web 2.0 technologies to encourage collaborative learning, or by sharing your verbal responses in the case of a live synchronous online learning environment) that new ideas and meaning are constructed.

Responding

In addition to sharing your thoughts and ideas, online learning provides an opportunity for you to respond to the thoughts of other learners. Providing comments and feedback to other learners may promote the flow of ideas and opens communication amongst online learners.

Dealing with Silence

There are times during an online course when participation may drop slightly, when posts are met with silence or when an online verbal discussion just does not seem to generate responses. This is not unusual, but can be unsettling. Several comments below explain why this may happen and how to deal with this if it does happen.

I think [she] makes another good point about adjusting to silence. It's not often that we say something only to be met with a resounding silence. But sometimes that happens online. And this happens for a variety of reasons. For me the lesson was to learn how to NOT take silence personally.

Some people are online all the time and others are only on occasionally. Some people have time to reply to everyone quickly and others have to prioritize and can forget to reply to you for quite a while. It doesn't mean they don't think of you just that they haven't had a chance to reply....yet.

—Online learner in the GO course

Do not let online silences deter you from participating in your course. It is important to understand that occasionally, there are naturally occurring lulls in online conversations.

Communicate with Facilitators

Part of active participation in an online course involves communicating with the course facilitators. (You may find that some courses may have more than one facilitator.) Just like in a traditional classroom, facilitators are available to answer any questions you might have about the course, or to assist with technical difficulties. Some online learning software allows participants to send a private email or message to the facilitators. And a note about non-participation: it is frustrating for facilitators when learners are absent from an asynchronous online course for a period of time without communicating this absence. (Fellow participants are also likely to notice when you're not present.) Any change in your status as a course participant should be communicated to the course facilitators.

Working With Groups Online

In face-to-face learning, group work is a standard method used to encourage learners to collaborate on a course assignment or project. Increasingly, online learning uses group work as a method of instruction. For online learners, the process of completing a series of tasks and submitting one final product in a virtual classroom can be intimidating.

The following guidelines will provide some direction on how to accomplish a group assignment in an online environment:

1 **Prepare:** After the initial project is assigned and teams are formed, your team should have an initial online discussion to clarify the scope of the project, timelines and individual tasks.

2 **Work:** At this point in the process, team members work in an appropriate manner to complete the various tasks selected/assigned and to keep lines of communication open.

3 **Perfect:** The final phase of the online group project is to compile all individuals' work into a working draft that will be reviewed and edited by group members before presenting the final product.

Online group work can be a very effective, synergistic way to learn with and from your colleagues. Make sure you take time to celebrate your accomplishment when your assignment is completed!

Contributing to an Online Learning Community

An online learning community is a group of learners that collaborate to achieve shared learning goals. Online learning communities depend on their members to share their knowledge and experiences. This shared knowledge is often useful in its own right and can also be combined with other knowledge to create new meanings and perspectives. Online learning communities may use synchronous and asynchronous methods to share knowledge. These learning communities may also combine their online learning with face-to-face learning, referred to as blended learning.

Much like non-virtual communities, online communities rely on social presence. Social presence is the degree to which learners feel affectively connected to each other. Social presence can play an important role in supporting learning and can have an equally important role in creating an online learning community.

Online social presence can be created in a variety of ways including:

Sharing Learner Profiles

Many online courses build in the option for learners to upload a digital photograph and share some information about themselves including where they live, occupation, hobbies, reason for taking the course, etc. These profiles help group members to get to know each other. In synchronous (live) online courses, learners may be asked to verbally introduce themselves to the group. Synchronous online learning software

may also allow learners to upload a photo or create an avatar to express their personality. Using such techniques, learners may find they have something in common with other learners, which increases the likelihood of developing connections.

In a course I was facilitating, we invited participants to share their profiles and photos online. One participant shared a really creative profile that others followed using the same template. The profile was based on counting down from 10 to 1 and went like this: 10 things on my desk...9 foods I love...8 places I would like to visit...7 jobs I have had...6 places I have lived... And so on. It was really a fun way to get to know people quickly, as well as being creative. I think most people in the course, even those who had already posted their profiles, gave it a whirl!

—Online facilitator in the GO course

Use of Audio/Visual

Combining the opportunity for participants to hear each other's voices through synchronous audio technology such as Elluminate, Skype, and conference calling can also create social presence. Reading posts after hearing the person's voice helps to set the context of the message, as you are better able to imagine the inflection and tone of the writer. In my experience, when I read posts of people whose voices I know well, I imagine their voices when I read the posts which gives me a more personal connection to the writer. As well, some online learning platforms used to deliver live online learning courses allow for the use of webcams or digital pictures of the facilitator or learners to appear while they are speaking.

Quick Responses

Facilitators providing timely feedback to learners who post messages is an effective way to create online social presence. (Learners are also encouraged to respond to each other.) It can be disconcerting to post a message that does not elicit any responses. This can create isolation and cause learners to second-guess themselves. Prompt responses, however, indicate to the person who wrote the message that it has been read, that communication is occurring, and that someone has been interested in what was written. It also encourages others to participate.

Participation

One way for other learners and course facilitators to know a participant is engaged in the learning is through their active participation. Active participation through posting messages, responding to others, and completing activities and assignments is helpful to promote social presence.

In one online course I was facilitating, it seemed the participants were really focused on the course content and learning about the technology. They did not, however, seem to be connected to each other or willing to share much of their personal experiences. About half way through the course, a participant posted that she would be away from the course for a few days because she was attending a competition. This one post was a turning point in the course as the participants began to actively engage with each other. At first they expressed curiosity about the competition, and then they began to have conversations with each other on a different level—about the course content and related things. It was exciting to see this unfold.

—Online facilitator in the GO course

It is essential that online learners are aware of the ways that social presence contributes to a learning community and how it may enhance the learning experience of the individual learner and the entire group. As individuals, it is important to choose how we will help to create this presence and find ways to connect with our fellow learners.

Netiquette

Netiquette is a combination of the words "network" or "Internet" and "etiquette". The term refers to the generally accepted practices that govern written electronic communication such as email, blogs, asynchronous online learning, and forums. Like social etiquette that guides social behaviours in formal and informal settings, netiquette guides online interactions. Netiquette helps ensure electronic communication is respectful, effective, and efficient.

Understanding netiquette is a very important part of written online communication. The cyber world has a very distinct culture and participation in this environment requires understanding the generally accepted social norms for this culture. In addition to guidelines, netiquette provides some creative and fun ways to interact online. The

following is an overview of common netiquette guidelines for electronic communication.

Posting

A posting is a message sent to a discussion forum or text placed on the message board of a website. It is important to keep your posting relevant both to the topic being discussed and the entire group who will be reading the message. It is not appropriate to have private communication intended for one group member posted to the group site. A personal email is more effective and efficient if you wish to have a one-to-one exchange with another person in the group.

Subject Line

Ensuring your subject line is relevant and accurate helps group members stay organized. If the threads of discussion evolve to a different subject, it is helpful to start a new discussion that has a subject line containing the new topic. When group members want to re-read or review information, these accurate subject lines will help locate information contained in postings quickly and efficiently.

Message Length

While there are no definitive guidelines for the length of a message, brevity is generally appreciated by the reader. Because electronic messages are usually read from a computer screen or in some cases, a much smaller Blackberry or other screen, keeping messages brief and to the point is considerate of the reader.

Writing Style

Plain, simple style writing is widely accepted in electronic communication. Use of jargon, syntax, and lengthy prose is not widely used in electronic communication and better left to other methods of communication.

Formatting

Readers enjoy reading posts and emails that are well formatted. Posts that are spaced into short paragraphs with appropriate punctuation create ease of reading. Using numbers and bullets can draw attention to main points or questions in an email or posting.

Use of Emoticons

The word emoticon is a combination of emotion and icon. Emoticons are symbols or a combination of symbols used to convey emotion in a text. With some exceptions, most online communication does not facilitate the sharing of real time facial expressions that would ordinarily accompany the delivery of a message. Emoticons are cleverly designed symbols that a writer can insert into his or her text to show the reader how he or she is feeling. Emoticons are also available from various sites on the Internet (such as **http://messenger.yahoo.com/features/emoticons**) and can be colourful and animated. Below are some examples of commonly used emoticons. You may have to look at some of these sideways for the full effect.

  = Happy Face (Newer computer software will convert a colon combined with a right bracket to a happy face like this ☺!)

  = Sad Face (Newer computer software will convert a colon combined with a left bracket to a sad face like this ☹!)

\0/   = Hurray! (Arms waving in the air over a head)

:-o   = Surprised

;-)   = Winking

:-/   = Bored, annoyed, awkward

>:-[= Angry, cross

>:-@! = Angry and swearing

Use of Humour

Using humour in electronic communications in the absence of tone of voice, facial expressions, and face-to-face contact with other participants can be tricky. Misinterpreted humour can be viewed as confusing or offensive. Humour is best used sparingly online until the nature of the online relationships is clear and the writer is certain the humour is welcomed and appreciated by the reader.

Use of Capital Letters

Posts or emails that are composed in capital letters can be perceived as SHOUTING by the reader. To avoid being seen to be "shouting" at someone, use capital letters only when they would be normally required by standard grammatical rules.

Acronyms

To speed communication, a variety of acronyms have emerged in electronic communication. These acronyms also help to set the context of the communication that might otherwise be evident from verbal or non-verbal cues. The following are some examples of commonly used acronyms:

BTW   = By The Way
LOL   = Laughing Out Loud
ROTFL = Rolling On The Floor Laughing
TTFN   = Ta-Ta For Now
IMHO   = In My Humble Opinion
BBFN   = Bye Bye For Now
JK   = Just Kidding
NP   = No Problem
WBS   = Write Back Soon

(From **http://edition.cnn.com/2000/TECH/computing/07/21/ netiquette.tools**)

Spam

Spam is the electronic equivalent of junk mail. If you have an email account, chances are you have received unsolicited email from companies promoting all sorts of things including medications, watches, chain letters, and educational opportunities. In addition, you may also receive messages that appear to be gibberish. All of these emails are referred to as spam. Most Internet users do not appreciate spam, as they tend to overload a user's Internet account and must be deleted from the account. Some Internet users also send unsolicited emails to other users, which is known as *spamming*. Spamming is not welcomed by others and should be avoided.

Spontaneous Responses

Due to the instantaneous nature of the Internet, users may feel compelled to respond quickly. In some cases, the compulsion to send a hasty response may be later regretted by the sender, particularly if the response is written in anger or frustration. To avoid sending a message that you might later regret, it is advisable to wait 24 hours before sending the response if you are responding in anger. In addition, there are occasions when a response is better served by a phone call or a personal conversation.

Flaming

Flaming is defined as insulting or angrily criticizing an individual in an electronic message. Flaming is very inappropriate and could have serious consequences for the writer of the message.

Words of Others

If you are quoting an individual or publication in your email message, ensure you give appropriate credit to the original author. Similarly, do not forward emails sent to you by others without the consent of the person who wrote the message.

Company Email Accounts

If you regularly send email from your work related email account, it is important to know that all communication sent using company equipment is legally and technically owned by the company you work for. It is also important to note that email and other forms of electronic communication are not private and may be viewed by network administrators.

Conclusion

Being an online learner presents tremendous opportunities to engage in learning that might not otherwise be possible. The guidelines and suggestions in this chapter will help you prepare as you enter into the world of online learning or work with participants in an online learning setting. Most importantly, remember that successful online learning requires a willingness to develop new skills and a curiosity to explore the technology. Whether you dive into or cautiously explore online learning, have fun and stay open to the endless possibilities!

Additional Resources

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Bridging Distance

getting online
THE GO PROJECT

**Promising Practices in Online Learning
in the Canadian Literacy Community**

2 Developing Online Learning Content

Introduction

Welcome to the *Developing Online Learning Content* chapter of *Bridging Distance.* In this chapter, we will introduce you to the process of planning, developing, and evaluating online learning content.

We begin this chapter with an overview that looks at the importance of knowing the goals, needs, skills and capacities of your audience and your organization. This chapter also shares key information on how to effectively design online learning content. We also talk about the importance of planning for technology and content development. We close this chapter with a review of various ways to evaluate and continuously improve your online learning content.

Planning for Content Development

Initial Analysis

Although it might be tempting for some, don't just start creating your online learning content. It is important to first identify learning needs and constraints and then to develop a solid plan to create successful content for online learning.

To begin your analysis, here are some questions you could ask:

► What needs are you trying to meet by offering online learning?

► What are the overall goals and objectives for your online learning initiative?

► Are you sure that online learning provides the best solution for your organization and your participants?

► Who is the likely audience and what are their overall needs and barriers in terms of online learning?

► What type of online learning would your organization offer (formal courses, professional development opportunities, general interest training, etc.)?

► Do you have the necessary organizational capacity (financial, human resources and technology) to develop and deliver your proposed online learning initiative?

► What technology or technologies would be best suited to the needs and abilities of your organization and its participants?

► What type of online learning content will best meet participant's needs and learning goals?

► Based on organizational and participant needs, will all or only part of your content be delivered online?

► If you are already offering online learning, what is working for you and what might improve the online learning experience for your participants?

► If online learning is new to you, will you be developing content from scratch or do you have access to existing content from face-to-face training sessions that could be adapted for online?

Priya Williams of Stylus Inc. has written an excellent overview of many of the basic principles of conducting a needs analysis to design online learning content. This resource is called "*How to Develop an Online Course*" and is available at: **http://stylusinc.com/online_course/tutorial/process.htm.**

Know Your Audience

Having a basic understanding of the skills, needs, goals and motivations of your target audience is a critical piece of planning for content development. To better understand participant needs, ask yourself the following questions:

► Who is the target audience for your online learning initiative and what are their potential goals, needs, motivations, and barriers?

► Are there likely to be enough interested participants to make your online learning initiative successful and cost-effective for you?

► How can you make online learning content highly relevant to the needs and interests of your target audience?

▶ Do you think participants will be looking for a formal course, professional development opportunities or general interest training?

▶ How much interactivity are your participants likely to want?

▶ Will participants have low or high level technical skills and comfort with online learning technologies?

▶ How much technical and facilitation support are participants likely to need and can your organization provide this support?

▶ How do participants' needs, barriers, motivation, and goals impact on the development of online learning content? For example, are there issues such as reading levels, technological barriers, or access for participants in remote communities that would affect content design?

▶ Why would most participants want to access online learning from your organization? For example, is their prime motivator likely to be that online learning is more accessible geographically for them? Or, is their prime motivator likely to be that your training meets their personal schedules (work/life balance)?

Know Your Organization

Each organization is unique (size, mandate, capacity, resources and experience with online learning and technology) and assessing your organization's capacity, strengths and weaknesses in terms of its ability to develop and deliver effective online learning is critical. You could ask the following questions to help assess what your organization is most capable of, given its resources and capacity.

▶ Do you have sufficient financial resources to offer quality online learning? Remember to take into account start-up costs, content development, facilitation, technology, technical support and ongoing maintenance costs. If you do not have sufficient funds, how might you access the required financial resources?

▶ Does your organization have access to the online learning technology (or technologies) it requires to offer quality online learning that will meet the needs of its participants? If not, are there ways you could acquire this critical component?

▶ Do you have staff with the required high-level skills to develop and offer online learning? This includes content development skills, marketing, facilitation skills, and technical skills. If you do not have the necessary skills, are there ways in which you could fill these knowledge gaps (e.g., hiring new staff, training existing staff, contracting specialized services, etc.)?

► In the case of not-for-profit organizations, are your key funders knowledgeable and supportive of online learning in your organization? If not, how could you increase their knowledge and support?

► Do you have the support of senior management and/or your board of directors for your proposed online learning initiative? If not, how could you develop or increase such support?

► If your organization is already offering online learning, how effective and successful has it been? In which ways might it be improved in the future?

► Is your organization truly ready to offer online learning? If not, what steps can you take to ensure organizational readiness?

Planning and Technology

Planning for technology is also a key part of content development. You will need to carefully consider and plan for the technology needs and abilities of your participants and your organization.

The *Exploring Online Learning Technology* chapter of this resource guide covers the various online learning technologies in detail and gives practical examples of how they can be used to deliver online learning content. Different types of online learning technologies offer unique features and possibilities for content development and delivery. Please consult that chapter for a detailed overview of online learning technologies.

Here are some questions to help your organization plan for content development, technology and **participant** needs.

► What are the typical learning goals and needs of our participants and what online learning content and technologies are most likely to meet these needs?

► Do we have the skills, knowledge and capacity to support the needs of our participants?

► What type of hardware and software would our participants typically have and how does this affect our choice of online learning technologies and the content we can develop?

► Will all of our participants have high-speed Internet access and substantial bandwidth and if not how does this affect our choice of online learning technologies?

► How comfortable with technology are our participants likely to be and how does this affect the technologies we select to deliver content?

► What level of technical support might our participants require to be successful at online learning?

► If you are required to use a particular kind of online learning technology by your host organization (for example, a college that primarily uses BlackBoard), how can you best use that technology for content development and how can you best engage and support participants with that technology?

Answering the following questions would help your organization to plan for content development, technology and **organizational** needs.

► How can we effectively use technology to deliver content that is meaningful and relevant to our participants?

► What technologies are we able to use given our organization's budget for online learning?

► What technologies can we set up and support, given our organization's technical abilities?

► What technical support can we offer to our participants? How does that impact the online learning technology we select?

► Given the technical abilities and skills of our instructors (or our ability to provide training to them) how does this affect the type of technology we can use to deliver online learning content?

► How might our organization develop enhanced skills in technology in order to effectively develop online learning content? (Or, to improve what we are currently offering?)

► How can we keep up with the quickly changing world of technology?

► If our organization is already offering online learning, how is our current technology working for us and what steps might we take to improve content development and delivery?

For more information on this important topic, the Australian Flexible Learning Framework has prepared an excellent overview of planning for content development called *Developing E-learning Content.* You can access this valuable resource at: **http://pre2005.flexiblelearning.net.au/guides/ content.pdf**.

Technology and Content Development

There are a variety of technologies that can make the process of creating online learning content easier. Some of these resources and software can be costly, so please check prices carefully and assess features and technical requirements to know if they are right for you.

Document Conversion

One example of technology that can help you with content creation is software that can convert existing documents from Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and other programs into online learning content.

For example, many learning management systems (BlackBoard, Saba Centra, etc.) help you to easily convert existing documents into online learning content. For more information on these technologies, please check out the *Exploring Online Learning Technology* chapter.

An illustration of this is Adobe Presenter (formerly Breeze Presenter). With Presenter, you can personalize, narrate and deliver online presentations that can be shared over the Internet or via CD or DVD. With Presenter, and using your existing PowerPoint presentations as the base, you can add audio/video streaming, graphics, quizzes, surveys, and various other multi-media content. For more information see: **www. adobe.com/resources/breeze/presenter**.

Purchasing Online Learning Content

There are also professional companies who create online learning content on a fee-for-service basis. Two well-known companies are Plato Learning and LearnScape.

Plato Learning (**www.plato.com**) offers online products for educational institutions involved in teaching elementary, secondary, and adult students in Canada and the United States. Plato's curriculum for adult students includes math, reading, GED preparation, social studies, and life and job skills. For elementary students, Plato focuses on reading and math. For secondary students, Plato's curriculum includes credit recovery, summer school, and exam intervention.

You can view a demo of Plato via *The Learning Hub* at: **www. learninghub.ca/plato_demo/plato_demo.swf**. *The Learning Hub* (**www. learninghub.ca**) is an online educational initiative for adult students offered by the Avon Maitland District School Board in southwestern

Ontario. *The Learning Hub* uses Plato to offer online courses to adult students on such topics as Writing in the Workplace, Business Basics, Technology Fundamentals, and Job Skills for the Real World.

LearnScape (**www.learnscape.com**) offers online learning products designed for adults seeking retraining or upgrading to gain employment. SkillsCompass and GED Pathway are two types of adult learning software offered by LearnScape.

Ontario's *The Learning Hub* also uses LearnScape to offer a variety of learning modules to adult students including: Reading, Writing, Math, Canadian Social Studies, Science, Pre-GED assessments, Life Skills and Essential Skills. For a demonstration of LearnScape via *The Learning Hub,* take a look at: **www.learninghub.ca/learnscape_demo/learnscape_ demo/learnscape_demo.swf**.

Learning Management Systems

There are a wide variety of sophisticated learning management systems, such as Blackboard, Saba Centra, Elluminate, and Desire2Learn. Please see the *Exploring Online Learning Technology* chapter for more information on these systems. While many of these systems are costly, they can also provide excellent support with online learning content development (and other course management features such as student registration and tracking).

Features vary between systems but basically these systems assist organizations to create, organize and reuse online learning content. Using these learning management systems, organizations can develop new courses from existing content (Word, PowerPoint, pictures, graphics, Podcasts, etc.). They also have templates and other features that help with new content development. These systems also allow organizations to adapt and update existing courses and reuse the online learning content as often as desired.

Web Authoring Tools

Web authoring tools are designed to help organizations easily create high quality websites. Should your online learning initiative be a self-directed training website (which, incidentally, was a common trend identified in the Getting Online research), then web authoring tools can greatly help with the process of creating your website.

Web authoring tools can help you to create and layout text, add in pictures, graphics, audio and video, and other multi-media features. These tools also help you to upload content to your website.

One popular web authoring tool is Adobe Dreamweaver. For many years, Microsoft's FrontPage was a highly popular web authoring tool; however, new Microsoft products such as Expression have replaced FrontPage. (**www.microsoft.com/expression/default.aspx**).

In the Canadian literacy community, we are lucky to have the services of the National Adult Literacy Database (**www.nald.ca**). NALD creates and hosts websites free of charge for literacy organizations in Canada. Through NALD, Canadian literacy organizations have access to their own in-house web authoring organization!

Web 2.0 Technologies and Content Creation

Lastly, Web 2.0 technologies are a wonderful resource to help with content creation. Web 2.0 technologies are the newly emerging online technologies that allow people to directly collaborate, create and share content over the Internet. Examples of Web 2.0 technologies include blogs, wikis, YouTube, and Facebook. Web 2.0 technologies are designed so that anyone with basic computer skills can actively engage in online learning and content creation.

As you design your online learning content, remember these Web 2.0 technologies and consider ways you might embed them into more traditional online learning content. For example, you could add a wiki or a blog (or both!) to your online classroom on Blackboard and ask students to create content for that part of the online course.

Please see the *Exploring Online Learning Technology* chapter for more information on Web 2.0 technologies and how they can be effectively used in online learning.

Designing Your Online Course

Now that you are through the planning phase and have analyzed the needs of your audience, considered your organizational capacity, and thought about the technology you will use, you are ready to go ahead with creating your online course or workshop.

It's important to remember that online training is about more than simply taking the information and training you have offered previously and putting a duplicate online. It's a different way of doing things, and while you may be able to incorporate similar activities and information, your online teaching and training sessions are not going to replicate your face-to-face teaching and training sessions. Sometimes, the technology will not lend itself to creating a carbon copy of a tried and true face-to-face teaching method, but far more often, technology will open many new and exciting ways for you to teach. Therefore, because you will be working in a new environment, you need to recognize that and embrace both the differences and opportunities.

When designing and developing online learning content, there are no absolute rights or wrongs. There are many factors that we will explore in the following sections that will impact your decision about how you want to design your training. For example, is your online learning initiative a one-time afternoon event or is it a full semester course? Will it be facilitated or is it self-study? Will it be graded or not? Will it be an open course that anyone can join or will you restrict how many people can enroll at one time? Just like with traditional face-to-face questions, some of these choices will be within your control and others will be decided for you, perhaps based on the type of online learning technology you are using, by the organization where you work, or by the content you are trying to teach.

As you will see when you explore this section, there are no hard and fast rules or definitive answers. There is no one single way to design online learning content; so much depends on the approach you are taking, the needs and abilities of your organization and your participants, the type of technology you might use, whether you will be offering accredited learning or informal training opportunities.

Accreditation

One of the first things you will need to consider is whether or not the course or workshop you are designing is going to be accredited. If the online training you are designing will result in some kind of accreditation or formal recognition of learning, you will need to consider how you will assess whether or not students have successfully met the criteria for accreditation. Those criteria could include completion of written assignments, tests, exams, presentations or other demonstrations of learning.

As with traditional face-to-face learning, accreditation requirements will vary. It is important that those requirements be clearly communicated to potential students so that they are aware of any and all expectations before enrolling in the course.

Synchronous or Asynchronous?

Another thing you will need to think about is whether the course will be synchronous (i.e., offered in real time or "live" where everyone is online at the same time) or if it will be asynchronous (i.e., where people log in and participate at their convenience).

There are benefits and drawbacks to each approach. The method you choose will depend on a number of factors including the type of online learning technology you are using, the teaching approach you are taking and the location of the participants. For example, if your course is open to registration from across Canada, you will have to factor in time zones for a synchronous course. On the other hand, an asynchronous course is available at whatever time is convenient for the participant. For synchronous delivery, just like with a face-to-face training session, you will need to have all of your resources readily available, and you may be required to answer questions on the spot. Discussion can use up time that you had planned for other activities or it can veer off topic. However, controlling discussion is sometimes easier in a synchronous online format than in a face-to-face session because the technology may allow you to control if and when participants can speak. In an asynchronous setting, discussions can be more structured and you have time to reflect on questions and formulate a written response to a difficult question or do research if needed. You can also close discussions and moderate postings if needed.

Perhaps you would like to offer a combination of the two approaches. For example, you might want to have the majority of the course be offered asynchronously but include the opportunity for a live chat when everyone can be online at the same time.

Depending on the course content (and other considerations including travel), you might also want to offer a face-to-face meeting or session as part of your online course. You can mix and match approaches (synchronous, asynchronous, face-to-face) in any combination that works for you and your participants, and fits within your capacity to deliver the training in terms of time, money and human resources.

Facilitated or Self-Study?

Another thing to think about is facilitation. Will you or someone from your organization be actively facilitating the course or will it be offered in a self-study format? This may well be a capacity decision because course facilitation requires a significant allocation of time to monitor participation, respond to participants, grade assignments and so on. It also requires a skilled facilitator, which your organization may or may not have access to.

Facilitation can require different time commitments depending on whether the course is synchronous or asynchronous. For example, with a synchronous course, you will need to be online at the same time as the participants to deliver your training content, respond to questions, lead groups activities, etc. You will also be required to get ready for the synchronous session(s) by preparing your content and activities but also by making sure that you know how to use the various features of the online learning technology you will be using. If your training initiative includes graded assignments, you will need to mark assignments and return them to participants. You may also need to factor in time for reporting grades to other faculty or the appropriate department if you work in a college or similar setting.

When facilitating an asynchronous course, you will probably need to check in a few times each day to respond to participants' postings and questions and to monitor activity. While this may seem like a simple task, it can be time-consuming and is an important factor to keep in mind when thinking about staff time and responsibilities for your online training. You may be able to reply to some postings quite quickly, but you may have to do some research and take time to write responses for other postings.

Please see the *Facilitating Online* chapter for further exploration of this topic.

Ongoing or Single Delivery?

Another option to think about is whether you are going to offer a one-time training session such as an afternoon workshop, a one-day event, or will you be offering a larger event such as a training course that runs over a series of weeks or for a full semester? One of the most important deciding factors is the overall purpose of the training and how long it will take to achieve that goal. Sometimes the training you want to offer can be accomplished in a short amount of time whereas other training takes longer.

Another important consideration when deciding how long your training will be is time. Most people find it difficult to sit in front of a computer screen for hours at a time, so you need to think about ways to avoid this. If you are going to offer a synchronous workshop that is more than two hours in length, be sure to work in plenty of breaks and opportunities for participants to be actively involved in the training. You might even want to work in some stretching or other type of exercise so that people aren't just sitting at their desks staring at a computer screen for a prolonged period of time.

You might want to offer training that spans a period of time such as a month or a school semester. Within that timeframe, you might include a number of modules or topics to cover the content you are offering. With this type of training design, you could include, for example, weekly synchronous sessions or in an asynchronous training environment, you could require that participants log in at least once each week to download content and participate in a discussion forum.

In terms of time, however, you have to think not only about what you are able to provide as the organization that is offering the training, but also about the time that is available to your potential participants. As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, knowing your audience is important! Are they busy people who are looking for shorter, more concise training events that might be focused on one specific topic? Or, are they looking for more in-depth learning that will allow them the opportunity to explore the content at length and possibly also develop a sense of community with their fellow online learners? Or, are participants seeking formal accredited training from a college or university where they expect to devote a substantial amount of time to course completion?

When thinking about how long your training will be, imagine yourself as the facilitator. Synchronous sessions can be demanding because you have to pay attention to both the technology and to facilitation at the same time. Some synchronous trainers have reported that working in pairs or small teams is a good way to deliver training. For example, one facilitator can focus on the technical aspects while the other delivers content. For a longer synchronous session, another strategy is to bring in a special guest or content expert who can present some of the course material. This type of shared facilitation can also be helpful in asynchronous training. Each facilitator could check in once each day to monitor participation and respond to postings, rather than a single facilitator having to check in multiple times each day.

Whether your training is going to last an hour, an afternoon, a week or a semester, you need to let participants know how much time will be involved. You also need to let them know about any other training requirements and expectations. For example, will there be assignments or readings? Will participants be required to log in daily or once a week? Will there be pre-event or post-event activities? Be honest and clearly outline any time-related expectations when marketing your online training so that potential participants can make an informed decision as to whether they have the time required. For asynchronous courses, you also need to let participants know when they might reasonably expect to see responses to their postings. Be realistic. Can you promise to respond within 12 hours, 24 hours, or 48 hours? The choice is yours, but be sure to communicate your commitment clearly and to honour your promises.

Private or Public?

Another consideration to think about is whether you want your online training to be available publicly or privately. For example, is it training that is specific to your organization, your members, or to a broader audience? Do you want people to simply be able to go to your training site and have full access or do you want more control over who is seeing your training content? Or, is your training an accredited course from a college or university where only registered participants would have access?

If you want to make your training publicly available, you may also want people to register so you can track detailed user statistics. However, if you are required to approve everyone who wants to register, this will require some staff time. If you choose this option, be sure that your organization has the ability to keep up with requests. You can also make your training publicly accessible with no registration requirements. Many self-study modular training websites are set up in this way, where anyone can freely go to a website and work their way through the training content. If you choose this option, however, you should note that all of your content will be available to anyone who finds their way to your website. Regardless of any copyright notices you might put on that content, others may use it for their own purposes.

If your training is open to the public, you will want to think about how to effectively market it to attract participants. You can create flyers, post notices on your website, send emails or post notices in newsletters. Identify your target market and get the word out!

Free or Fee?

Sometimes, you may also need to decide if you are going to charge a fee for people to participate in your online training opportunity. In many cases, you will not have a choice in this matter — your course may be offered on a fee-for-service basis by a college or university, or other type of public or private organization. However, if you do have a choice and you are going to charge a fee, you will have to set up some type of registration process. Depending on the type of technology you use, it may be possible for people to register, pay the course fee online and have immediate access to the training. Alternatively, you may need to have people register and pay the course fee ahead of time before you provide them with instructions on how to access the training. In some organizations, such as colleges or universities, a different department would handle the registration process and you would not be involved in it.

Although you may not be charging a fee for people to access your training, you might require participants to purchase some materials in order to participate in the course. You can choose to have them pay any associated costs to your organization and arrange to have the materials sent to the participants, or you can ask them to purchase materials directly through your organization's bookstore or from a publicly available source such as Indigo/Chapters or Amazon. The biggest advantage of having participants order the materials through you is that you will know they have them in time. However, it also means you need to have the capacity to process orders and payments and also to ship materials. While this type of activity is matter-of-course for larger organizations, it may pose some problems for smaller ones. Having participants purchase materials themselves means that you don't have to worry about the logistics, but it does mean that you have to trust they will purchase the necessary material in a timely fashion.

How Many Participants?

Another decision you will have to make is how many participants you will be able to accommodate in your training. With a self-study approach, this is not really an issue because participants simply access the training on their own and there is often little interaction with the organization that provides the training.

However, if you are providing some type of personal interaction with participants, whether in a synchronous format where you deliver content

and include interactive activities or in an asynchronous format where you respond to postings, incorporate various activities, and possibly mark assignments, you will want to take some time to think about your capacity to work with participants. The technology you are using will also play a deciding role. For example, some synchronous software requires the purchase of a license based on the number of users. In that situation, you will be restricted to the number of seats that can be purchased.

More often, however, the deciding factor will be your capacity as a facilitator to work with participants. You will need to ask yourself how much time the registration process (if there is one) will take. Will you need to provide any additional support or information to participants before the course starts? Will you need to provide ongoing support during the workshop or course? If yes, how much support is likely to be needed? In an asynchronous setting, how many postings will you be able to respond to each day? If you are marking assignments, how long will this take? There is a significant difference in the workload between 15 participants and 50, particularly in a course that is being graded. As always, there is no right answer; it is up to you to determine the numbers you will be able to work with based not only on your capacity as a facilitator but also the capacity of your organization to deliver this training.

Sometimes, the decision about the number of participants will be a financial one. For example, if it is a fee-paying course, your organization may require that there is sufficient registration to cover the cost of delivering the course. In that situation, there will be a minimum number to consider as well as a possible maximum number. Minimum numbers may come into play in other ways as well. For example, you may require minimum numbers in order to make a course cost effective for you to run or you may require a certain minimum number of participants in order to ensure sufficient interactivity.

When thinking about how many people will participate in your training, you also need to think about the participants themselves. Some students may feel overwhelmed or even shy in a large group and be hesitant to openly participate. If you are trying to establish a close sense of online community, it may be preferable to have a smaller number. However, if the number is too small, you may not get enough interaction. It is normal for one or two people to be more extroverted and active while other participants may be quieter and less active.

Technical Support

Another thing to think about is technical support for your online training. For an overview of general issues to consider about planning for online learning technology, be sure to check out the previous section of this chapter on *Planning and Technology.*

If you are developing content and learning activities, you need to be familiar with the online tools you are using and develop the content accordingly. If you are facilitating an online training session or course, you will also need to be familiar with the technology and related tools to present content, respond to participants and any other facilitation tasks that you need to do. If you work in a small organization, depending on staffing resources, you might also have to help out with registration or other situations that require some technical skills.

However, although you need to be familiar with the software or tools you are using online, you do not have to be a technology expert. For example, if participants run into difficulty downloading software or accessing some of the features of your training, it doesn't necessarily have to be up to you to solve their problems, but you should be able to direct them as to where they can find help. If you work in a larger organization, such as a university or college, there is probably a department or contact person that provides this level of support. If not, you should find out if there is a website or telephone number where participants can get support if needed. Check to see if there is already a document that lists common questions and answers about how to use the technology. These documents are often called FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) and can be found on the website of each online learning technology. You may be able to send an FAQ to participants ahead of time or link to it during the introduction to your training. Or, you can create your own, based on common questions your own participants have asked you.

If you are working in an organization that has an IT department, it will be your main source of information for any issues related to technology.

Evaluation

Evaluating your online training is an essential element of course design. It is discussed in detail in the *Evaluation* section of this chapter.

Developing Online Learning Content

Once you have made some decisions about the overall design of your content (synchronous or asynchronous, accredited or informal learning, the length of your training, the learning outcomes, whether or not to charge a fee and other decisions about participant needs, organizational capacity and technology as discussed in the first section of this module) you will then need to create that content.

There are two general approaches that you can take when creating content for your online training. You can either create new content "from scratch", or you can adapt existing content that was developed for traditional face-to-face training. Whichever approach you are using there are a few important things to keep in mind. The most important thing is that even though you will be working online, probably with some creative and exciting software and technology, you are still delivering training. The content (i.e., the training) is the most important thing; the technology is secondary. In other words, your training is first and foremost about delivering content, it is not about the technology. Use the features and creativity that online technologies offer to enhance your training but don't let technology overshadow or get in the way of the training.

It is also important to remember that creating online learning content doesn't simply mean taking existing content and uploading it as a text document or a PowerPoint presentation. As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, delivering online training is different from delivering face-to-face training, and you will have to adapt the way you do some things. So, while you may know the content you want to deliver, you will need to organize it differently, and you will also have to create and use activities differently than you would in a face-to-face setting.

Adult Learning Principles

Any content, whether online or face-to-face, needs to consider adult learning principles in order to be effective. Adult learning principles include the following:

► Adults bring extensive life and work experience to their learning. Your content should respect and build upon this life experience.

► Adults have a goal and purpose for taking training. Your content should closely link to these goals and be highly practical and relevant to their needs.

► Adults are practical and learn by doing. Your content should engage adults in active learning.

► Because adults are choosing (usually!) to take training, they are highly motivated. Your content should build on and respect this motivation.

► Adults are adults and want to be treated as such. Content and activities should be specifically designed for adults not based on content and activities for children and youth.

As well, research has shown that being able to interact with the content helps learning happen and improves retention of the material. Technology certainly offers many creative options for incorporating interaction in your online training.

Learning Outcomes

When you prepare to deliver a face-to-face training session or to offer a semester-long course, a standard best practice is to set learning outcomes. Online learning is no different. You need to be clear about the learning objectives for the training you are offering. Clearly stated objectives help potential participants determine if this is a professional development opportunity, an accredited academic course, or some other type of learning opportunity that they may want to sign up for.

Learning outcomes should clearly state the skills and knowledge that participants will gain in your course. If your course is accredited, you will likely require your students to be able to demonstrate that they have indeed achieved those outcomes. This also means that learning outcomes should be measurable and achievable. Clearly stated learning outcomes can help potential participants determine if your online course or training workshop will meet their needs.

Developing learning outcomes also benefits you as the person who is designing and/or delivering the online training. If you are clear about the objectives you are trying to achieve through your online course or workshop, you will be sure to include both content and learning activities to help you achieve those outcomes. Learning outcomes can also help you when it comes to determining student success in your course because you will know what skills and knowledge you are measuring.

Clearly stated learning outcomes can also be very helpful when it comes to marketing your online learning opportunity. Including this

information in any promotional material will quickly let potential participants know what they can expect from your course and will help them decide if they want to enroll.

You can find samples of learning outcomes in course descriptions from most online training providers. For example, the *Teacher of Adults: Literacy Educator Certificate Program* offered through Ontario colleges includes learning outcome statements for each of the courses included in the program. The introductory course, *The Adult Literacy Learner,* lists the following outcomes for participants:

► Application of adult learning principles to literacy instructional situations with a focus on learner involvement.

► Ability to design literacy instruction to meet the specific goal of individual adult learners.

► Ability to work with adult learners to identify strategies that will allow them to be self-directed learners and support their ongoing participation in their literacy training.

► Ability to situate learning to reflect and respect the strengths of individual adult learners.

To review learning outcome statements for other courses in the Teacher of Adults program, please see their website at **www.nald.ca/ literacyeducator**.

Another good example of clearly stated learning outcomes is the Thinkfinity Literacy Network (**http://literacynetwork.verizon.org**) in the United States, which offers a wide variety of online literacy courses. The learning outcomes listed for their course on Principles of Adult Learning state that participants will:

► Reflect on how the literacy or ESL student's life experiences and challenges affect their learning process.

► Recognize how students' challenges can result in other strengths and skills

► Identify and learn about several principles of adult learning.

► Understand some of the physical, sociological, and physiological issues that adult literacy students face.

► Identify how you will incorporate what you've learned into your work with adult literacy students.

You can review learning outcomes for all of Thinkfinity's online courses in their catalogue available at **http://literacynetwork.verizon.org/Free-Online-Courses.21.0.html**.

For additional information about developing learning outcomes, you will find a wealth of information by searching the Internet, or you can start with these sites:

Getting Results: A Professional Development Course for Community College Educators. *Module 2: Planning for Outcomes* at **www.league.org/gettingresults/web/module2/index.html**.

Developing Learning Outcomes from City University (London) at **www.city.ac.uk/arts/dps/Information/Guidelines_on_Developing_Learning_Outcomes.doc**.

Getting Started

When preparing content to be delivered online, whether in a synchronous or asynchronous format, you will need to have a plan for delivering the content. You will want to not only provide information (the training content), but you will also want to provide the opportunity for participants to interact with and explore the content through learning activities.

Generally, you will want to create some type of introduction that will include the learning outcomes and outline any expectations for course participants (e.g., time commitment, due dates for assignments, facilitator support available, etc.). You might also want to include a brief introduction to the technology if you are using a technology that may be new to your audience. Depending on your audience's familiarity with online training or if you are using a new technology for the first time, you might even want to hold a tutorial to introduce your training and give participants a chance to learn the features and practice. As we mentioned earlier, FAQs about your online training are helpful resources.

Be Prepared

You should have all of your content and learning activities prepared well ahead of time. Both should link directly back to your stated learning outcomes. If your training is a single event such as an afternoon workshop, this will be fairly straightforward because you will need to have everything ready for that one day.

If you are including a discussion forum or even a live chat with your training, it is also important to have topics and individual posts prepared ahead of time. This can help get conversation started. For example, you can post an introductory message that lets participants know about you, your organization and the training you are offering. You can then in turn ask them to introduce themselves. As the discussion continues you can add informational postings and then ask questions about them. Similarly, you can pose questions about the training content. Encouraging participation in online training will be more fully explored in the *Facilitating Online* chapter.

What does the content look like?

Once you have decided on and begun preparing the content you will be delivering, keep in mind it isn't simply a matter of copying text or PowerPoint slides over to the online setting.

First, you need to think about how you will divide it up. Even if your training event is only a couple of hours long, you will not want to simply deliver everything you have to say in one piece. Research has shown that online learning happens best when information is presented in smaller, concise pieces rather than in one large piece. Interspersing the content with activities and opportunities for interaction is also important to allow participants to work with the content.

How will you divide your content into manageable sections? Can you identify sub-sections and specific content areas? If you are using text to deliver the content, will you put all of that text in one document or break it up into various modules? Or will you use some text in your content and then enhance this text by linking to external websites, podcasts, online documents or other resources?

When deciding which approach to use, you need to think of some logistical details that you may have never had to consider for traditional face-to-face training. For example, if someone has to read pages and pages of text online, they have to keep scrolling down the page to read everything which can become tiresome; this is called scroll fatigue. To keep scroll fatigue to a minimum, break up the text into smaller sections that can be presented in a more readable way on the computer screen. You can do this by using multiple pages on a website if your training will be housed on a website, or you can break up text on to different screens within your online classroom.

With some online learning technologies, your information might be presented using PowerPoint slides or another presentation format. In that case, you will want to keep the amount of text on each screen to a minimum for visual appeal, just as you would with a face-to-face presentation.

Another text-based detail to think about is the font and overall look of the text you are presenting. A large amount of text on the screen, even if no scrolling is required, can be difficult to read, especially if the font is unclear or too small. When choosing fonts, a good rule of thumb is that sans serif fonts (like Verdana, Garamond or Trebuchet) are easier to read onscreen than serif fonts (like Book Antiqua or Times New Roman). Experiment with different looks and be sure to incorporate enough white space. Add graphics for interest but don't over-use them and avoid giving your content a cluttered look.

Yet another detail to consider is printing. In all likelihood, your participants will want to print out some or all of the text information you provide them. If possible, you might want to email documents in Word or PowerPoint formats ahead of time so that they can print it out prior to your online event. If you are presenting your training via a website, be sure that it is set up as printer-friendly which means that text will print out cleanly.

It is safe to say that the vast majority of computer users today have colour monitors, so make use of colour. It is a very effective tool for highlighting text or drawing attention to something. It adds visual interest and breaks up the text as well. However, do remember that some colours do not print well and many participants will be using black-and-white printers so take that into consideration for material that is likely to be printed.

Learning Activities

Once you have developed your online course design and content you will also need to think about your learning activities. Be sure to remember adult learning principles (such as the extensive life/work experience adults bring to learning) when creating activities. Also remember to ensure that the learning activities link back to the overall learning outcomes for your training event.

Just like traditional face-to-face training, learning activities in online training can take on many formats. The online approach you are using (self-study, facilitated, synchronous, asynchronous, etc.) will often help

determine the scope of your activities. For example, if you set up a self-study website with training modules that participants can access freely at their convenience, it would be very difficult to include any type of group learning activity because this type of training is very much an individual pursuit. However, if you host a synchronous training event, you may have the option to set up breakout rooms where participants can be divided into groups to carry out an activity. If your online course is delivered asynchronously using an online classroom, you may also be able to assign participants to work within a group. Discussion forums are an excellent way for the entire group to reflect on content or delve deeper into the topic being studied. These forums can also be set up with separate threads so that smaller group discussions can take place.

When deciding what type of activities to include in your online training, you will want to first discover what is available. Take some time to explore the online learning technology you are using and become familiar with the possibilities. Some of the features provided by various online learning technologies include the ability to link to websites, incorporate audio and video, set up discussion forums and chats, communicate via email and more. Learning management systems such as Desire2Learn and Blackboard include the capability to upload assignments, administer tests and set up self-marking quizzes. Be sure to check out the *Exploring Online Learning Technology* chapter in order to learn more about the various features and possibilities of common online learning technologies.

If you are developing activities for teaching literacy skills and are looking for some creative ideas, be sure to visit Larry Ferlazzo's blog at **http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org**. Mr. Ferlazzo is an educator who regularly posts interesting and useful sites and "best of" lists.

However, although creativity is wonderful and exciting and the possibilities are virtually endless thanks to ever-emerging technology, once again we caution that the focus of your online training should be the content and the learning, not the technology. The technology should enhance the learning, not be the focal point.

Assessing Learning

If you are delivering a course or training event that results in some type of accreditation or other indication of learning, you will have to assess the learning in some way. You can incorporate activities that allow you to do this including traditional quizzes and tests. You can require assignments to be completed that will be graded as demonstrations of learning. The

type of assessment that you choose will depend on the content you are providing, the needs of your participants, your ability to conduct the assessment and the type of online approach you are using.

Assessing learning also depends on your organization and whether or not the course is accredited or part of a larger accredited course of study such as a diploma or degree or professional certification. In this situation, your organization will have specific and rigorous criteria that must be met that may include the amount of time spent in learning, completion of specific assignments and/or tests and more.

If you choose to develop your online training using a self-study approach, you will likely not be able to assess learning during the training. However, you could provide a link for participants to voluntarily self-report on their learning. If you incorporate an evaluation or ask participants to provide feedback, you could include questions asking them to report on their learning.

Content Experts

Online learning can provide you with the opportunity to have guest content experts in a way that may not be possible with face-to-face training. Thanks to technology, a content expert doesn't have to be in the same physical location as the facilitator(s). You could arrange to videotape or record a presentation from a content expert and include that as part of your online training. Even in a synchronous training event, you can create a pre-recorded presentation so that the content expert doesn't even have to be online during the actual training event.

You can also link to a website, podcast, YouTube video or online document about (or by) a content expert to enhance your content. This ability to access experts is a huge benefit provided by online learning. For example, if a literacy agency wanted to offer training to its members about Essential Skills, they could invite a certified Essential Skills Profiler from another region, another province or even another country to join the session to share his or her expertise.

Field-testing

Before actually launching your online training, it is a good idea to field-test it; both for input into the content but also to make sure that there are no problems or issues with the technology. Similarly, if you are used to doing face-to-face training, you likely do a run-through of your workshop

to get a colleague's feedback or you ask someone to review your content for accuracy.

In terms of the content you will be presenting, it is a good idea to get input from at least two reviewers if possible. Ask these people to provide feedback on the accuracy of the content, its relevance to the audience, the flow of the training and the overall tone. If you will be presenting text-based content, you should also ask someone to review it for grammar, spelling and layout.

Along with reviewing the content and grammar of your online training, you should also field-test the approach you are using. For example, if you will be working with self-study web-based modules, ask some people to look at the website you will be using and give you feedback about the navigation (is it easy to find what you are looking for?), the overall layout (do they experience scroll fatigue?), and the printing capabilities. Ask them to make sure links to other sites and resources work; if you have embedded video or audio, make sure that also works. Ask your reviewers, if possible, to visit the website using different sized monitors and different connection speeds. Sometimes this can have an impact on how a website looks and how features work.

If you are delivering your training using a learning management system, you will also want to check that all of the features work the way they are intended to, i.e., does the embedded video work, is the online chat functional, does the self-marking quiz function properly and so on.

You may also want to ask for some input into the overall flow and design of the content because what looked good on paper in terms of a logical flow to your content might not work as well in an online setting. Is there a natural progression, for example, to reading text-based content, then linking to additional resources and then returning back to the text-based content? If you include an interactive component such as a discussion forum in your online classroom, do you have topics that reflect the content? Does your content reflect adult learning principles and link back to the learning outcomes?

You can also ask your field-testers to try out some of the activities to find out if they take more or less time than you have planned and if they are appropriate for the content and the stated learning outcomes. If you market your online training as a four-week course that will require four hours of active time each week, but in reality it requires ten hours each week, participants will likely drop out and be unhappy with their online

learning experience. Similarly, if your activities seem too easy or do not relate to the training content or learning outcomes, participants may feel that the training was not valuable or lacked meaning.

If your online training is a synchronous event, be sure to test everything before you actually deliver a session. If there is an audio component, does it work? If you are using slides or a video presentation, does that work well for different monitor sizes and connection speeds? It is critical that synchronous events are field-tested ahead of time because it can be very embarrassing to be scheduled to deliver a training session only to have to cancel it at the last moment because something isn't working. Of course, there can be unforeseen circumstances that simply cannot be avoided like a power outage at the time you are scheduled to deliver your session or a failure with the technology, but this is rare. Generally, if you are well prepared everything will go smoothly.

Updating Content

One of the advantages of online training is that you can update content regularly. When you produce print-based material, it may become outdated quickly, depending on the subject matter. It is costly and time-consuming to reprint a manual or a textbook. Thanks to technology, however, it can be relatively straightforward to change, update or otherwise modify material.

How you actually update your online training content and the ease of doing so will depend on the approach you use (website, synchronous/asynchronous, text-based, etc.). It will also depend upon your organization's capacity to do so. Reviewing material to ensure that it is still relevant or verifying that links still work does require an investment in time. Making changes or adding new material and resources also requires time and possibly money. Depending on how your training was set up, updating content might be something that you can do in-house or you may have to pay someone else, such as your website developer, to do it.

Copyright

Thanks to technology, online training enables us to link to many, many resources including documents, online presentations, videos, podcasts and more. It also lets us be creative by incorporating graphics or photographs in training materials. A simple mouse click can add interest to a presentation when accompanied by a compelling visual, or it can provide a wealth of factual information to provide evidence to a point. However,

although information and a multitude of resources are available on the Internet, they are not always available for general use.

Some material, particularly artistic material like photographs and graphics, as well as written material including excerpts from manuals or other texts, are copyright protected. Before linking to anything or adding something to your online training, check to see if it is available for you to use. Unless you see a specific statement that the material can be used without restriction, you should request permission to use it because copyright protection in Canada is automatic once something is created. Therefore, even though you may be able to download material and copy it, this doesn't mean that you have permission to use it. A good rule of thumb to follow is "when in doubt, ask".

For more information about copyright issues, read this informative article from *The Association of Canadian Community Colleges:* **www.accc.ca/ english/advocacy/digital_copyright_issues.htm**. For information from the Government of Canada, please refer to this Question and Answer page about ongoing copyright reform: **www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/crp-prda. nsf/eng/h_rp01153.html**.

Evaluation

Evaluation is an important part of continuously improving your online learning content. If you do not take the time to carefully assess participant response to your content, you will not be able to improve it, nor will you have solid results that you could use to further promote your online training to a variety of stakeholders. In this section, we will overview effective ways to evaluate your online learning content, discuss continuous improvement, review different types of evaluation, share some important uses of your evaluation results, and discuss the kinds of questions you might ask to conduct a more effective evaluation.

In the GO research, we found that online training providers across Canada were actively involved in evaluation. Nearly all organizations surveyed conducted some kind of evaluation of their online training. Organizations used a variety of formal and informal approaches to evaluation. Formal evaluation was overwhelmingly the most common method used. For more information on the research results of the GO project, you can view our research report online at: **www.nald.ca/ gettingonline**.

The evaluation method you select will likely depend on your organizational resources, the purpose of your training, and the length of your training (i.e., will you be offering it on continued basis or is it a one-time only event?). It will also depend upon organizational requirements. For example, colleges and universities formally evaluate all of their training as a matter of course. As well, often project funders will specifically require that a formal evaluation take place as a condition of funding.

Additionally, if this is the first time you are offering online training, your evaluation may be more in-depth because undoubtedly, there are many things you would like to learn as you jump into this new way to deliver training.

Formal Evaluation

Formal evaluation is an effective and often efficient way to collect reliable data on your online training. There are a variety of methods you could use to conduct a formal evaluation including the following:

▶ You could gather responses to key evaluative questions from participants. Methods used could include conducting online, print-based or telephone surveys; engaging in quarterly participant satisfaction surveys; or surveying participants after a period of time has passed. Some online learning technology allows you to easily incorporate evaluation during the training. In the GO research, formal surveys were overwhelmingly the most common way to conduct an evaluation.

▶ You could formally track and assess the success, retention, and failure rates of your participants. Several colleges and school boards in the GO research used this method of evaluation.

▶ Some organizations, typically larger ones or ones who receive special project funding for this activity, could engage an external evaluator to evaluate their training. For example, one organization in the GO research received special funding to hire an external evaluator to conduct telephone interviews with all participants after each online training session.

▶ Another formal evaluation method could be to measure the outcomes of the online learning offered by your organization. For example, one organization in the GO research (that had the training goal of assisting participants to find employment) tracked whether in fact participants reported finding a job after taking their online training. Another

organization tracked whether participants implemented what they had
learned during their online course.

► Evaluation can be conducted both before and after your online
training or course to determine specific skills or knowledge gained by
the participants.

Informal Evaluation

An evaluation is informal if information about the online learning
initiative is collected in an unstructured and non-deliberate manner.
This type of evaluation can lead to an overall sense of whether the online
learning was successful. It is also often easier to implement than a formal
evaluation. However, because it is not structured nor implemented
consistently to all participants, its results are not as valid and reliable as
the results of a formal evaluation.

Here are some common ways to conduct an informal evaluation:

► You could gather evaluation information through informal feedback
from participants. This could include soliciting email responses,
anecdotal comments, and testimonials from participants. Sometimes
compelling quotes can be gathered using this method that can in turn
be used to great effect in promotional materials.

► You could informally evaluate your online learning by assessing its
popularity. Is demand for your online learning continually increasing
or is it getting ever more difficult to recruit and retain participants?
One respondent to the GO research noted that their online training
was so popular that their organization had sold the content of its
online training to the federal government!

► Some organizations informally evaluate their online learning by
assessing whether it was successful in a "real world" environment. For
example, in the GO research, one organization had received a national
award for its online learning initiative and another noted that a major
national newspaper had written an extremely favourable article about
its online course. Several GO research respondents also noted that
they were self-sustaining not-for-profit organizations who had to offer
their online training on a fee-for-service basis. Accordingly, if their
courses were not excellent, people would simply not pay to attend.

► You could also informally evaluate the content of your online training
with the help of an advisory group or content readers. Advisory group
members or content readers can be recruited from typical user groups
and their feedback can greatly improve your online learning content.

Types of Evaluation Questions

The depth and quality of evaluations typically varies greatly between organizations. Many organizations, for both face-to-face and online learning, ask very basic evaluation question such as: "*Were you satisfied with this training?*" While basic questions can give an overall reaction to the training, they do not get at deeper issues such as whether the participants truly learned anything of lasting value and whether they will actually implement and use their learning in the future. Instead, basic evaluation questions often ask questions mainly relating to participant satisfaction. Another basic evaluation criterion is to assess completion rates as a measure of satisfaction.

More in-depth, higher level evaluation questions delve into high level issues such as the learning experience of participants and implementation plans for what they learned. Higher level evaluation would ask questions such as "*What did you learn?*" and "*How will you apply what you learned?*"

Higher level evaluations sometimes also track participant response to the training over time. For example, an organization might conduct a follow-up survey with participants three months after the initial learning event to learn if in fact participants were actually implementing what they learned and whether their learning had indeed proved to be relevant to their needs over time.

The University of Georgia has prepared this overview of Donald Kirkpatrick's four levels of evaluation (reaction; learning; behaviour; results): **www.stfrancis.edu/assessment/Kirkpatrick_1.pdf**

As well, for a more in-depth discussion of types of evaluation, the Council on Foundations has written an informative article called *Evaluation Approaches and Methods* which is available at: **www.cof.org/ Learn/content.cfm?ItemNumber=1379**.

Sample Evaluation Questions

The actual evaluation questions you ask will depend upon your organization's needs and participant willingness to respond. Try to use technology to make responding easier. For example, build an online survey right into the course, or email participants an online survey using a tool such as "Survey Monkey" (**www.surveymonkey.com**) to make the task of responding easier.

Here are some sample questions. Naturally, you would not ask all of them. However, these questions can get you started on thinking about effective questions to assess participant feedback so that you can continuously improve the online learning offered by your organization.

► What was your purpose for taking this course? Did this course fulfill this purpose?

► How would you rate the content of this course? (excellent, good, fair, poor)

► How would you rate the facilitation of this course? (excellent, good, fair, poor)

► What was the most valuable part of this course and why?

► What was the least valuable part of this course and why?

► Would you recommend any changes to the content of this online course (i.e., areas to be shortened, lengthened or new topic areas that should be added)?

► Were the online course materials relevant to your needs?

► Were the online activities relevant to your needs?

► Please tell us in what ways this online course either exceeded or fell below your expectations.

► Did you achieve the goals you had when you started the course? Why or why not?

► Was the online environment easy for you to access and to navigate? If not, what changes or supports would you recommend?

► Will you implement what you learned in this course? Why or why not?

► Please tell us of any specific recommendations you have that would improve this online course.

► Do you plan to take another online course with our organization?

► Would you recommend this online course to others?

You can find more sample survey questions on the *Training Toolkit* website at: **www.go2itech.org/HTML/TT06/toolkit/evaluation/forms. html**.

Evaluation Questions for Your Organization to Answer

Developing and delivering online training is a serious endeavour requiring substantial organizational resources and commitment. It will be important for you to also conduct your own organizational evaluation of the training. Have key stakeholders from your organization answer such questions as:

► Was this online training event successful from our organization's point of view?

► Was it cost effective for us?

► Did we have the necessary human resources to effectively develop and deliver the course?

► What areas could have been improved?

► What expanded, new or different resources or supports might our organization need to continue with online training (for example, HR, technology, new funding sources, or training)?

► Will we run this same course again? Why or why not?

► Are there other courses we'd like to offer?

► Are there ways we could better support our students?

► Are there ways our participant evaluation could be improved in the future to gather more helpful and in-depth evaluation results?

Knowing the answers to questions such as these will greatly help your organization to decide its next steps as it builds organizational knowledge and capacity. It will also allow you to track organizational satisfaction over time and improve your online learning content.

Continuous Improvement

Evaluation results can provide great help in terms of continuously improving your online learning content. Those in your organization who are involved with developing and delivering online learning content should assess the results and jointly plan for ways to improve the next time the course is offered. For example, during the evaluation you may learn that your online course was not interactive enough, which would lead you to build more interactivity into your next event.

Some key questions those involved in online learning in your organization could ask themselves in order to continuously improve quality are:

► What key findings did we learn from the evaluation and how can we use these to improve our online learning content for the next course?

► What were the overall strengths of our online training?

► What were the overall areas needing improvement?

► How can we build on our strengths for the next course?

► What steps can we take to improve areas of weakness?

► What did we learn from this experience?

For example, the GO project offered an *Introduction to Online Learning* course in 2008 and 2009. This course was first offered as a pilot session followed by three online training courses. Through evaluation activities in the pilot session, GO trainers learned many lessons. These lessons included: the need to clarify expectations about participation and timelines early on; the importance of not assuming anything about the level of technical skills of participants; and the need to present content in a relaxed, supportive, and unhurried manner.

Another example is Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO). CLO has offered more than 30 online training workshops to literacy practitioners on Saba Centra Symposium, an interactive, real-time online learning classroom. Participants evaluated each workshop session. From these evaluations, CLO learned that participants enjoyed having more than one facilitator; that they liked solid content interspersed with interactive group activities; that participants preferred to take part in an online workshop of two hours in length; and that they liked the sessions to start promptly and finish at the stated times. Based on the evaluations, CLO adapted its online learning content and delivery as needed.

Using Your Evaluation Results

Besides using your evaluation results to continuously improve your online learning content, there are other ways these results can be used.

Evaluation results can give you the confidence that you are indeed offering quality online learning content to your participants. Strong evaluation findings let you know whether you did indeed meet the objectives you had set for your online learning initiative in the first place. As well, these results can be used to help you effectively promote your organization's online learning. The power of sharing solid statistics on participant satisfaction coupled with a quote or two for personal impact can go a long way towards engaging new participants.

As well, solid statistics speak volumes when you want to request funding from government, foundations or corporate donors for your online learning initiative. In addition, in larger organizations where senior management may be disconnected from the online learning initiatives occurring on the front line, solid evaluation data can build high level organizational support.

Conclusion

As you can see, there are many things to think about when creating online learning content. It is not a simple matter of following a step-by-step process, because so much depends on the approach you are using, the needs of your participants, your organizational capacity, and the technology being used.

There are a number of different ways you can approach online training and content development, and the features available to you will vary accordingly. However, there are some common characteristics to keep in mind:

► Know the needs and capacities of your audience and your organization.

► Don't simply take an existing course and put it online. You will need to modify it to take advantage of technology and incorporate learning activities that can enhance the learning.

► Develop clear and relevant learning outcomes and ensure that your content and activities link back to these.

► Use adult learning principles when developing content.

► Create solid, relevant and meaningful content and activities.

► Remember that technology can be exciting and wonderful, but don't let the technology overshadow the content. Your training should be first and foremost about the content.

► Test it out and make sure it works before inviting participants to sign up.

► There is a lot of good information available online. Link to it when appropriate but be sure to respect copyright.

► Evaluate and continuously improve your online learning content.

► Don't be shy! Experiment and explore the world of online training!

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Bridging Distance

getting online
THE GO PROJECT

Promising Practices in Online Learning in the Canadian Literacy Community

3

Exploring Online Learning Technology

Introduction

Online learning is growing in leaps and bounds in Canada and around the globe. According to Statistics Canada, 11% of Canadian home Internet users used the Internet for online learning (2005). While high, this statistic is already several years old and it is certain to be much higher now. The growth in online learning has naturally led to an increased interest in the technologies that support online learning.

During the research phase of the Getting Online Project, many survey and interview respondents indicated that while they were currently using technology for online learning, they would like to know more. They wanted to improve their online learning activities and stay on track with new developments in the technology field. They wanted to know about other possibilities, other technologies, and other modalities. And, they definitely wanted to know about the emerging Web 2.0 technologies and their application to learning.

Many respondents, especially those from non-profit organizations, had a sense that many new tools were available but often they did not know where to go to access clear, concise, and user-friendly information on a wide variety of online learning technologies. In response to these needs, the Getting Online Project is delighted to share this informative chapter on *Exploring Online Learning Technology.*

Exploring Online Learning Technology provides an overview of some of the common technologies that can be used for online learning. It is not an exhaustive review, and we are not recommending any particular products or manufacturers. We do hope, however, that this information will provide you with some examples of what technologies are currently

being used for online learning in Canada. We have also included a section called Technology in Action to show you examples of how each type of technology is currently being used. In each description, there are a number of links that you can follow to expand your knowledge. Where possible, we have also provided you with web links to live demonstrations of the technologies.

There is not a perfect or a "right" choice when it comes to online learning technologies. What is right for you and your organization will depend on a number of factors including:

► Your organizational mission and purpose

► Organizational capacity

► Content being delivered

► How that content is delivered

► Whether the learning opportunity is formal or informal

► Your knowledge and skills with technology

► Computer equipment and technology available to both you and your participants

► Skills and knowledge of your staff

► Budget.

In some cases, you will be able to choose the software or features you would like to use; in other cases, you may not have a choice because of budget or human resources constraints, for example. Whatever your situation, we hope that this chapter will provide you with some useful information to help you learn more about online learning technologies.

It is also important to remember that as important as technology is, it is just a tool used to deliver learning. Try not to get dazzled by technology as an end in itself. Use it well and build on the wonderful features and abilities offered by the various online learning technologies, but also remember that first and foremost you need to develop high quality content, offer excellent instruction and provide strong support for students.

Description of Technologies

Some of the descriptions in this chapter are for a specific software or application (for example, Moodle or Facebook). Others are for a type

of technology (for example, audio feed or online meetings). Some of the software we have included was designed specifically for online learning (for example, Acrobat Connect or Saba Centra), while other technologies can be used for a variety of purposes, including the delivery or enhancement of online learning (for example, YouTube or podcasts). The technologies researched and overviewed in this report are current as of December 2008.

The online learning technologies are reviewed in alphabetical order in this chapter. The technologies reviewed are:

Adobe Acrobat Connect	Adobe Presenter	Audio/Video Feed
Blackboard	Blogging	Desire2Learn
Discussion Forums	Electronic Mailing Lists	Elluminate
Facebook	First Class	Mobile Learning
Moodle	Online Meetings	Podcasts
Portable Storage Devices	Saba Centra	Self-Study Web Modules
Skype	Web 2.0	WebEx
Wiki Websites	YouTube	

In this *Exploring Online Learning Technology* chapter, Getting Online researchers have tried to provide a clear overview of each of the technologies along with possible uses for online learning, but we encourage you to explore and experiment on your own. New features and functions are being added to online learning technologies every day, and it is a "brave new world" out there for those wanting to initiate, expand or explore.

Adobe Acrobat Connect

Adobe Acrobat Connect is produced by Adobe (**www.adobe.com** or visit the Canadian site at **www.adobe.com/ca**), a large company that offers a number of products for different technology needs. Many computer users are familiar with another of Adobe's products, Acrobat Reader — free downloadable software that allows PDF (Portable Document Format) documents to be read on virtually any computer.

Adobe Acrobat Connect (sometimes known simply as Adobe Connect) is software that can be used for online learning or for online meetings. It is

available in three different versions, depending on how many people will be participating in the e-learning session or the online meeting:

1 **Adobe Acrobat Connect Pro** (for **more than** 15 participants) **www. adobe.com/products/acrobatconnectpro**. Connect Pro can be used for either online learning or for web conferencing. It offers the ability for participants to share the same screen, which can be helpful if you are trying to demonstrate a software application or a specific task. It also offers a whiteboard, a chat feature and both streaming audio and video. Connect Pro requires a web browser (e.g., Explorer, Navigator, Firefox) and Adobe Flash Player.

Connect Pro can be used for self-paced learning by setting up a classroom that participants can access at their convenience. It can also be used for synchronous (live) virtual classes. Live events can be recorded for later playback and review.

2 **Adobe Acrobat Connect** (for **up to** 15 participants) **www.adobe.com/ products/acrobatconnect**. Connect can be used to set up a meeting space or an e-learning site for up to 15 people. It also provides the ability to screen share, and it features a whiteboard, chat function and audio conferencing. Like Connect Pro, it can be used for either synchronous or asynchronous events. The major difference between the two products is the number of people that can participate at one time.

3 **Adobe Connect Now** (up to three participants, currently available as a Beta [i.e., test] version only) **www.adobe.com/acom/connectnow**. Like Connect Pro and Connect, Connect Now is accessed through an Internet browser and also requires Flash Player. Because it only allows three people to be online at one time, it is mostly used as a virtual meeting space.

Look for detailed fact sheets and product demonstrations for each of Adobe's products on their website.

GO researchers heard from an interview participant who uses Adobe Connect Pro for both e-learning and for online staff meetings. He described the platform as being highly user-friendly with a full range of features including audio, video, webcam feed, text chat, podcasts, polls, games, email distribution lists, the ability to record and archive sessions.

All versions of Adobe Connect are available for companies to license, by annual subscription or on a pay-per-use basis. Free trial versions are also available. Contact Adobe for more information on pricing.

Technology in Action

Using Acrobat Connect, a provincial literacy network for example, could deliver professional development workshops to its members. Individual participants could log in from wherever they are located and actively participate in a live workshop by asking questions of the facilitator or engaging in training activities. The facilitator could present the workshop content using a combination of slides and video presentations. The workshop could be recorded and reviewed later by participants. It could also be made available for playback to anyone who was unable to attend the live session.

Additional Resources about Adobe Acrobat Connect:

▶ For more information, be sure to read a product review from The eLearning Guild: **www.e-learningguild.com/showfile.cfm?id=2642**.

▶ There is an online forum for users of Acrobat Connect at: **www. connectusers.com**.

▶ Penn State University also has an online forum for Adobe Connect users: **http://meeting.psu.edu**.

Adobe Presenter

Adobe Presenter (**www.adobe.com/resources/breeze/presenter**) (formerly Breeze Presenter) allows you to easily create online presentations from existing PowerPoint presentations. Presenter is part of Adobe Acrobat Connect Pro. With Presenter, you can personalize, narrate and deliver online presentations that can be shared over the Internet or via CD or DVD. Using your existing PowerPoint presentations as the base, with Presenter, you can add audio/video streaming, graphics, quizzes, surveys, and various other multi-media content. You can narrate your presentation and upload it to the web or copy it to a CD or a DVD.

The cost of Presenter varies between private sector, not-for-profit, educational and government rates. Contact Adobe for more information on pricing.

Technology in Action

You could use Presenter to create and deliver presentations over the Internet. For example, you could create a presentation to provide initial orientation to tutors. You could then email tutors this presentation to listen to in the comfort of their homes. Or, for those who do not have computers, you could copy the presentation to a CD for tutors to listen to at home or at the literacy office. More in-depth training could then be provided to tutors at a later date during a face-to-face training event.

Here is an example of Presenter. It is a presentation by Karin Sherrill from Mesa Community College on "*Cardiac Dysrhythmias*": **http://breeze.mc.maricopa.edu/p65735599/**.

Another sample use of Presenter is Melanie Kroening from Mesa Community College presenting on "*Improper Fractions*" at: **www.mc.maricopa.edu/~mkroening/breeze_ex/index.htm**.

(Source: Both of these presentations were found on the website of the University of Minnesota.)

Audio/Video Feed

There is a wide group of applications that can be used to provide audio and/or video feed for online learning including, but not limited to, Windows Media Player (**www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia/default.mspx**), RealPlayer (**www.realplayer.com**), and YouTube (**www.youtube.com**).

Adding video and audio to an online session is a great way to provide added interest. Seeing a video demonstration or hearing someone talking about a particular subject can make content come alive. Text-based content is effective; however, video and audio can help highlight the point you are trying to make, and they can simply add a bit of fun to a learning site. Adding video and audio to online learning also helps address a variety of learning styles and preferences.

The possibilities for the type of video and audio feed that you can add to online learning are numerous. For example, you could include video and/or audio of a subject expert explaining an aspect of the course content. You could include a video of someone demonstrating a particular skill

or concept that you are trying to explain. You could include music as background or as part of the content. For example, a yoga site might add music that plays while you are reviewing text-based content or watching a demonstration of some of the poses. What you decide to do depends on the type of training you are trying to provide.

If you want to provide an online session to help literacy learners improve their basic math skills, you could show a video that demonstrates the concepts of addition and subtraction. The American website *YourTeacher. com* (**www.yourteacher.com**) has many teaching videos available. Although this site requires you to pay a fee to access all of the videos, some of them are available for viewing at no charge. For informational videos about a wide variety of subjects, be sure to check out *Monkey See* (**www.monkeysee.com**) where you can learn how to winterize your car, make a Bloody Mary or learn to kayak.

An important concept to keep in mind when adding audio and/or video to your online training is that less is more. Lengthy video or audio presentations can be a deterrent for participants. With this in mind, many good training providers break up their audio and/or video into shorter segments and intersperse them throughout the training. For example, there might be a few paragraphs of text about a particular piece of content with a five-minute video clip included to help illustrate it.

We have mentioned a few examples of online learning using video and audio presentations. You can find instructional video and/or audio on virtually any subject you are looking for by searching on the Internet.

One of the most popular video sharing sites is YouTube (**www. youtube.com**). However, YouTube isn't the only place to find videos. LearnOutLoud (**www.learnoutloud.com**) features over 15,000 educational audio books, MP3 downloads, podcasts and videos. Another good source is Teacher Tube (**www.teachertube.com**) or Google Video (**http://video.google.ca/**). To find audio presentations, a good place to start your search is iTunes (**www.itunes.com**). Also, most newspapers, magazines and radio stations include podcasts of many of their news items and feature stories.

If you can't find what you are looking for, you could videotape or record what you need and upload it to YouTube and then link it to your training event. The quality of your video or audio presentation will depend on the equipment you use and your camera and/or recording skills. If you want a professional, polished presentation, you will need to find someone who

can do this for you (provided you have the budget to pay for it). A good idea may be to check with your local community college or even high school. Many colleges and schools teach these skills and there may be students eager to practice and help you out.

Technology in Action

Learning through video and audio presentations is great for professional development. Literacy practitioners can't always leave their agencies, but they can find the time to watch an instructional video. For example, the *Let's Go Learn* YouTube channel (**www.youtube.com/user/LetsgoLearnVideo**) has nine instructional videos that practitioners can watch to learn about reading and reading assessments.

Adding audio and/or video feed to your online training will depend on the training platform you are using. For example, many types of training software let you easily link to or include audio and/or video presentations in a training event. For an interesting example of how one organization includes video on their website, be sure to visit *Mind your Mind* (**www.mindyourmind.ca**) which features embedded video on the main page as well as links to other video presentations. For another excellent example of integrating audio into online learning, go to *The Learning Edge* (**www.thewclc.ca/edge**), an interactive site for adult literacy learners.

As well, the Canadian Council on Learning has prepared an inspirational series of online videos about men and women with literacy challenges telling their stories. These success story videos are available on the CCL website at: **www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/ReadingFuture/SuccessStories.htm**.

Additional Resources about Audio and Video Feed:

► For a good overview of the use of audio, visit The University of Manitoba's Learning Technologies Centre's website: **http://ltc.umanitoba.ca/wiki/index.php?title=Audio**. They also have a page about using video: **http://ltc.umanitoba.ca/wiki/index.php?title=Video**.

Blackboard

Blackboard (**www.blackboard.com**) is a highly popular learning management system (software designed to deliver, support and manage courses) used to deliver formal online courses. Blackboard's mission is to "*enable educational innovations everywhere by connecting people and technology*". In the GO external research, we found that Blackboard was used by larger organizations, in particular by colleges and universities, to deliver a wide variety of accredited online courses.

Blackboard is a full featured learning management system that can be used either to deliver an online course in its entirety or to supplement a traditional face-to-face course. Blackboard has many course content and course management features that make it an extremely effective tool for delivering online learning. While Blackboard is primarily an asynchronous learning management system (i.e., people are not online at the same time), it does also have some synchronous (live) features.

Blackboard features include:

► A well organized and easy to navigate learning environment for most students and instructors.

► Course content that can include text, audio, photographs, web links, PowerPoint presentations, syllabus, etc.

► Threaded discussion boards are available for class interaction.

► An easy to create "Frequently Asked Questions" section.

► Capability for students and instructors to easily share files and other resources with each other.

► A live component can be added to the course via Blackboard's live chat feature.

► Drop boxes exist so students and instructors can easily track submitted assignments.

► A variety of assessment tools, including quizzes and tests.

► A gradebook that allows instructors to mark and track student progress.

► Course content that can be easily reused for subsequent courses.

There is a helpful overview of the features and benefits of Blackboard called *What is Blackboard?* available at: **http://blackboardsupport. calpoly.edu/content/about/whatis.html**.

Technology in Action

In partnership with local school districts, the Manitoba Department of Education, Citizenship and Youth uses Blackboard to deliver online high school courses. For more information, please see: **www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/dl/wbc/index.html**.

Ontario's Sault College offers the Teacher of Adults: Literacy Educators Certificate Program online via Blackboard. This accredited program has seven course modules including the Adult Literacy Learner; Assessing and Evaluating Literacy Learning; and Strategies for Literacy and Numeracy Instruction. You can learn more about this course at: **www.nald.ca/literacyeducator/**.

And you can even go on your own tour of Blackboard! The Centre for Innovative Teaching and Learning in Washington, DC provides a sample Blackboard course that walks you through the various features and tools of this learning environment: **www.cidd.gwu.edu/bbtour/control/sample.html**.

Blogging

Experts say there are currently between 50 and 70 million blogs on the Internet—that's a lot of blogs! So what, exactly, are blogs and why are they important?

The word *blog* is short for "Web log" and it means an online journal where the author's thoughts are posted on a regular basis on a website. Usually, entries are posted in reverse chronological order, with the newest items first. Visitors can typically respond to blog postings and contribute their own thoughts. Blogs can contain text, photographs, embedded audio and visual clips, podcasts, and many other features. Blogs can be publicly read or accessible only to a select group of people invited by the creator of the blog. Blog authors can solicit feedback from others and allow others to comment or they can adjust the settings so that the blog is a one-way dialogue only. Blogs can be as simple or as complicated as the blog author desires.

Blogs are an easy, interesting and often entertaining way to share information with others. Blogs also encourage discussion, promote reflection, encourage the sharing of ideas and resources, and support the

creation of community. Blogs are highly interactive by nature.

Sometimes blogs will contain the personal stories of the author (for example a trip diary), but other times the blog will be on a specific topic of interest to the author or organization that created the blog (for example, bird watching, science, raising children, current political events, cooking, woodworking, or economics).

And the good news is that blogs are easy to set up and maintain. As well, on several blog-hosting sites there is no cost to set up and maintain a blog. Blogs can be created and accessed from almost any computer with an Internet connection. In short, blogs are a wonderful tool.

For more information on blogging, Common Craft has created an informative and fun overview called *Blogs in Plain English* at: **www.commoncraft.com/blogs**.

In adult literacy, blogs can be used to encourage learners and educators to reflect upon various learning issues, hear diverse opinions, engage in collaborative work, build community, engage in online discussions, share information and resources, support peer-to-peer learning, and give people a voice on issues that are important to them. Blogs can also allow learners and educators to "go global" and connect with people with common interests in other parts of the world.

In education, blogs are usually used to supplement online courses or face-to-face learning opportunities. For example, a blog could be used for students to continue discussions started in a regular face-to-face classroom setting. Or, a blog could be added to an online course held on Moodle, Blackboard, etc.

How to Start Your Own Blog

Blogger is a very popular, user-friendly and free online blog hosting system. For a guided tour of what a blog is and how to set one up, please click here: **www.blogger.com/tour_start.g**. Blogger's site is very user-friendly and is highly recommended. You will, however, need to register with the site and create a username and password.

After the guided tour, in three easy steps Blogger will walk you through how to create your very own blog at: **www.blogger.com/start**.

There are many other popular blog hosting services including Word Press (**http://wordpress.com**), Type Pad (**www.typepad.com**), and Live Journal (**www.livejournal.com**).

How to Find Blogs

So how do you find some of the wonderful blogs on the Internet? One effective way is to search for blogs at: **http://blogsearch.google.com/**.

When you heard that there were between 50 and 70 million blogs currently on the Internet, you may have thought, "*I'll bet that there is a literacy blog or two*". And you'd be right! GO researchers typed "Adult Literacy" in Google blog search and this returned over 300,000 hits! We then tried the term "Adult Literacy Canada" and this returned 5,678 hits. Blogging about literacy issues is obviously very popular!

Many online directories of blogs exist including: Technorati Blog Directory at: **www.technorati.com/blogs/directory/** and Ice Rocket Blog Search at **www.icerocket.com/**.

As well, blog authors will often post links to other blogs they value. Clicking on these links can be a very effective ways to find other blogs of interest and build your own blog network. These are sometimes called "Blog Rolls" (a list of all blogs the blog author or reader subscribes to).

Technology in Action

GO researchers found some interesting blogs created by the Canadian literacy community covering diverse provinces and issues. These blogs include:

AlphaPlus—*Learning Outside the Lines:* **http://blog.alphaplus.ca**

AlphaPlus also supports a blog for AlphaRoute learners where they "learn about blogging and blog about learning": **http://alphastory. blogspot.com**

British Columbia Literacy Forum: **http://bcliteracyforum.ning.com**

Literacies: **http://literaciescafe.blogspot.com**

Ontario Literacy Coalition: **http://ontarioliteracycoalition.com**

Prince Edward Island Literacy Alliance: **http://literacytalkpei. blogspot.com**

Yukon Literacy Alliance: **www.yukonliteracy.ca/this-week-in-literacy**

Additional Resources about Blogging:

► Educause Learning Initiative developed a highly informative overview of blogging called: *Seven Things You Should Know About Blogs* at: **http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7006.pdf**. Topics covered include: what are blogs?; who's blogging?; how does it work?; and what are the implications for teaching and learning?

► The Learning Technologies Centre of the University of Manitoba has information on the *Top Things Educators Need to Know about Blogs* at: **http://ltc.umanitoba.ca/wiki/index.php?title=Blogs**

Desire2Learn

Desire2Learn (**www.desire2learn.com**) is a formal learning management system (software designed to deliver, support and manage courses) used by schools, colleges, universities and businesses. Desire2Learn provides a web-based suite of tools including tools for developing online courses, and tools for online delivery and course management. This innovative learning management system can be tailored to meet the needs of individual clients. Desire2Learn is a Canadian company with its headquarters in Kitchener, Ontario.

Desire2Learn has a full suite of learning management features to support effective learning and teaching. These features include:

► A user-friendly interface and an effective and easy to navigate layout

► Ability to develop effective content by uploading MS Word files and PowerPoint presentations and embedding URLs, audio, and text

► Group collaboration features that encourage peer-to-peer learning

► LiveRoom where students can collaborate using chat, whiteboard and presentation software

► Tools for tracking student progress such as assignment drop boxes and grading

► A wide variety of assessment tools including quizzes, surveys and other evaluation tools

► The ability for the host institution to easily and effectively generate solid data on student learning and statistics

► Ability to reuse course content for subsequent courses

Desire2Learn offers a variety of products including:

► Learning Environment

► LiveRoom

► ePortfolio

► Essentials

► Learning Repository

For an overview of the various products offered by Desire2Learn you can click here: **www.desire2learn.com/products/**.

Desire2Learn has a demonstration library where it shares information on the key benefits of its learning environment and case studies of students and teachers who use its product: **www.desire2learn.com/demos/**. Another great way to learn more about Desire2Learn is to take one of its webinars (web-based, online learning sessions) at: **www.desire2learn.com/webinars/**.

Desire2Learn's main website at **www.desire2learn.com/** can lead you to a whole host of information, tools and resources.

Technology in Action

The New Brunswick Department of Education's Francophone Sector uses Desire2Learn, in combination with other learning platforms, to deliver quality online education to high school students in the province. They currently offer more than 20 courses online for students in grades 11 to 13 and several specialized courses for grade 9 students in remedial French and math. Offering courses online has increased the range of courses that can be offered to students throughout the province, particularly in rural areas. This website provides more information on this initiative: **http://clic.nbed.nb.ca**. (*Source: Website of the New Brunswick Department of Education*)

The College of the North Atlantic (Newfoundland and Labrador) offers 250 online college credit courses to students in their province and beyond. CNA uses Desire2Learn and other platforms. You can learn more about these opportunities at **http://dls.cna.nl.ca/szone/online_programs.asp**. (*Source: Website of the College of the North Atlantic*)

The Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation offers online learning opportunities to high school students, adult learners and teachers throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. Desire2Learn is one of the learning platforms used by the Centre in its highly successful program. Please see: **www.cdli.ca/** for more information. (*Source: Website of the Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation*)

Discussion Forums

Online discussion forums, or message boards, are very easy to find on the Internet about any subject. There are forums about gardening, celebrities, products, sports, dieting and even literacy! Discussion forums can be about fun topics or about serious ones. If there is something you would like to talk about, chances are that there is an Internet discussion group you can join. For example, visit the English as a Second Language discussion forum at: **http://forums.eslcafe.com**.

Discussion forums can be private or public, large or small. They can be integrated into existing online learning software like Moodle or Desire2Learn (and many others) or they can be stand-alone. The discussion forum itself can be the method of providing online training, or it can be just one component of training. For a general overview of online discussion forums, see this Wikipedia entry at: **http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_forum**.

Generally, online discussions are asynchronous. Participants read and post messages whenever it is convenient for them. However, sometimes two or more people can be online at the same time and respond to each other. Some discussion groups also feature a "chat" component that allows for synchronous (live) communication. To use the chat, participants in the discussion forum click a link that takes them to a separate "room" where they can "talk" to each other via text in real time.

A discussion forum can be used to offer online training on its own or it can be used to supplement training provided elsewhere, either face-to-face or using another type of online technology. Training content or activities can be presented on the forum, and participants can then discuss the training content, and the facilitator can respond accordingly or post questions to stimulate discussion. Within the discussion forum, both the participants and the facilitator can post links to other Internet content, to videos or to any site of interest.

Online discussions can be a great way for literacy practitioners to share information or to learn about a particular topic. They can also be a terrific way for literacy learners to practice their skills. AlphaRoute (**http://resources.alpharoute.org/home.asp**), an adult literacy online learning environment, includes discussion groups as one of its many features. It also offers a chat feature.

Setting up an online discussion forum can be fairly simple for a straightforward site. However, if you want to start adding features such as the ability to make certain sections private or to allow participants to use a variety of fonts and graphics in their posts, it will become more complex. There are a number of sites where you can download open source discussion software for free or for very low cost, but if you need something more complex, you may need to budget for this. One of the popular sites to set up a discussion forum is phpBB (**www.phpBB.com**) which claims to be the most widely used open source discussion software.

Providers of discussion forum software generally provide a number of links to help you learn how to set up and get the most from your discussion forum. Other free sites include Simple Machines (**www.simplemachines.org**) and Invision (**www.invisionfree.com**).

If you prefer not to download software for your discussion, you can set up a forum using Google Groups (**http://groups.google.com**) or Yahoo Groups (**http://ca.groups.yahoo.com**). For example, there is a group called Adult Literacy Matters for literacy tutors that can be found at: **http://groups.yahoo.com/group/AdultLiteracyMatters**. You do have to request to join this group.

Technology in Action

If you would like to see a literacy discussion group, be sure to visit Literacy Newfoundland's online forum: **www.literacynl.com/forums/**.

Another good example of a new online discussion forum is one that was developed for the literacy community by AlphaPlus Centre (**http://alphaplus.ca**). You can find the forum at: **http://on.alphaplus.ca/forums/index.php**. This site includes a few discussion topics that can be viewed by anyone without having to register or log in. Most of the topics, however, require that you register with the site and log in before reading.

Literacy Nova Scotia (**http://alt.ns.literacy.ca**) hosts discussion forums on their Advanced Learning Technology site. Be sure to check out their Numeracy Web Forum.

Visit *Dave's ESL Cafe* for ESL teacher forums: **http://forums.eslcafe.com/teacher/index.php**.

LD Online has a discussion forum about learning disabilities that you can join at: **www.ldonline.org/xarbb/?catid=769**.

Additional Resources about Discussion Forums:

▶ For more information about online discussions and chat rooms, see Learn Quebec's site: **www.learnquebec.ca/en/content/pedagogy/cil/inet_law/tools/forum.html**.

▶ The National Adult Literacy Database, or NALD (**www.nald.ca**) has an excerpt from New Horizons in Adult Education called *Promoting Reflective Discourse in the Canadian Adult Literacy Community: Asynchronous Discussion Forums* by Lori-Kyle Herod. You can read the excerpt at: **www.nald.ca/fulltext/herod/apr03/vol17n1.pdf**.

Electronic Mailing Lists

You may be familiar with the term "listserv" and think it is a generic term for an email list. However, "listserv" actually refers to a specific piece of software developed by L-Soft (**www.lsoft.com**) in 1988. The proper term is *electronic mailing list,* but as so often happens, a commercial name has found its way into general use to refer not just to a specific product, but to encompass a range of products.

Electronic mailing lists allow email to be sent to a number of subscribed users at the same time. Usually, software (like Listserv) is used to automate the sending and distribution of emails. Rather than subscribers directly emailing each other, messages are sent to a central address and distributed to everyone. This can help protect privacy and control content as well as attachments. Mailing lists can be set up as "announcement only" or they can be configured to allow participants to reply to each other, either via the list or off-list to individual emails.

Electronic mailing lists are a convenient way to participate in topic-specific discussions because the postings or messages come directly to your inbox; you don't have to go to a website or forum to participate. Most mailing lists allow you to choose whether you want to receive posts as individual emails or if you prefer a digest format, which means that all postings from each day are combined into one email. Another useful feature of many mailing lists is the option to suspend your subscription so that if you are away on vacation or unable to access your email, you will not receive any messages during your absence. Some mailing lists also offer an archive feature so that you can go to a website and search through past postings to retrieve information.

For a general overview of electronic mailing lists, see the National Adult Literacy Database's description: **www.nald.ca/info/dgroup/dgroup.htm**.

Electronic mailing lists can be a useful online training tool. They can be used as a standalone training device, or they can supplement training offered through another means. A facilitator could post training content in a message and distribute it through the list; in turn, participants could discuss the content via the mailing list. A literacy network could set up an electronic mailing list for students in its region or province and adult students could use the list as a way to practice reading, writing and computer skills.

> ### Technology in Action
>
> There are many electronic mailing lists available for literacy-related topics. A good place to find one that you might be interested in is by reviewing the list posted at the National Adult Literacy Database: **www.nald.ca/info/dgroup/dgroup.htm#listsrvs**.
>
> The National Institute for Literacy in the United States hosts a number of literacy-related mailing lists: **www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/discussions.html**.

Additional Resources about Electronic Mailing Lists:

► NALD provides some basic information about electronic mailing lists and how to subscribe: **www.nald.ca/info/dgroup/dgroup.htm#whatis**.

► For some helpful hints about how to use electronic mailing lists, see this posting from The Help Web: **www.imagescape.com/helpweb/mail/lists.html**.

Elluminate

Elluminate (**www.elluminate.com**) provides software that enables real-time (synchronous) online learning and collaboration. As of October 2008 (according to its website), Elluminate had been used for more than 300 million minutes in over 185 countries.

Elluminate has offices in both Calgary, Alberta and Fort Lauderdale, Florida. It is used by a number of school systems and corporations

including Apple Computer and Queen's University. Elluminate has won several awards and was named as one of the 50 fastest growing technology companies.

Elluminate is available in a variety of configurations. Be sure to check out the product comparison chart on their website for detailed information. According to one GO survey respondent, Elluminate works very well with both high speed and lower bandwidth connections. This can be an important consideration for people in some rural areas.

► **Elluminate Plan** (**www.elluminate.com/plan/index.jsp**) lets you organize and set up learning content and activities before a live session. Once everything is set up, it can be launched during the actual live session. Features and activities that can be managed ahead of time using Elluminate Plan include recording, moving to the next slide, breakout rooms, quizzes, and multimedia files. According to Elluminate's website, you do not need to have advanced technical skills to use Elluminate Plan to set up your live session; the software guides you each step of the way.

► **Elluminate Live** (**www.elluminate.com/elluminate-live/index.jsp**) is designed for a group of people to meet online at the same time in a multimedia learning or meeting space. Elluminate Live is available in three editions, including a virtual classroom environment, an environment designed for corporate training and collaboration, and a "lite" version that provides only basic functionality. Elluminate Live offers a number of features including an interactive whiteboard, direct messaging, live webcam capability, application sharing and breakout rooms.

► **Elluminate vRoom** (**www.elluminate.com/vroom/index.jsp**) is a free version of Elluminate Live that provides the same interactive features as Elluminate Live but only three people can be online at the same time using vRoom. A vRoom session can easily be set up by following the links on the site.

► **Elluminate Publish** (**www.elluminate.com/publish/index.jsp**) allows you to create a podcast or a standalone recording of your Elluminate Live Session.

► **Elluminate Next** (**www.elluminate.com/next**) combines Elluminate Plan and Elluminate Publish in one package.

► **Elluminate Learning Suite** (**www.elluminate.com/products.jsp**) combines Elluminate Plan, Elluminate Live and Elluminate Publish in one package.

To help review the various features of the different versions of Elluminate, and to see what the classroom looks like, be sure to watch some or all of the demonstration videos at **www.elluminate.com/demo/recorded_demos_list.jsp**. Elluminate also offers a number of free webinars about the software and its features.

Elluminate vRoom is free to use. Costs for Elluminate vClass vary depending on the number of seats that you require. Contact Elluminate for more information using the "contact us" or "request info" links on its website or by telephone at 1-866-388-8674.

Technology in Action

Throughout the GO Project, our research team used Elluminate for our planning meetings. GO team members were located across Canada, from the East Coast to the West Coast, but we were able to review documents and meet with each other on many occasions by simply downloading Elluminate and meeting together online in real time. During these online meetings we were able to speak to each other and also correspond through a text chat. Our agendas were posted on the whiteboard, and we could add notes to them or cut and paste information from other documents. We could also upload any resources that were needed during the meeting. Our online meetings were recorded and were available for team members to review at any time.

Many post-secondary and training institutions across Canada use Elluminate to deliver some of their online courses. Examples include:

Athabasca University, Canada's Open University (**www.athabascau.ca**) uses Elluminate in many of its courses to help students communicate with each other and with professors.

College of the North Atlantic in Newfoundland (**www.cna.nl.ca**) offers career planning sessions to its students, using Elluminate.

The Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation (**www.cdli.ca**), also in Newfoundland, uses Elluminate as well. It features a "help" tab on its main menu that provides links about Elluminate along with information and helpful advice.

Nova Scotia Community College (**www.nscc.ca**) offers some of its continuing education courses through Elluminate. It also offers online support for students to help them use Elluminate effectively.

Bridging
Distance

Facebook

Facebook (**www.facebook.com**) is a social networking site. There are quite a few other social networking sites including MySpace (**www.myspace.com**) and Friendster (**www.friendster.com**). However, Facebook is extremely popular in Canada and claims to be the most popular site of its kind. Facebook was originally designed for college and university students to network with each other, but in 2006 it was opened up for anyone to join.

Facebook is extremely easy to use; there is nothing to download. You simply go to the site and create a profile, add your information and then start adding people you know. Once you have joined Facebook, there are countless groups, causes, networks and applications that you can add. One of the most popular features on Facebook is photo sharing. There are a number of privacy settings that can be enabled to control how much information can be seen publicly and by your contacts.

According to Facebook there are over 120 million registered users. Although it was originally designed for and used by college students, its fastest growing user group is now people over the age of 25. Facebook claims that it is the fourth most popular Internet site and the most popular photo sharing site with over 10 billion photos posted worldwide!

Although it is primarily used for photo sharing and social networking, Facebook can also be used for learning. Some face-to-face instructors and teachers encourage students to set up Facebook study groups.

Facebook isn't just for individuals, however. Organizations, businesses, events, television shows, music groups and more have set up pages. For example, Facebook played an important role in the 2008 American presidential elections. Barack Obama and his supporters made extensive use of the Internet in general, including using Facebook to organize rallies and other political events and even to raise money. President Obama's site has over three million members.

Technology in Action

Facebook is used by a number of literacy organizations to raise money and to create groups of learners, volunteers and supporters. In fact, a search for literacy groups on Facebook resulted in over 500 listings. If your literacy agency hasn't set up a Facebook group yet, perhaps you might want to consider this. It could be a great way to market your program and to recruit students, volunteers and community partners. It could also be used to share success stories and to let people know of upcoming events. Because Facebook groups can be private or public, you could set up private groups for professional development discussions or for learning opportunities for students. This would be a wonderful way for students to practice their writing skills. Facebook also offers a variety of free game applications that can be added to your profile including Scrabble, WordTwist, TextTwist, Soduko and more. This could be an enjoyable way for learners to practice their literacy and numeracy skills while engaged in friendly competition.

For example, the ABC Canada Literacy Foundation has a Facebook group where members can post events or join in a discussion. As well, the Toronto Public Library also has a Facebook page that it uses to promote its events and services. It includes links to book collections and to YouTube videos of some of its events.

Additional Resources about Facebook:

▶ For more information, be sure to read the article from Educause Learning Initiative called *7 things you should know about Facebook*: **http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7017.pdf**.

First Class Collaboration Suite

First Class (**www.firstclass.com**) is available for both educational and business use, but we are going to focus only on the educational use. First Class provides features that work for both communications and for training. First Class users have set up collaborative online learning communities (sites where literacy practitioners or literacy learners can both meet and learn) and e-learning events (incorporating everything from virtual schools to blended learning).

First Class is easily downloaded and installed onto any computer from a link at their website. Once installed, First Class opens on your computer as a "desktop" that provides access to all the software's features. You can customize the look of the desktop to suit your preferences. If you are a member of more than one group, or if you are registered with more than one training event, each group and event appears in its own section.

First Class offers a variety of ways to communicate with other First Class users. For example, you can send emails to other First Class users or to your regular email contacts. You can also have instant message discussions with fellow First Class users who are online at the same time you are. You can post, download and edit documents. You can set up discussion groups. You can use the calendar feature. You can set up a virtual classroom or a meeting space. All users are required to log in which means that your First Class space is private and only your colleagues or fellow participants can join in the discussion or access the training event.

First Class works on Windows (including Vista), Linux and Macintosh operating systems. For more information, be sure to look for the brochure on their website.

First Class can be downloaded directly from the website at no cost. However, it does need to be set up to work with a server so this may present some technical challenges for smaller organizations. For more information, contact First Class at 1-888-808-0388.

Humber College, as part of the Ontario Learn distance education network, has developed an excellent online demonstration of FirstClass: **www.online-learning.humber.ca/tutorials/embanet_fc.html**.

Technology in Action

Literacy networks and agencies in western Canada made extensive use of First Class through their e-Lit communication system. Unfortunately, this system had to be discontinued because of funding cuts, but it was a very popular and effective way for literacy practitioners to communicate and engage in online learning for a number of years.

Literacy BC uses First Class software and thus joins Capilano University in their learning community called The Hub, to provide discussion conferences for the literacy community in BC.

The Alberta-based Centre for Family Literacy (**www.famlit.ca**) recently offered its *Foundations in Family Literacy Training* using First Class.

Deborah Morgan from Alberta delivered the popular *Writing out Loud Instructor* training workshops using First Class.

M-Learning (Mobile Learning)

M-learning stands for mobile learning. M-learning refers to learning that is delivered via portable devices such as MP3 players, cell phones, "smartphones", pocket PCs, laptops, or personal digital assistants (PDAs). Blackberry, Palm, and iPhone are all examples of PDAs.

M-learning offers incredible access to a wide variety of learning applications. Content can be downloaded to these portable devices and utilized at times and locations convenient to the learner. Learning is not limited by the need to be in a classroom or connected to a computer. Locations for M-learning are limited only by your imagination. With M-learning people can learn on the bus, in their cars, while jogging, or as they walk their dogs.

M-learning can be very cost effective since devices such as MP3 players are relatively inexpensive. In fact, traditional text books are infinitely more expensive than MP3 players. As well, many people already own cell phones and usage is only expected to increase as ever-more diverse applications are designed (for example, multi-functional "smartphones" and GPS navigation systems). As well, the capabilities of other portable devices are continually expanding and more innovative approaches to learning are constantly emerging.

In addition, often there is no cost (or only a limited fee) to download content from the Internet. For example, if you are a history student, or just an interested member of the general public, you could freely download to your MP3 player the series of lectures on *Conversations with History* presented by distinguished men and women around the world, offered by the University of California. You could listen to these lectures at times and locations convenient for you.

M-learning is often fun and engaging and builds on both informal and formal learning strategies. M-learning, while not the answer to all learning needs, is a very effective emerging learning method that is well positioned to grow and enhance standard learning practices.

> ## Technology in Action
>
> The applications of M-learning are truly endless. For example, you could download a podcast to your MP3 player by a world-renowned expert on Egyptian civilizations to listen to on the subway on your way to visiting a museum with an ancient history exhibit.
>
> This same scenario could be true for a high school class visiting a science centre. The teacher could send all students the link to a podcast given by an expert on human genetics which they could then listen to, via their cell phones or MP3 players, on the bus on the way to the science centre. Further, these students could make a photo documentary on their cell phones of their visit to the museum.
>
> Or, you could make good use of your commuting time by reading a novel on your cell phone. In Japan, for example, "cell phone novels" are extremely popular.
>
> Another example involves creating online quizzes for students to answer on a cell phone or Pocket PC.

Additional Resources about M-Learning:

► *10 Reasons Why Mobile Learning Matters* provides an excellent overview of the features and benefits of M-learning and is available at: **http://mlearning.edublogs.org/2007/01/16/10-reasons-why-mobile-learning-matters/**.

► *What Can You Learn from a Cell Phone? Almost Anything!* overviews the great potential for using cell phones to enhance classroom learning. Please see: **www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky-What_Can_You_Learn_From_a_Cell_Phone-FINAL.pdf**.

► You can try out some simple M-learning applications (including word skills, math skills, health, fitness, lifestyle and travel) at: **http://learn.m-learning.net/iframe_page.htm**.

► Tribal CTAD shares valuable information on its website, including What is M-Learning?; How Can I Use M-Learning?; and M-Learning in Action: **www.m-learning.org/how/adult-and-community-learning.htm**.

> ► Liz Kolb, an American educator, has created an informative site called *Cell Phones in Learning: From Toy to Tool.* This site includes a wide variety of information and a podcast on this topic: **www. cellphonesinlearning.com/**.

> ► For resources on podcasting, please look under "Podcasting" in this chapter.

Moodle

Moodle (**http://moodle.org/**) is a learning management system designed to help people create a variety of online learning opportunities. Moodle stands for "Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment".

Because it is user-friendly, free, engaging, and highly interactive, Moodle is gaining in popularity as an online learning tool. It is used in almost every country in the world and is available in 34 languages. Moodle is used by millions of people to create online learning opportunities, including individuals, not-for-profit groups, government, the private sector, universities and colleges. In the external GO research, Moodle was found to be one of the most popular online learning platforms. In fact, as of November 2008, Moodle.org had over half a million registered users!

Here are just a few of the reasons that Moodle is so popular:

> ► Moodle is very cost-effective. In fact, it is free! However, you will still need to register to join up to this exciting learning community.

> ► Moodle was developed using sound adult education principles.

> ► Moodle is user-friendly and highly interactive.

> ► Moodle is designed to be easily customized to suit the needs of the organization and participants.

> ► Moodle can be used effectively for both large and small online learning initiatives. For example, Moodle is used to deliver university courses to hundreds and thousands of students but it could also be used by a small not-for-profit to deliver informal training opportunities to just a few people.

> ► Moodle can be downloaded and hosted by virtually anyone.

> ► Moodle's modular structure allows you to easily create or modify content and courses from both existing resources and new sources.

► Moodle can be used for both blended and fully online learning opportunities.

► Moodle has both asynchronous (any time; anywhere learning) and synchronous (real time) learning environments.

► Moodle content can be created from scratch or uploaded from previously created files (i.e., Word, PowerPoint, Excel, PDFs)

► Moodle content can be used and modified again and again for new participants and/or new courses.

► Moodle features you can use in your online classroom include: a variety of online content and resources; online forums; online journaling; video clips and pictures; peer review of documents; quizzes; surveys; online chat; and assignments.

► Moodle offers many user-friendly teacher support and tracking tools (registration, grading and marking, etc.).

For a complete list of Moodle learning activities, see: **http://docs. moodle.org/en/Learning_Activities_Overview**.

There are also a wide variety of plug-ins and add-ons that can be used to enhance and customize Moodle and add a variety of features to suit your needs. A few examples include:

► An accessibility plug-in that lets the learning participant (rather than just the facilitator) control the font size and the background colour.

► A translator plug-in that allows text to be translated into various languages.

► A calendar plug-in that allows participants and facilitators to book appointments for meeting times, classes, etc.

► A certificate plug-in that allows course completion certificates to be generated.

► A plug-in that allows specific types of assignments to be generated, e.g., math quizzes and worksheets.

► For more information on Moodle plug-ins and their wide world of possibilities, please visit: **http://moodle.org/mod/data/view. php?id=6009.**

All of the above features (and many more) have combined to make Moodle a very popular online learning platform. Or, as Moodle itself says on its own website: "*Moodle is a real gift to forward thinking educators.*"

Technology in Action

ACE Online (Academic and Career Entrance):

The College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading (CSC) is an Ontario college network which provides support to Ontario's 22 English and 2 French community colleges. The CSC is using Moodle as the platform to develop and deliver ACE programming to adult students across Ontario through *Ontario Learn*. ACE is the level of programming necessary to register as an apprentice and to access postsecondary programming. Courses include Communications (French, English and Anglais langue Seconde), Mathematics (Core, Apprenticeship, Business and Technology), Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Computer Fundamentals and Self Management/Self Direction. These are highly interactive courses which enable participants to progress at their own rate. For more information, please visit: **www.collegeupgradingon.ca**. *(Source: College Sector Committee Staff)*

Alphaplus Centre:

AlphaPlus Centre, a provincial literacy organization which provides technical support and resources to Ontario literacy agencies, has readily adapted to Moodle and offers an 8-week training course to Ontario literacy educators. AlphaPlus' hands-on training introduces educators to the basics of Moodle, guiding them in exploring Moodle tools and features. One hundred literacy educators have completed the Moodle training course as of November 2008. Educators can also create private activities on the AlphaPlus Moodle site to meet the specific needs of their local students. AlphaPlus hosts province-wide free short courses for adult literacy students, using Moodle as part of the AlphaRoute online learning environment. Moodle has shown itself to be a successful platform for adults working online on literacy skills. Please visit: **http://moodlee.alphaplus.ca/** for more information about the training course. To learn more about AlphaRoute visit: **www.resources.alpharoute.org**. *(Source: AlphaPlus staff)*

Literacy Nova Scotia:

Literacy Nova Scotia (Nova Scotia's provincial literacy coalition) uses Moodle as the platform to host the Advanced Learning Technology (ALT) website. The very innovative ALT website offers online discussion forums, online conferencing, online training and access to a wide variety of resources and information. While visitors are welcome, this site was created for literacy practitioners, learners and coordinators in Nova Scotia's community-based literacy programs and, as such, some of the site is password protected for their use only. Please visit: **http://alt.ns.literacy.ca/** to learn more about the Advanced Learning Technology (ALT) website. *(Source: Literacy Nova Scotia website)*

Share:

Literacy Alberta (Alberta's provincial literacy coalition) uses the Moodle platform to offer online conferencing to its members called SHARE. Via SHARE, Alberta literacy practitioners and other members of Literacy Alberta use Moodle to access information and resources on a variety of topics of interest, take online courses, participate in online discussion groups, and receive current updates about literacy events and activities in the province. One particularly innovative use of SHARE by Literacy Alberta is the ability for students and tutors to create a private work space on Moodle to support students who work out of town, live in remote areas or who work shifts or irregular hours. For more information on SHARE, please see: **www.literacyalberta.ca/share.htm**. *(Source: Literacy Alberta website)*

Additional Resources about Moodle:

► Athabasca University (the host of the GO Project) is a leader in online learning in Canada and an extensive user of Moodle. It has developed two extremely helpful overviews of Moodle and its various features and applications: **www.athabascau.ca/moodletrain/intro.htm** and **www.athabascau.ca/moodletrain/**.

► Another useful resource called *Moodle School in New Zealand* is available at: **www.moodle.school.nz/**. This resource teaches people how to use Moodle and offers various resources, discussions, ideas and tips on effective usage.

► The Moodle site itself offers a variety of user-friendly online resources about Moodle and what it is and how to use it at: **http://moodle.org/**.

► Peace Wapiti School in Grande Prairie, Alberta has also prepared various online resources on the use of Moodle at: **http://collaboration.pwsd76.ab.ca/course/view.php?id=7**.

Online Meetings (Web Conferencing)

Sometimes, people need to meet to plan, discuss an issue or just to share information. In the past, "meeting" meant physically getting together at an office or in a boardroom. In the past couple of decades, however, this definition of meeting began to change. As technology evolved, ways of meeting without actually having to go somewhere were developed. This was of great benefit for many people, given the distances that we often have to travel in Canada to meet with our colleagues. It helped save time and money, as well as reduce the amount greenhouse gases produced from travel to face-to-face meetings.

One of the earliest ways that people were able to meet over distance was through teleconferencing. Participants would call into a central number and all be linked together on one call. Over the years, changing technology has given us a number of ways that we can meet without physically getting together. While we can still use teleconferencing, we can also use videoconferencing and the Internet, or a combination of technologies to hold meetings. Today, online meetings are often called web conferencing.

If you would like to set up an online meeting, or if you have been invited to participate in one, there are many brands of software that might be used, including WebEx, GoToMeeting, Microsoft Live Meeting, Acrobat

Connect, Saba Centra, Elluminate, Web Conference and more. Each brand of software offers a variety of features, but most include:

► the ability to invite participants via email

► whiteboard capability

► audio feed

► text chat

► the ability to upload PowerPoint presentations and other documents.

Some also include the ability to go into an application and demonstrate its features; this is particularly useful for training in how to use the various types of software.

The cost of web conferencing varies greatly, depending on the software you choose. There are fee options, for group of three people or less, such as Adobe Connect Now and Elluminate. Most other software brands will offer a free trial period so that you can try out their products.

Technology in Action

Online meetings are used by corporations, government departments and not-for-profit agencies. For example, the Getting Online research team held monthly meetings online throughout the life of the project to plan and discuss progress, using both Elluminate and Centra.

A number of provincial literacy networks told us that they also hold online meetings because it is both time-consuming and expensive to physically bring people together. For example, in order to save both time and travel costs, Community Literacy of Ontario holds its Board of Directors meetings online. Literacy BC hosts monthly Elluminate meetings with Regional Literacy Coordinators, who are situated all around the province.

Additional Resources about Online Meetings:

► The Learning Technologies Centre at the University of Manitoba has developed a general overview of web conferencing: **http://ltc. umanitoba.ca/wiki/index.php?title=WebConferencing**.

► For a comparison of a number of web conferencing tools, visit the Webconferencing Test site: **www.webconferencing-test.com/en/ webconference_home.html**.

► Tech Soup has an article called Web-Conferencing Tools: Right for You that explains what web conferencing is and how to use some of the tools: **www.techsoup.org/learningcenter/internet/page5975.cfm**.

Podcasts

A podcast is an audio or video broadcast that is circulated and downloaded via the Internet. Podcasts are highly accessible and are automatically and seamlessly downloaded directly to your computer, iPod, MP3 player or other device. You will of course need access to speakers or a headset and the bandwidth required for viewing or listening to the podcast.

Podcasting is growing in leaps and bounds as a training and communication tool. Podcasts can vary in length, from brief presentations to full length workshops. There are podcasts available on virtually any topic of interest. As an added bonus, podcasts are typically free. For ease of access, podcasts can be embedded in websites or emails. As well, most major newspapers, magazines and radio stations make podcasts of their shows available.

There are numerous Internet sites that collect and make podcasts freely available. One of the most popular of such sites is iTunes (iTunes was created by Apple and can be freely downloaded to your PC or Mac). See: **www.apple.com/itunes/store/podcasts.html** for more information (and to download iTunes).

iTunes contains thousands of podcasts, all categorized in a searchable database. A quick search of the iTunes library using the term "literacy" revealed a variety of free podcasts, including those on the following topics: information literacy, computer literacy, family literacy, health literacy, and critical literacy practice.

Apple has also created iTunes University which offers free podcasts of university and college lectures and other educational presentations. iTunes U is free and it is open to the general public, not just students. You can learn more at: **www.apple.com/education/itunesu**.

Most major newspapers and magazines (and other news sources) offer podcasts, which makes the news accessible in more than just a read-only format. This makes the news more accessible and often more engaging.

For more information on the basics of podcasting, Common Craft has created a highly user-friendly and engaging overview called *Podcasting in Plain English* at: **www.commoncraft.com/podcasting**.

Technology in Action

The educational possibilities of podcasting are endless. Podcasts could be used to supplement learning activities, to promote literacy, or to supplement staff and/or tutor training.

For example, a podcast of an adult learner speaking about the need for literacy could be created to promote the cause of literacy to politicians, community leaders, and the general public. Or, an organization could create a podcast where the chair of its board promotes a fundraising or public awareness campaign. Another example could be for an organization to embed a podcast on its website of a volunteer speaking about their positive experience with volunteering in literacy.

Yet another good example came from the GO research where one of the organizations, in a bid to add flexibility and convenience, intended to supplement its current online course offerings by developing 15-minute podcasts for participants to listen to on their iPods or MP3 players at convenient times during their busy lives.

You can access a podcast about literacy from any (or all!) of the Ministers of Education from Canada's provinces and territories from the Canadian Ministers of Education Canada website at: **www.literacy.cmec.ca/en/index.aspx?sortcode=2.1.3**.

The National Adult Literacy Database presents an adult learner *Story of the Week* via podcast. Here is a sample podcast from NALD, featuring three adult learners from the Barrie Literacy Council: **www.nald.ca/story/archive/2008/08oct27/mary.htm**.

The Ontario Ministry of Education has created several podcasts which provide practical ideas for parents and caregivers to help children learn: **www.edu.gov.on.ca/abc123/eng/podcast/**.

And finally, the *Just One More Book* website offers wonderful podcasts of a variety of children's books: **www.justonemorebook.com/**.

Additional Resources about Podcasting:

► Educause Learning Initiative created an extremely informative review of podcasting called: *Seven Things You Should Know About Podcasting* at: **www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7003.pdf**. Topics covered include: what is podcasting?; who is doing it?; how does it work?; and why is it significant?

► This interesting article from Charity Village overviews seven innovative ways a non-profit organization could use a podcast. For more information, please see: **www.charityvillage.com/cv/research/rtech61.html**.

► Another useful resource is the Educate Podcast Portal site from Russell Education Consultancy and Productions in the UK which highlights various educational podcasts at: **http://recap.ltd.uk/podcasting/**.

► This link from Apple provides a very helpful demonstration about how to use iTunes University: **www.apple.com/education/itunesu_mobile-learning/landing.html**.

► You can find tips on creating a podcast from Apple at: **www.apple.com/itunes/whatson/podcasts/specs.html**.

► Here is another great site, called *Podcasting Tools*. It includes information on what is podcasting and how to do it and what podcasting software is available. See: **www.podcasting-tools.com/**.

Portable Storage Devices

Portable storage devices include things like CDs, DVDs, and USB flash drives. These are the portable storage units that plug into the USB drive in your computer. Sometimes they are called "memory sticks", a patented name used by Sony. Portable storage devices are an excellent way to access training because they are very portable. You can put a CD, DVD or USB flash drive into almost any computer and read an article, complete an assignment, watch a video or listen to a recorded presentation. The amount of information that is available on each device is limited by its capacity. As technology has evolved, portable devices have become smaller but capable of holding ever-increasing amounts of data.

The cost of portable storage devices has decreased over the years, making them a cost-efficient way to distribute and access training. Portable storage devices are also environmentally friendly, potentially saving a significant amount of paper. For example, you can store an entire text

book or curriculum or a series of documents on a device rather than printing it out. An entire semester's worth of reading material could be distributed to students using portable storage devices rather than having everyone buy print copies.

Portable storage devices can be used to give someone an entire training workshop or course, or they can be used to supplement other training. For example, some colleges provide new employees with a CD for Workplace Health and Safety Training. The CD includes text, video and self-marking quizzes to help the employee prepare for WHMIS certification.

Literacy agencies could provide resources to literacy practitioners, tutors, and learners by putting it onto a CD, DVD or a USB flash drive. Agencies could also put their board orientation manual onto a portable storage device to give to new board members rather than giving them a large binder. If you have to give a presentation about your literacy agency to a community group or other stakeholders, you can load the presentation onto a DVD or CD and just insert it into any computer. You can also provide copies of the presentation by giving it out on CD to participants.

Technology in Action

The Ontario Native Literacy Coalition has produced a CD and hard copy manual for family literacy training called *Completing the Circle.* This new resource includes sessions on speaking and listening skills, talking with children, and families as teams. Be sure to check it out: **www.onlc.ca/newsfull.php?NewsID=29**.

Additional Resources about Portable Storage Devices

► To learn more about USB flash drives, you can visit Wikipedia at: **http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USB_flash_drive**.

► Jennifer M. DeFeo has written an informative article called *Portable Storage Devices* for *PC Magazine.* This article focuses on USB flash drives: **www.pcmag.com/article2/0,1895,1789824,00.asp**.

Saba Centra

Saba Centra (**www.centra.com**) is an online learning environment that can be used for virtual classroom learning, for meetings or for web seminars (also known as webinars). Be sure to click on the "view demo" link on the home page to see what Saba Centra can offer. Saba Centra is used by a wide variety of educational institutions and businesses, including Cingular Wireless, Sony Electronics and the Harvard Medical School. In the Ontario literacy community, Saba Centra is hosted by Contact North (**www.contactnorth.ca**) and supported by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.

Saba Centra's online classroom includes many interactive features including two-way audio, an interactive whiteboard, application sharing, text messaging, user feedback, breakout rooms, surveys, evaluations, web surfing and more. Instructors and facilitators planning an online session can prepare the learning content using PowerPoint which can then be imported into the live session. Alternatively, an additional tool called Agenda Builder can be used to convert the PowerPoint slides into a Centra-compatible format with any of the interactive features built right into the presentation. Centra sessions can also be recorded for later review and playback. Click on the "Saba Centra product overview" link on the home page for more information.

A free 30-day trial is available from a link on the home page. Ongoing licensing fees vary depending on the number of users. For more information, contact Saba using the "request information" form on their website or by telephone at 1-877-722-2101.

> ## Technology in Action
>
> A number of Ontario literacy organizations have used Centra extensively over the past few years. For example, Community Literacy of Ontario (**www.nald.ca/clo**) has delivered numerous professional development workshops on Centra. Workshops on Performance Management, Essential Skills and Marketing have been archived and can be viewed by going to: **www.e-channel-login.ca** and clicking on "public recordings".
>
> Another good example of how Saba Centra can be used for literacy instruction is the *Good Learning Anywhere* program offered by the Sault Hudson Literacy Council in Northern Ontario. You can learn about this at: **www.siouxhudsonliteracy.com/**.
>
> The Learning Hub is the new e-Channel province-wide learning initiative offered by the Literacy and Basic Skills program of The Centres for Employment and Learning of Avon Maitland District School Board in south western Ontario. It is funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and is free to all adult learners in Ontario who want to access a flexible online learning environment. The Learning Hub uses a variety of online learning platforms to deliver online learning to adult learners, including Centra. Please click here to access a demonstration of a Centra course via the Learning Hub: **www.learninghub.ca/centra_demo/centra_demo.swf**. *(Source: The Learning Hub website)*

Self-Study Web Modules

GO research identified that self-study web modules are a very popular way for literacy practitioners and others to both offer and access online training. In fact, this approach to online training was identified in the GO research as the most popular training method, especially for not-for-profit organizations. Reasons for choosing to offer online training using a modular self-study format included accessibility and the demand for training about specific topics rather than a complete course of study. Survey respondents also noted that this approach generally doesn't require sophisticated technology to use, making it accessible for most computer users. Also, after the initial development cost, the cost of having self-study training modules available is minimal, because the modules do not need to be facilitated.

If you do an Internet search for online training, you will find that there are many self-study training modules available all across Canada on a wide variety of subjects. Many are available free-of-charge.

Using this modular approach, the training host creates a website to house the self-study modules. The training participant then goes to the website to access the modules whenever it is convenient.

A training website can be set up for public access so that anyone can use the training modules without going through a registration process, or it can be set up to require registration. It can be made available at no cost or a fee can be charged. The host organization can set up the site to track statistics in order to find out who is using their site and how. It is up to each organization to set up its training website in whatever way works best for them.

Self-study web-based training can incorporate many different features. It can be a website with only text-based information or there can be additional components such as podcasts, embedded video, graphics and more. When deciding what to include if you are developing this type of training, you will want to consider a number of factors including the cost of development, the topic, who will be accessing the training and how. If your participants have older computer equipment or do not have access to high speed Internet, for example, you may want to minimize the use of video feed that requires high amounts of bandwidth to function properly. Similarly, photographs can take a long time to appear on a web page for those with slow connection speeds, and this can be very frustrating for the user.

One of the benefits of setting up training using web-based modules is that you can add or delete information and develop new modules as needed. For example, when Community Literacy of Ontario created its Literacy Basics (**www.nald.ca/literacybasics**) training, there were four training modules. Now there are thirteen!

The GO research revealed that many self-study training websites were created through special project funding. For some organizations, it is not financially possible to develop and deliver professional development workshops or education courses using some of the more expensive technologies. However, developing and setting up a self-study website often incurs one-time costs that can be covered through project funding. Once the project is complete, the website is still available for people to use and ongoing maintenance costs are relatively low.

If you are looking for online training, self-study web modules can be very useful because you can access them when you want from virtually any computer with an Internet connection. You can select the specific sections you are interested in, or you can complete everything that is available. Often, you can print out the modules, making them even more accessible. While some people like to participate in a group, others like to learn on their own, making this an excellent training choice for them.

Another advantage is cost. Self-study web modules are often available to participants at no charge or for a small fee. If you don't have the time or the budget to sign up for other training, you might want to do an Internet search to see if there is a self-study option available for the training you are looking for.

Technology in Action

Examples of literacy practitioner training being offered via self-study modules include La Coalition ontarienne de formation des adultes: **www.coalition.on.ca/gestion/**.

Two interesting modules are *Developing Adult Numeracy* available through the National Adult Literacy Database at: **www.nald.ca/tools/practitioner/dan/course/DAN.swf** and *Adult Learning from Theory to Practice* at: **www.nald.ca/adultlearningcourse/info.htm**.

Literacy Nova Scotia has a number of modules that you can access, including this one about maintaining your computer: **http://alt.ns.literacy.ca/mod/resource/view. php?inpopup=true&id=62**.

The Verizon Foundation from the United States offers many free online professional development courses at: **http://literacynetwork.verizon.org**. Click on "teach".

The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) has developed The First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Place (**http://cli.ccl-cca.ca/FN/index.php?q=home&l=en**) as an interactive way for literacy practitioners and others to explore the elements of their Lifelong Learning Model. The Model, and the Learning Place site, are part of a larger project called *Redefining How Success is Measured in Aboriginal Learning,* an initiative that the CCL is working on in partnership with its Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre, and First Nations, Inuit and Métis organizations. They have also developed a model for Inuit and Métis communities which is also available on the CCL website.

And of course we have to mention the Getting Online self-study training modules on online learning. Please check them out at: **www.nald.ca/gettingonline**.

There are also many self-study training websites available that are not literacy-related. One way to find what you are looking for is to go to a search engine such as Google and enter the topic you are looking for along with "online training".

Skype

Skype (**www.skype.com**) is a type of technology known as "voice over Internet protocol" or VoIP. Simply put, VoIP allows you to use your computer like a telephone. Skype was created in 2003 and is one of the more popular VoIP products with an estimated 250 million accounts worldwide. It is available in 28 languages. Skype is owned by eBay. It can be used on a variety of operating systems including Windows, Mac and Linux.

You can download Skype for free and talk with other Skype users anywhere in the world at no cost, using Skype software or by calling a Skype number. With Skype, you can hold a conference call with up to ten users at the same time. However, if you want to call a landline or a cell phone number, charges will apply. You can purchase a variety of packages from the Skype website.

Although you can use Skype with virtually any microphone/speaker headset combination, many companies sell headsets that are optimized to work with Skype. You can also see who you are talking to on Skype if you use its webcam capabilities.

Skype is not just for personal use, nor is it just a "fun" piece of Internet technology. Both individuals and corporations use Skype for all of their telephone needs. For example, the City of Mississauga uses Skype. For this type of use, Skype can be set up to work through traditional telephone desk sets rather than via the computer.

Skype is also available for mobile devices such as the new "smartphones", and it is compatible with Windows Mobile. You can even use Skype with a Playstation Portable gaming device.

Technology in Action

A number of respondents in the GO research indicated that they used Skype as part of their online training. In several colleges and university courses, Skype was used as a convenient and inexpensive way for students to contact the course facilitator. Skype was also used for group discussions amongst participants.

Skype could be very helpful for literacy organizations where travel is a concern. For example, literacy practitioners could use Skype to host weekly teaching sessions with a group of learners living in remote communities. Or literacy practitioners could hold meetings with others in their region without having to leave their own agencies. Learners in one agency could talk to learners in the next town, in another province or across the country. Learners could use Skype to practice their telephone skills. Before starting, you might want to read this informative article about using Skype in the classroom: **www.wtvi.com/TEKS/05_06_articles/skype-in-the-classroom.html**.

MacDonald Youth Services (**www.mys.ca/**) is a registered charity located in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Much of their work is done by volunteers, including "virtual volunteers". They have produced a YouTube video demonstrating how to use Skype to work with virtual volunteers: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=sodMDs7rEEk**.

Additional Resources about Skype:

▶ For a good overview of Skype, be sure to check out the article *7 Things You Should Know about Skype* at **http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7032.pdf**.

▶ For general information about VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol), see: **http://communication.howstuffworks.com/ip-telephony.htm**.

Web 2.0

The term Web 2.0 does not refer to a particular online learning platform. Instead, Web 2.0 is about a wide variety of emerging technologies that are user-friendly, social in nature and highly engaging to users. Examples of Web 2.0 technologies include Facebook, Blogs, Wikis, Social Bookmarking, YouTube and Photosharing sites.

Web 2.0 is also about ease of use, access and affordability and most Web 2.0 technologies are low cost or free, and easy for the average person to use. Web 2.0 technologies have created a huge shift in the way people use and think about technology. Web 2.0 is fundamentally about using technology interactively to allow people to directly collaborate, create and share content over the Internet.

Web 2.0 technologies are designed so that ordinary people with basic computer skills can actively engage with technology and other people over the Internet. With Web 2.0 technologies, everyone can contribute. Web 2.0 builds on the inherent strengths of the Internet. Web 2.0 technologies are designed to be user-friendly, highly democratic, interactive and collaborative. They are also typically low cost or free. Users do not need to buy any software or take any special training.

Web 2.0 is sometimes also referred to as the "Read-Write" web or Social Media. Using the term "social media", this video by Common Craft explains the basic principles and benefits of Web 2.0: **www.commoncraft.com/socialmedia**.

These new technologies are very engaging to users. In fact, it would be hard to overstate the extreme popularity of Web 2.0 technologies. Just ask anyone under 35! For example, according to the market research company ComScore, in the month of June 2008, over 132 million unique users visited Facebook.

In the Getting Online research, the most common Web 2.0 technologies identified were:

► Blogging

► Facebook

► M-Learning

► Podcasting

► Skype

► Wiki websites

► YouTube

We covered each of these above technologies in detail throughout this chapter. Please go to those particular sections (covered in alphabetical order) for more information on each.

Some of the other common Web 2.0 technologies are:

Photosharing Sites

Photosharing sites allow users to upload photos to a central website where people can share photographs with one another over the Internet. People can make comments and discuss each other's photographs and they can organize and annotate their own photos. You can share your photos either publicly or with a private group of people. One of the most common photosharing sites is Flickr (**http://flickr.com/**). The Common Craft site gives a great overview about photosharing: **www.commoncraft.com/ photosharing**.

RSS Feeds

RSS stands for "Really Simple Syndication" and it is a technology that is used to send updates from your favourite websites or blogs to one central place where you can easily retrieve and read new online content. RSS feeds are also called "newsreaders" or "newsfeeds". There are different RSS feeds available and most are free. Two common RSS feeds are Google Reader (**www.google.com/reader**) and Bloglines (**www. bloglines.com**). When you login to your newsreader, any articles or updates that have been posted since you last logged in will appear for each site you feed from. This is a great way to keep up-to-date without having to browse to a variety of individual sites. For more information on RSS feeds, just watch this helpful video: **www.commoncraft.com/ rss_plain_english**.

Social Bookmarking

Social bookmarking involves saving your favourite websites to a central website. On a social bookmarking site, you can see and access the "favourites" lists of others and they can see yours. Social bookmarking allows you to access your list of favourites from any computer with an Internet connection. All you need to do is login to your social bookmarking website. One of the most common sites is Delicious (**http://delicious.com/**).

Social Messaging Systems

Social messaging is a way for people to share information online in a highly shortened form. It is somewhat similar to instant messaging only it is more accessible and broad-based. Probably the best known social messaging site is Twitter (**www.twitter.com**). Each Twitter posting (or "Tweet") must be 140 characters long or less. Each posting typically has the user answer the question: "What are you doing?" It is a simple, casual, fun way for people to keep in touch. For example, during the 2008

presidential election race in the United States, Twitter was used to keep the public updated on where the candidates would be.

Virtual Worlds

Virtual worlds are just what they sound like! These are 3-D online worlds where people set up an "avatar" (a virtual character) who interacts with others in a virtual environment. Virtual world "residents" actually design and create their own worlds and interact with others, using a variety of applications. One of the most popular virtual worlds is called *Second Life* (**http://secondlife.com/whatis/**). While mostly used for recreation, many people are also using virtual worlds for business and educational purposes. You can learn more about this phenomenon here: **http://net. educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7015.pdf**.

More to Come with Web 2.0!

The overview of these Web 2.0 technologies will hopefully get you started on the exciting educational journey offered by these technologies. However, the sky is the limit and new Web 2.0 applications are constantly emerging. Be sure to keep your ear to the ground (or eye on the Internet!) because by this time next year, there are sure to be new applications or enhancements and new ways to add to existing ones.

Technology in Action

A literacy organization could use Flickr (**www.flickr.com**) (an online photosharing site) to collect and share photographs from its annual community Book Festival. It could then take the "best of the best" of these photographs and prepare an online collection of photographs to promote its agency to the community. Similarly, this online collection of photos could be used to recruit volunteers and partners for next year's Book Festival!

A literacy organization could use Delicious (**www.delicious.com**) (a social bookmarking site) to collaborate with other literacy programs and educational services in their community to develop an annotated and tagged online collection of the best adult learning websites. The literacy organization could then, in turn, share this online collection of websites with all staff and tutors in their agency as well as its literacy colleagues from across the province. All of these people could then continue to add to the online collection of websites on adult learning!

A literacy organization could develop a promotional video on YouTube (**www.youtube.com**) about adult upgrading. This video could be shared at community presentations and also posted to its website. It would be an effective and innovative way to promote the agency to adult learners, volunteers, funders, and the general community.

Additional Resources about Web 2.0:

▶ The Public Library of Charlotte Mecklenberg County in the US has created an online self-study, guided tour of emerging technologies called *Learning 2.0: The 23 Things.* This is a highly recommended resource. See: **http://plcmcl2-things.blogspot.com/**.

▶ Peter Duffy of Hong Kong Polytechnic University has written a helpful overview of Web 2.0 technologies and education called *Engaging the YouTube Google-Eyed Generation: Strategies for Using Web 2.0 in Teaching and Learning.* It is available at: **www.ejel.org/ Volume-6/v6-i2/Duffy.pdf**.

▶ Google has created a website called *Google for Non Profits* which provides a variety of tools to promote your cause, raise money, and operate more efficiently. Google's slogan for the site is: "You're changing the world. We want to help". Check it out at: **www.google. com/nonprofits/**.

▶ Michael Wesch of Kansas State University created this YouTube video about new technologies and their profound impact on our world called *Web 2.0: The Machine is Using Us.* See: **www.youtube.com/ watch?v=6gmP4nk0EOE&eurl**

▶ For general information about social networking see the Wikipedia entry at: **http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_network_services**.

WebEx

WebEx (**www.webex.com**), owned by Cisco Systems, was another commercial online learning platform mentioned by several larger organizations in the GO external research. WebEx offers a variety of services, including web meetings and webinars.

Online meetings (or web conferences) allow participants to meet online, in real time, with other people from literally around the corner or around the globe from the comfort of their own computer. Please click on this link to access FAQs about WebEx and information about online web meetings: **www.webex.com/individual/faqs.html**.

A webinar is short for a "web-based seminar". A webinar is delivered over the Internet and can be a presentation, workshop or other online session. Typically, a webinar is interactive between presenter and participant and amongst participants. For more information on webinars through

WebEx, click here: **www.webex.com/enterprise/webinars.html**.

Other WebEx products include "WebOffice" which allows you to share documents, data, calendars and other office applications from anywhere and "MeetMeNow" which allows you to hold online meetings, make presentations, and review documents collaboratively.

WebEx is a commercial application, but it has solutions and prices designed for individual users as well as small/medium and large sized businesses and organizations. For more information on WebEx, please visit their website at: **www.webex.com/**.

Technology in Action

You could use WebEx to host an online meeting of literacy practitioners in your region or province to discuss the latest developments in adult education. Or, a provincial literacy coalition with directors located in diverse areas of their province could host an interactive online board meeting using WebEx.

Further, a literacy organization with an expertise in plain language (or any other topic) that wanted to offer a training seminar on plain language principles could offer this seminar to literacy practitioners across the country as an online webinar via WebEx.

The following link overviews how the Faculty of Medicine of the University of British Columbia's used WebEx to provide ongoing education to medical professionals: **www.webex.com/pdf/cs_UBC. pdf**.

As well, Imagine Canada (formerly the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy) has used WebEx to offer "*Sector Casts*" on a variety of topics of interest to the voluntary sector.

Wiki Websites

Wikis are interactive websites that can either be available to a specified user group, or open to the general public. Users can both post their own content for use by others, or access information that other wiki members have added. They are a great way to collaborate and interact online. There is no limit to how many pages you can add to your wiki, so information can stay organized in an easy to browse fashion.

Wikis are taking the education world by storm because they make it easy for almost anyone to write content for the web. Wikis are simple to set up and to navigate. They promote group collaboration and are also highly democratic because they allow a voice for all. As an added bonus, wikis can easily be used by people with low level technical skills and are generally available for free.

Wikis allow users to switch between a website and an editable page. With a simple click of the edit button on a wiki, content can be added, edited or deleted by any user. This means that all wiki users are working with the same up-to-date document—as opposed to a flurry of emails with varying versions of a document attached. Wikis allow you to set up a living document that can be edited in a highly collaborative manner. The content of a wiki is constantly evolving and changing.

You can set the access to your wiki and decide who can view and edit documents. In other words, you can determine whether your wiki is accessible to the world or to just the people you invite to join your wiki. Passwords are not required to visit wikis that are publicly accessible, but they are required for private wikis.

The word "wiki" stands for "fast" in Hawaiian and indeed wikis are a wonderful tool that will save you valuable time! Non-techies can easily set up or use a wiki because knowledge of programming and HTML is not required. Because wikis are web-based, they can be accessed from any location: at work, at home and around the globe.

Examples of items you can upload to wikis are: pdf documents, Word documents, PowerPoint presentations, photos, quizzes, polls and games. As well, RSS feeds, podcasts, audio/video clips, and links can all be embedded in the wiki content.

This example may help you to better understand the power of a wiki. Picture a group of literacy practitioners writing a research report on tutor training in their province. Rather than forwarding around endless versions of a Word document by email, they set up a wiki. This wiki allows them to all work with the same continually updated version of the document. This is a great way to save time and reduce stress!

Once again, CommonCraft has prepared a wonderful audio-visual presentation on the basics of wikis called *Wikis in Plain English.* To better understand wikis, this presentation is definitely worth checking out at: **www.commoncraft.com/video-wikis-plain-english**.

Bridging Distance

Wikis record the history of the edits made which means that you can easily track changes over time. As well, they have a restore feature in case content is inappropriately changed or deleted. Many wikis have user guidelines and codes of conduct to ensure appropriate usage. Some have an overall editor or administrator who reviews the changes, deletions and additions for appropriateness and edits as necessary.

If you want to set up your very own wiki, first decide the purpose of your wiki, then decide whether access would be public or restricted to a smaller group. Next decide upon the features you want for your wiki, then check out various wiki hosting sites and select the one that best works for you.

Wetpaint (a wiki hosting service) has an excellent online video located on its main website (**www.wetpaint.com/**) called See *How Wetpaint Works.* Just click on the arrow in the top right corner of this website to see a helpful and user-friendly overview of the process of setting up a wiki.

As well, you could click on this link to access PowerPoint slides on *How to Set Up a Wiki Site* with Wikispaces (another wiki hosting service): **www.slideshare.net/sharpjacqui/how-to-set-up-a-wiki-site**.

Here are just a few of the many wiki hosting sites. Each of these sites requires user registration and prices vary from free to low cost. All of these sites (and others like them) will allow you to easily set up a wiki in a few easy steps.

Wetpaint (slogan: create a free website about anything you love). Wetpaint is free. Website: **www.wetpaint.com/**.

Wikispaces (slogan: wikis for everyone). With Wikispaces, "Basic" wiki hosting is free; "Plus" starts at $5 per month; and "Super" starts at $20 per month. Website: **www.wikispaces.com/**.

PBwiki (slogan: simple, secure collaboration). PBwiki has a free version for individuals and educators, but there are optional upgrades for a fee; business users must pay an annual fee for use. Website: **http://pbwiki. com/**

Technology in Action

The most famous wiki is **Wikipedia**, a free massive online encyclopaedia where content can be added, edited and deleted by any user. According to Wikipedia's own website statistics, there are currently 75,000 contributors working on more than 10 million articles in 250 languages and these articles are viewed by hundreds of thousands of people each day. Because content can be edited by anyone, Wikipedia faces problems with accuracy, quality and bias. It is important to check the sources that are used for the Wikipedia entry. However, for some, Wikipedia has become a common source of online information. To access Wikipedia, click on: **http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page**.

Wiki Literacy Tent (or to use its full name: the *Adult Literacy Education Wiki: Research and Practice*) is essentially a clearinghouse of information and online discussions with people around the world on a variety of literacy issues. Wiki Literacy Tent is publicly accessible and covers an extremely wide variety of topics (from A to Z in fact!). A small sampling of topics includes issues such as action research, learning disabilities, reading, family literacy, assessment, and women and literacy. Check it out at: **http://wiki.literacytent.org/index.php/Main_Page**.

There are wikis on virtually any topic of interest and the sky is the limit! To whet your appetite, here is a sampling of diverse wikis:

Green Wiki (for learning about the environment and various green initiatives). See: **http://green.wikia.com/wiki/Wikia_Green**.

Literature Wiki (for sharing information about literature – novels, poems and short stories). See: **http://literature.wikia.com/wiki/Literawiki**.

Knit Wiki (for "all things knitting"!). See: **http://knitting.wikia.com/wiki/Main_Page**.

Recipes Wiki (for novice and experienced cooks). See: **http://recipes.wikia.com/wiki/Recipes_Wiki**.

On a more serious note, Community Literacy of Ontario, one of the Getting Online Project partners, has set up a wiki for CLO staff. CLO staff work on a variety of projects and live in different parts of Ontario. This wiki allows CLO staff to work collaboratively and to share and edit project reports, newsletters, meeting minutes, agendas and other important information. Given that CLO is a provincial organization, this ability to easily share and edit documents will be extremely valuable and save the organization time and money.

Additional Resources about Wikis:

► The Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County in North Carolina has prepared a very helpful and practical podcast called *So What's in a Wiki?* This podcast is part of their fabulous Learning 2.0 Initiative and is available here: **http://plcmclearning.blogspot. com/2006/09/16-so-whats-in-wiki.html**.

► Educause Learning Initiative has created an informative overview of wikis called: *Seven Things You Should Know About Wikis:* **http://net. educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7004.pdf**. Topics covered include: what is a wiki?; who's doing it?; how does it work?; and why is it significant?

► Meredith Gorran Farkas has prepared a useful text-based slide show called *Wikis: A Beginner's Look: Harnessing the Collective Intelligence:* **http://meredith.wolfwater.com/cil06/**.

YouTube

YouTube (**www.youtube.com**) is an online website where people can freely upload and share their videos with others over the Internet. YouTube's very catchy slogan is "Broadcast Yourself", and that is exactly what millions and millions of people all around the globe are doing. Even in the early days (July 2006) YouTube stated that over 100 million videos were watched each day on their site. And in the month of January 2008 alone, almost 79 million users viewed over three billion videos on YouTube!

YouTube is a global phenomenon and videos are posted in virtually every language. The YouTube site itself is currently available in 12 languages including English, Spanish, French, Swedish, Dutch, Polish, Japanese and Italian. Considering its extreme popularity, it is amazing to think that YouTube was only launched in December 2005!

For the most part, YouTube videos are purely for fun; however, they can also be used for educational and other more serious purposes. For example, YouTube music videos were made during the recent US election campaign to engage young people in the political process. As well, a wide variety of teaching resources are available through YouTube (i.e., math or English tutorials). YouTube can also be effectively used for promotions and marketing. And to use a more commonplace example, recently the son of a GO researcher learned how to tie his tie for a family wedding by

following the online tutorial on a YouTube video!

To give you a good sense of YouTube, just watch this two-minute video (on YouTube of course!) called *What is YouTube?*: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2PbdIzAVKs**.

You do not need to register with YouTube to view most videos; however those wanting to post videos must register with the site. People who upload videos to YouTube can either post them as public, or restrict viewing to a select group. YouTube has strict controls and regulations on the types of videos that are posted; for example, no "R" rated videos are allowed on YouTube. Near each video is a link that allows users to flag a video for inappropriate content. YouTube staff will then view the video and decide whether to remove it or not.

Below each video there is a place where you can comment on the video, share it with others, rate it, or add it to your favourites list. You can also see how often the video has been viewed. As well, YouTube has a section of its site where people can discuss videos or link to blog sites about the videos.

The YouTube site has a handy search feature. Entering the key word "literacy" resulted in over 7,000 hits! The key words "adult literacy" returned a more manageable 273 videos. You can also search by which videos were "most highly ranked", "most viewed" and "most discussed".

You can embed YouTube videos on your website; however, do check to make sure that the video you are embedding does not have copyright restrictions. To learn the specifics of how to upload a video to YouTube on your own, just click here: **www.youtube.com/t/howto_makevideo**.

For more information on YouTube, please visit its website at: **www.youtube.com**.

Bridging Distance

Technology in Action

The YMCA Career Development and Learning Centre (located in Burlington, Ontario) prepared a very engaging YouTube video to promote its literacy and employment services called *Get a Job!* See: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=9I3WGQmRH6w**.

The Literacy Volunteers of Rensselaer County in New York State have prepared two YouTube videos: one of an adult student and one of a tutor:

Becoming a Tutor: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJ_f8Hk_nGw**

A Student's View: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUxqXgCT9hs**

Otis College (USA) has created a professionally designed and helpful YouTube video to teach students about information literacy and how to correctly identify their sources for class papers at: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-2hziLTSyU**.

Additional Resources about YouTube:

▶ Educause Learning Initiative has written a very helpful overview of YouTube called: *Seven Things You Should Know About YouTube:* **http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7018.pdf**. Topics covered include: what is YouTube?; what are the implications for teaching and learning?; and where is it going?

Conclusion

That brings us to the end of the GO Project's tour of some of the most popular technologies used for online learning. We hope we've given you a concrete and helpful picture of some of the technologies that are currently available, sample applications of these technologies, and links and resources to further extend your learning.

We hope we have also given you inspiration and confidence: inspiration to see that technology can be a wonderful tool for learning and that it is constantly evolving in ways that can enhance the learning experience and engage participants on deeper levels and confidence to experiment with these exciting technologies.

Technology offers so many opportunities and continually brings exciting new ways that we can communicate with each other, share and learn. We will end this chapter with the words of one of the participants in the Getting Online research project "*the sky is the limit with online learning technologies!*"

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Bridging Distance

Promising Practices in Online Learning in the Canadian Literacy Community

4 Facilitating Online

Introduction

Many facilitators experienced in face-to-face facilitation have some trepidation about facilitating learning in the online environment. Making this transition often raises the following questions: What is the role of the facilitator in an online environment? How is facilitating online different than in person? What skills do online facilitators need? What technological knowledge and skills do online facilitators have? How are online communities created? In this chapter, we will explore these and other issues related to online facilitation as well as provide some tried and true tips from experienced online facilitators. Our purpose is to assist less experienced online learning facilitators feel confident about working in this environment, as well as share our experiences and research on this topic.

Roles and Skill Set of the Facilitator

Generally speaking, online facilitation can be described as managing learning with and for learners through an online medium such as a web-based course or program. The term *facilitation* refers to the student-centered approach to learning as opposed to a teacher-driven approach. To effectively facilitate online, the facilitator assumes several roles and has a specific skill set. The teacher's role moves from one of being the expert to the facilitator. One researcher described teaching as being a "sage on the stage" and facilitation as being "the guide on the side" (Kempe, 2001). In the online environment, facilitation is a very effective way to ensure participants have a good learning experience.

What roles does a facilitator play in online learning? There are four essential roles of an online facilitator: Social, Managerial/Organizational, Intellectual, and Technical. The following is a brief description of each of these roles.

Social: In an online environment, participants often do not have the opportunity to greet each other and introduce themselves in the same way as they would in a face-to-face learning environment. During online courses, participants will be spending time together, synchronously and/or asynchronously. An important role of the online facilitator is to create opportunities for social interactions to help participants get to know each other. This will help develop group cohesiveness and can lead to the creation of a collaborative learning environment. Often, participants are invited to post a brief biography, as well as posting a digital picture of themselves at the start of a new course. This social aspect of the online environment should be supported throughout the course by the facilitator. In a very short course, there may not be the time to fully develop this role; however in longer courses the facilitator can continue to encourage social networking and group development. Throughout both synchronous and asynchronous discussions, the facilitator's role in promoting the development of social learning relationships contributes to the success of online learning.

Managerial/Organizational: A key role for facilitators is to ensure learning takes place in an organized way. The facilitator assumes the responsibility of setting the agenda, managing the course schedule, facilitating the discussion and development of group guidelines.

Intellectual: To assume the role of course facilitator it is necessary to have a good understanding of the course content. Course participants will expect the facilitator to have a solid base of knowledge so that he/she can respond to questions, provide feedback, and encourage discussion. Furthermore, the facilitator's role is to challenge and expand the thinking of the participants and promote critical reflection.

Technical: The facilitator's role is to ensure the comfort level of all participants with the learning technology. To accomplish this, the facilitator must not only have a good understanding of the features of the technology being used, but must also be skilled in sharing that knowledge with the course participants. In online learning, the facilitator is often the point of contact for technical issues and questions that course participants might encounter. You don't need to be an expert but you will

need to know where to direct people for support. When participants are comfortable with the technology, they can focus on the learning tasks.

Facilitation Skills

What skills does an effective online facilitator have? There are a number of key skills that effective facilitators bring to an online learning environment.

Online learning skills: Effective online facilitators are often effective online learners. To be a skilled facilitator, it is a good idea to have experienced online learning. In this way, facilitators have an understanding of the experience of the participants in their course or program.

Engaging: Skilled online facilitators create ways to engage all participants in the course, especially in the beginning. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, for example by having a low-risk ice breaker that encourages initial postings or discussions. Responding to participants' posts, especially their first ones, in a timely and thoughtful way can also engage learners.

Questioning, listening, providing feedback: Effective facilitators use questioning and feedback as a key part of the guided learning. Well-constructed, open-ended questions help participants construct new knowledge. Feedback provides guidance and is motivational to learners. And of course, active listening is a pre-requisite skill to both asking questions and providing feedback.

Managing online discussions: When managing online discussions, effective facilitators use a variety of skills including questioning, engaging, paraphrasing, summarizing, guidance, and closure. An equally important skill for facilitators when managing online discussions is knowing when to step back from a discussion to promote collaborative learning among participants, and when to step in to keep it focused on the task at hand.

Building online teams: This can occur when there is a clear common goal, the processes are clearly understood by participants, there is respect among participants, and communication is effective. The facilitator of an online course has a significant role in creating an online team by modeling the necessary skills.

Creating an Accepting, Welcoming Online Environment

One important factor for the success of any online learning program is the creation of an accepting, welcoming environment. This is necessary to engage learners and provide them with an environment in which they are comfortable participating in. The following tips will assist you in creating a welcoming environment for your online learners:

1 Group introductions: Group introductions are necessary for the participants to know who is around them in cyberspace, which can help them establish a learning relationship with their fellow learners. Typically, brief biographies and pictures are posted, but there are many creative ways to have learners introduce themselves. For example, the facilitator may ask a series of open-ended questions or participants could be paired to learn about each other and then post their results online.

2 Establish group guidelines: Much like in a face-to-face learning environment, establishing group guidelines can contribute to a welcoming environment. This is an excellent opportunity for the group to create the type of learning environment most conducive for their learning, which can be empowering for participants. Having guidelines about confidentiality, respect, and types of participation creates safety and encourages sharing. Guidelines on levels of participation can give participants clarity on expectations. When learners have a hand in creating guidelines, they are also creating their own accepting, welcoming learning environment.

3 Sending a welcoming email: At the start of each course, sending a welcoming personal email with contact information and an offer to be of assistance can be very effective. This personal contact lets the participant know they are a welcome member of the group. Similarly, a welcoming telephone call or pre-course conference call can help establish a welcoming learning environment.

4 Pre-Course information: Sending clear information about the course, the technical requirements, and registration ahead of time to participants can ease a participant's curiosity about the course. This will also give them time to prepare to participate in the course. They might need to purchase a headset, for example, or download software. Including a well-written "Frequently Asked Questions" can also let the learner know that questions are welcomed and expected. It is important that the tone of this correspondence is welcoming and positive.

5 **Responding to participants:** As a facilitator, it is important to respond to posts or questions in a timely, positive manner. For participants, a response to a post or a question is one way they know that they have been "heard" by the facilitator. In face-to-face learning environments, we rely upon visual cues to know if we have been heard, however in online learning, we use text or verbal responses. Posts and questions that are met with silence can create self-doubt and confusion for learners. Prompt responses go a long way to validate that the learner's input has been received.

6 **Levels of participation:** Online learners participate in many different ways and different levels. For example, some participants like to read and reflect before submitting a selected number of posts, while others may respond to every post they read. By accepting that there are many ways to participate, facilitators are demonstrating respect for the level and type of participation of each learner. In a synchronous (live) online event, once again, some participants may eagerly respond to questions and activities while others may remain silent. Encouraging and supporting each learner regardless of their level of participation creates an accepting learning environment.

7 **Humour and Sarcasm:** Without the benefit of visual cues and context, humour and sarcasm can be misinterpreted by readers. This can create an unfriendly learning environment. Humour should be used with caution and sarcasm should be avoided.

8 **Be available:** Being available to participants throughout the course to answer questions, provide feedback, and discuss course content is an indication that you are interested in their progress. This is particularly important during the first part of the course when participants are learning about the technology as well as the course content. Having "office hours" when you can be contacted during the course or being in a chat room at specific times are ways to be available to learners.

When experienced face-to-face facilitators make the transition to facilitating in an online environment, they bring many skills and roles that are transferrable. The challenge is to adapt these to the online environment. Understanding the dynamics of online learning and the needs of the online learner can help us adapt. As a facilitator, it is critical to reflect on your practice to continually ask yourself: What are the needs of the learners? What information and skills do I need to ensure their learning goals are met? How can I continue to improve this learning experience? How can I improve my social, administrative, technical and

intellectual roles? Being an online facilitator provides an exciting and rewarding development opportunity for facilitators.

Encouraging Active Online Participation

You are finally in the situation where the course is ready to begin. Participants have been recruited and given appropriate information about accessing the course. Questions have been answered, energy and expectations are high. You've thought about ways to create a comfortable learning environment (see preceding section), and you are keen to get the learning going. It could be a twelve week synchronous course with six units or a three hour asynchronous afternoon workshop. In any event, these principles and "tips" for dealing with and responding to online learning apply in most situations.

Introduce yourself: If you haven't already done so, one of the first things to do is to introduce yourself. Say something brief about who you are, what your background in the subject is, and just a wee insight into your life, like a hobby, favourite activity, book, or sport. The purpose of this is to give people a sense that there is a human being at the end of the keyboard, or at the other end of their headset. In some ways, online learning can be an isolating mode of learning, so you have to develop an intentional community. Letting the participants know who you are will go a long way in getting that process started.

Familiarize yourself with online etiquette: Like Emily Post's *Miss Manners,* there is a series of common sense rules of engagement that have evolved for online communication. Having a positive tone and displaying respect for others are just two fundamental principles of "netiquette". Read through several sources to get a sense of some of the basic approaches and to be tipped off on some of the evolving polite practices. We have included a number of these in the resource section of this chapter.

Set boundaries: In any situation where you are going to be interacting with people, it is important to establish boundaries. It is much easier to establish a boundary at the very beginning, rather than in mid stream when some folks may have inadvertently crossed the line. It is our ultimate intention to support learners in being active, independent learners; however, the newness of the learning mode can sometimes temporarily lead to passive, dependent behaviours. Here are some boundaries we believe are critical to establish at the very beginning.

Helpful boundaries for online facilitators:

Be clear about your role as a facilitator. Because you are the main person at the end of the computer, participants may not have a clear sense of your skill set and what you are willing and able to do for the success of the course. For example, they may think you are a computer wizard. If you are going to provide technical support as part of your role, let them know that. If not, be clear about that so people can make arrangements to have this support at their end. You will also want to make it clear to participants how you understand your role, or better stated, your philosophy of learning in this instance. Do you see yourself as an "expert" and the course will operate on a questions asked, questions answered basis? Or do you take a more collaborative view of learning, and will work to create an online community where everyone is a learner, and everyone is a teacher at one time or another?

Be clear about how available you will be as a facilitator. In a synchronous course, will you be checking in several times a day, responding to posts? Or will you check in every other day or every few days? Will you be replying to each and every post, or will you group the ideas together and make a general reply? The important thing is to be clear about what you are willing and able to do as a facilitator; that way your participants won't be in the sidelines wondering about why you haven't commented on their ideas. Because synchronous learning is available to learners 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, there is that temptation to want facilitators to be continually available.

Be clear about the level of support you will give to participants. In a synchronous session, let participants know if you will be recording the session for later use, if you are willing to take notes of the session for them, or if you expect them to do so themselves. There is no room for assumption in online learning. If you are going to provide regular feedback and some one-on-one tutoring, let people know. If you expect them to sort out their difficulties on their own, be clear about that as well so they have time to find applicable supports.

Be explicit in your communications. Think about, reflect upon and read about effective communication strategies. In online learning, everything you have ever read about active listening and paraphrasing will come in handy. You are trying to engage people in the moment, get their attention and focus their efforts on the learning at hand. These moments that you have with people are also moments that are broken up by other events

in people's lives. Your job is to remind them of where the group is in the learning, what is happening, and what is expected. It may seem tiresome, but it is important to develop the skill of being explicit and repetitive without being boring.

It is also helpful to make the parameters of your discussion clear at the beginning. If you only want to talk about and explore specific topics, say so. If you want to have a more open conversation that can go in different directions, be clear about that so others won't hesitate to jump in with an idea, thought or topic that hasn't yet been mentioned. Please see Tips section for a more detailed explanation.

Responding to online messages. In asynchronous learning, a good amount of the learning often happens through reading and responding to posts. As the facilitator, your job is to get the discussions going, keep them on track, and encourage people to delve deeper in the topic. There are ways to reply to participants' posts that keep the conversation going and encourage others to join in.

Tips for responding to online messages:

Model the on-line behaviour you are encouraging. If you want to encourage participants to be brief in their postings, you must also be brief. If you want them to engage others in the discussion, you must do that from the very beginning. For the most part, participants will follow your lead.

On the topic of brevity, it's a good idea to **be brief in your postings.** People don't want or need to read long passages. Think of yourself as the host/hostess at a cocktail party. You are not responsible for doing all the talking and coming up with all the ideas; you are working to get discussions started and moving along.

Acknowledge the person who has posted and **say something genuinely positive** about their posting. "*Thank you Cate for joining in with your personal experiences on the topic. As noted, there are many times that facilitators really feel in the dark about what's happening in an online class. . . .*"

When your class is just starting, **check the site frequently.** Be on the lookout for "*cries for help*". "*I just wrote a long message and then something happened and I lost the whole thing, this is so discouraging, what did I do wrong?*"

Respond promptly and directly to a participant's first post. Participants in a course must believe that someone is reading their messages. You don't have to reply to each and every one for the duration of the course, just in the beginning, until folks get the rhythm of how online learning works, and develop trust in the process.

Encourage participants to **be inclusive in their discussions** and not just focus on you, the facilitator. Work to widen the discussion and ask probing questions to the entire group not just to the person who has posted.

Don't feel that you have to post, and post, and post. Too much of the facilitator can appear desperate. Just wait and see what the response is. Check in at least once a day (more in the beginning as noted above) and see what's happening.

If you aren't getting a response **try some behind the scenes** phone calls or emails to see what's up. Don't be discouraged by initial deafening silences; just keep working to find out why. Consider contacting participants privately, as you may very well find out they've been out of town, been ill, or lost their internet connection.

Use open ended questions, or provocative points of view to draw out discussion. Gently challenge, inspire and even provoke participants by playing devil's advocate to tease out other points of view.

You are the host at this cocktail party, therefore, if the conversation moves to areas that you don't feel comfortable talking about, just gently steer them away from it. Don't be shy about saying, "*in this conference/forum we are focusing on . . . . perhaps in the next one we will talk about. . . .*"

Wrap-up. It's your role to wind down and wrap up the discussions.

Accept different learning styles. As in any teaching situation, in online learning you will be confronted with a variety of learning styles, preferences and temperaments. There will be people in your classes and online sessions who actively engage, readily respond to posts, have their hands up to "talk", and make regular use of the text chat function. There will also be people who read more than they post, prefer to stay in the background and will engage only when necessary. It is important to validate the divergent ways people engage in online learning and not

make the quieter ones feel less significant. Please see the Tips section for a real life example of this.

Time management is an issue. Because asynchronous learning is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, you run the risk of spending far more time on your online facilitation than you would in a face-to-face class. It is therefore important for you to have a clear plan of how often you will check into the course, and how many hours a week you will spend responding to participants. You will probably spend more time in the beginning as participants are getting used to the course and with each other, more so if this kind of learning experience is new to people. In synchronous learning, the time management factor to consider is the amount of time you take preparing for and setting up for the session.

Enforcing the ground rules. As discussed earlier in this chapter, it's a good idea to start any online learning session or course with some basic ground rules or rules of engagement. But what do you do when someone pushes the boundaries and breaks the rules? How do you enforce them? While there is the temptation to make the situation seem more complicated because the behaviour is happening in an online setting, the fundamental approach is the same one you would use in a face-to-face setting.

As you would in face-to-face facilitation, you first assess the transgression and determine if you need to approach the person directly or as part of the group. Sometimes you can gently remind people about the rule, without drawing direct attention to a specific person. "*I feel it necessary to remind the group that in this discussion forum we aren't judging people's ideas, rather we are trying to brainstorm as many different thoughts as possible.*" However, if you do have a participant who is making things uncomfortable for others, you will have to deal directly with them. You can do this by email, or by phone. We recommend telephone because you can deal with the situation immediately and the human voice is often gentler than email. Remember, you aren't reprimanding anyone; you are reminding them of the guideline, perhaps explaining why that guideline is important and hearing what the person has to say.

If you are working in a synchronous setting it is a good idea to think about this ahead of time, because you will have to act in the moment. Private text messages can sometimes get people back on track and re-focused, or made aware of the effect their actions are having on others. If that doesn't work, you can take away their text and or microphone privileges, and discuss the issue with them later. That is a very drastic

measure to take and one that shouldn't be taken lightly. It's a hard call because you need to deal with an unpleasant situation, and you don't want the negative situation to ruin the learning experience for others.

Provide regular updates. It is helpful if you provide regular updates, or summarize discussions for people who don't sign in every day. These regular updates enable people to stay on top of things when they can't manage to log in every day. It also gives people a sense of the bigger picture of what's happening with the course and what's coming up. In a synchronous setting, because course content is audio based, it's helpful to use the white board to summarize thoughts and reiterate what's been talked about.

Online Facilitation and Technology

An important consideration when facilitating online is, of course, the technology that you will be using. As we discussed in the Online Content chapter, creating an online course is not simply a matter of replicating face-to-face training in an online setting. Thanks to a myriad of new technology, as facilitators we have an exciting array of choices and options when it comes to how we want to deliver content.

As the facilitator, you do not have to be a technical expert, but you should have a working knowledge of the platform or software you are using so that you can use it effectively to deliver course content. Before you begin to plan your course, you will want to take the time to discover the various features and capabilities of the software you will be using as this can greatly impact the type of facilitation you offer. Will you use a discussion forum or live chat? Are there quizzes or test capabilities? Are there online journals or other ways that participants can track their progress and reflect on their learning? Are there ways for participants to interact with each other through file-sharing and messaging? Does your synchronous platform offer audio and visual capabilities so that you can interact with your participants in real time?

Knowing the software/platform and its capabilities will inform the type of activities that you can incorporate into the course you are facilitating. For example, most synchronous (live) systems will allow you to verbally ask a question and gather a quick yes/no response just as you would in a live setting. Within an asynchronous discussion you can pose a more complex question that requires an essay-type answer and participants can review the question, think about their response and type in a longer answer and even edit it at their convenience.

Sometimes, your decision about which activities to include will depend on whether you are facilitating in a synchronous or asynchronous setting. For example, if you engage participants in a problem-solving activity in a synchronous setting, you will be more likely to initiate an immediate brain-storming exercise. On the other hand, an asynchronous setting generally allows more time for reflection and fine-tuning of responses.

Many online learning activities can be adapted for either synchronous or asynchronous settings. For example, a discussion forum can be used in real time as a text-based "chat" or it can be used to post questions and ideas that participants respond to at their convenience. Quizzes can be set up to be time-limited and accessible during a certain period of time or again, they can be made available for access at the participants' convenience.

Whether you are facilitating a synchronous or an asynchronous online course, you can incorporate Web 2.0 technologies to add interest and interactivity. While these technologies can be used on their own, a major finding of the GO research was that the addition of Web 2.0 technology in online training events is an increasing trend. For example, you can highlight a particular skill or concept by showing a YouTube video. You can bring in a guest expert to your course by linking to a podcast. You can take your participants on a virtual fieldtrip using webcams. You can add a social dimension for participants to interact by setting up a Facebook group. Participants can work together on assignments by setting up and using a Wiki.

Because Web 2.0 technologies are user-friendly, experiential, easy to access, free and becoming increasingly popular in everyday life, their use has allowed online facilitators to incorporate peer-to-peer learning and facilitation. For more specific examples of how Web 2.0 is being used in online learning, be sure to refer to the *Technology* chapter in this manual.

As a facilitator, there are two important things to keep in mind. First, what type of technology are your participants already using? For example, if your participant group is younger, there is a good chance that they are already using Web 2.0 technologies and are very comfortable with technology in general. You will want to capture their interest by incorporating the tools they already use on a regular basis. Second, as a facilitator you can also be a learner. Take the time to play with the technology you are using and find out what it can do. Set aside a block of time before you finalize plans for your course and experiment with

an activity or technology feature that you haven't tried before to see if it offers a new way of delivering content or of providing interaction with participants. Don't be afraid to think outside the box. Boldly go where no facilitator has gone before!

Our Ten Top Tips for Online Facilitation

In the GO research, we found many examples of promising practices in online learning all across Canada. Now it is our turn to share. The Getting Online team is made up of five people who are experienced in both adult literacy and online learning. Based on our knowledge and experience, we are extremely pleased to each share our "Ten Top Tips for Online Facilitation" with you.

Top Tip #1   *Participate before you facilitate*

One of the best ways to learn how to be an effective online facilitator is to take the time to **participate in an online course** yourself. It wasn't until I became an online learner that I fully realized what students experience when they take part in the asynchronous Writing Out Loud Instructor online courses I teach.

The first online course I registered for was a disaster. I had a difficult time figuring out the software being used (WebCT) and I didn't ask any questions. I watched and "listened" as a few students posted answers to a question posed by the instructor. When I finally weighed in and joined the discussion, nothing happened! No one said anything. My words just sat there. It seemed like there were few other students who had a presence online and I wondered if the class was really small or if the other students were as hesitant as I was.

I had much better results six months later when I enrolled again in an online course. This time was different because I had previously met the professor and wasn't afraid to ask questions about technology or course content. Feeling more relaxed, I found it easy to engage in online discussions with the other students and was delighted with the richness and thoughtfulness of everyone's posts. Although the instructor was very much present, he stayed on the sidelines to give us direction, but not to direct the actual discussions. The students and their thoughts and ideas were always acknowledged and I felt my contributions were both valued and appreciated.

My two online experiences were like day and night, what to do and what not to do. I learned so much through my own reactions, but also through the actions, attitudes and approaches of both the instructors.

I highly recommend "participation before facilitation". Do a Google search for topics that interest you—from knitting to home decorating to hiking. You'll find lots of intriguing online learning opportunities and many of them are free. You might find, as I did, that being an online student can actually be better training for being an online facilitator than anything you'll find or read in books!

—(GO researcher/writer Deborah Morgan)

Top Tip #2: *Know Your Audience*

A top tip for online facilitation for me is to **know your audience.** For example, when I first started delivering online training to literacy practitioners in Ontario I was so excited by the technology that I forgot that my target audience was sometimes still struggling with technology. I needed to slow down and put myself in their shoes in terms of technology. This led me to create very user-friendly registration instructions and to just use the basic features of the technology in initial training sessions, so as not to overwhelm people.

Later, we used the full technological features when people became more comfortable, but initially we started off slow. Also, at first I thought everyone would be excited by the chance to build an online learning community. And some certainly were. However, in knowing my audience, I came to realize that the majority of people just wanted immediate "just in time" training and that they were too busy for anything but this. This lead me to offer highly focused online training for everyone and to create a longer-term discussion group for those that wanted to create a community and discuss issues in greater detail.

Taking the time to know your audience, their training goals and their needs and abilities will infinitely help you to be a better online facilitator.

—(GO researcher/writer Joanne Kaattari)

Top Tip #3: *Use a personalized approach to engage reluctant participants*

I have found that using a personalized approach is a highly effective way to get to the heart of why a participant isn't engaging. There may

be times in your online courses where a participant doesn't engage, or engages and then seemingly disappears. If a participant does not appear to be fully engaged or is less participative than others, a personal email or phone call can often help re-engage him or her. It is important for the facilitator to approach the individual in a supportive manner, stating you have noticed a decrease in participation and offering support to get the person re-engaged. Sometimes silence from a participant is assumed to be disinterest but personal phone calls and emails often reveal a technical difficulty that can be resolved, or that the person was travelling or busy with work projects, or that they have been ill, or that they have been actively reading everything, but have not responded. Sometimes this personal connection may also reveal that the participant does not find the course material relevant to their needs. This personal contact can have the effect of bringing a learner back into the learning group in a supportive way. It can also provide you with evaluation information to improve your facilitation skills and/or course content the next time round.

Calling or emailing participants who have not engaged in the learning process will help you to understand the nature of their non participation and will help you to mutually address their barriers and needs.

—(GO researcher/writer Lynn Best)
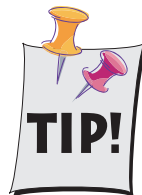
Top Tip #4: *Review basic technical instructions and features regularly*

Many of the people that I have worked with online are working full-time, have families and do not use technology, with the exception of email, on an ongoing basis. Because of this, it is important not to assume that people will remember from one learning session to the next how to use the technology. For example, I found in various Elluminate sessions, there are often gaps of several weeks between learning events. It is understandable that people may forget how to use the technology. One way I found to compensate for this was to incorporate a review of the technology in my welcoming remarks. As people logged in, I had posted instructions on the whiteboard which served to guide them to do an audio and voice check. Once all participants had joined in to the online training session, I did a quick tour to review with them how to activate the microphone, raise their hands, use the chat function, use emoticons and so forth. While some might remember instructions from session to session, it's a good practice to remind all participants in this generic manner. As well this supports new participants in helping them to feel comfortable with the technology and ready to participate.

People have varying levels of skills in using technology so it is helpful to review basic technical instructions and features on a regular basis.

—(GO researcher/writer Diana Twiss)

Top Tip #5:   *Be comfortable and familiar with the technology*

As an online facilitator, you don't have to be a technical expert. I'm certainly not! However, it is important to have a good working knowledge of the software or learning management system you are using. There are two reasons for this.

First, if you know how the technology works and what it can do, you can take advantage of the various features to offer a wide variety of learning activities or interactivity. For example, when using Moodle to develop a course recently, I tried out all of the various activities available to me to see what each of them could do and how I might use those activities to support the course material. I discovered some interesting features and ways to manipulate them that I hadn't previously known about.

Second, if you are familiar with the technology you can provide some basic support to participants. This doesn't mean that you have to be a technical expert by any means, but it does mean that you can quickly respond to a participant who wants to know how to attach a document to a discussion forum or how to use the microphone during a synchronous session. It is also a good idea to have a phone number or other contact information available where participants can get technical support for more complicated problems.

When I am developing a course, I always try to take at least a day to just play with the technology and try things out. Push buttons, see what happens!

It is important for an online facilitator to be comfortable with the technology being used. This doesn't mean being an expert, but it does mean knowing how the various features work and being able to respond to participants' questions or to know where to direct them for help.

—(GO researcher/writer Vicki Trottier)

Top Tip #6:   *Provide an early opportunity for personal connection amongst participants*

In courses where participants do not know each other, it's important for facilitators to provide an early opportunity for personal connection.

Often participants will value knowing basic information about their peers such as: which communities, provinces or countries do participants come from? Do they have similar learning goals and interests? How can they learn from each other?

For example, during the GO online course, facilitators hosted teleconferences a few days before the course started. The participants phoned into a toll-free teleconference bridge at a specific time so that all the participants were on the phone at the same time. The purpose of the call was to introduce the course participants, ensure everyone had access to the course site and had received the learning materials, as well as to answer any questions participants might have. The added benefit of this call was to hear the voices of the other learners and learn about their work, which helped give a context when reading participants' posts. This helped participants to communicate with each other from the very beginning. It also gave facilitators a chance to give participants the exact same information and to clearly establish some general expectations and the offer of support if anyone needed it.

Giving participants the chance to make a personal connection with each other goes a long way in creating a welcoming environment.

—(GO researcher/writer Lynn Best)

Top Tip #7: *Acknowledge and Expect Varying Levels of Participation and Interaction*

Another top tip from my perspective is to accept that participants will be comfortable with different levels of participation and interaction. For example, the first time that I delivered an online course I had very much hoped for a high degree of interaction and participation from all participants. I developed engaging activities, worked hard to create a welcoming environment and bent over backwards to acknowledge all participant comments and to try to "tease" out comments from those who were not participating. And, most participants did actively participate. However, several participants remained silent. Somehow, I felt like I had "failed" these silent participants!

I thought about this and in my next online course, I instead decided to accept that people have different learning styles and that some prefer to learn by reading or listening to the comments of others. Instead of trying to push everyone into participating, I instead worked hard to ensure that I created an excellent and user-friendly online environment

in terms of content, activities and facilitation. I validated to participants that not everyone needed to participate and that their presence was still a welcome component of the online class. The fact that they were learning and enjoying the course became more important than whether they participated or not. This made for a wonderful dynamic. The majority of participants actively participated, some chose not too (and felt validated in this choice), and everyone could relax and learn in the way that felt "right" to them. And, I later received several emails from the quieter participants saying how much they appreciated having their particular learning style accepted!

It is important for an online facilitator to accept and acknowledge that people have different learning styles and will be comfortable with varying levels of interactivity during online learning.

—(GO researcher/writer Joanne Kaattari)

Top Tip #8: *Listen to and review past recordings of synchronous sessions*

Facilitating an Elluminate session for the first time is quite an exciting event, and for me, the time passed quickly. Learning how to speak to a group of people through the microphone seemed a lot like being a DJ on an all-night radio program. Not sure about how the participants were receiving the information, I relied heavily on the emoticons to get a sense of levels of understanding and agreement, and when they weren't being used by the participants, I felt like I rambled on and on trying to make my point. Despite this minor difficulty, this kind of facilitation excited me. I wanted to get better at it so I wasn't boring people with my monologues, taking up too much space trying to make my point. Sounds pretty negative, but that is the way I felt I was being, until I started listening to recordings of the Elluminate sessions. We choose to record each Elluminate session so we can make notes from them and also to accommodate others who couldn't attend.

At first it was painful listening to myself (do I really sound that way?) but the experience was rich and offered me the best kind of feedback for improvement. I learned that I needed to speak a little more slowly, to pause a bit between thoughts and to provide regular verbal summaries of my thoughts and the ideas of others. I learned that what seemed like an eternity at my end—ask a question and there is a deafening silence—was really only a few seconds, the amount of time it usually takes for folks to process info and decide to reply. Because I couldn't see the thought

processes as they were unfolding for participants, the time seemed much longer than it actually was. I also learned to add a bit more inflection to my voice levels, but not too much as I didn't want to sound like the perky traffic report gal on the country radio station. ☺

—(GO researcher/writer Diana Twiss)

Top Tip #9: *Co-facilitate when possible*

In both synchronous Centra and asynchronous Moodle sessions I have facilitated, I have benefitted enormously from working with a co-facilitator.

Facilitating a Centra session requires that you pay attention to a variety of things at once; all in the same instance you are listening to what participants are saying, constructing answers, leading the group towards your desired goal, reading the text chat space, responding to text chats, making decisions, manipulating the white board and so on. When using a co-facilitation model, my partner and I take turns: when one is doing the talking, the other is keeping track of the questions that are coming up on the text chat and trouble-shooting any technical glitches that may arise. We also both have a complete copy of any documents relating to the Centra session including all activities, any supporting documents and any presentation notes. That way we can also step in if something happens, and it has! On one occasion, my co-facilitator lost hydro at her location and I had to step in. On another occasion, I lost my voice and she stepped in for me. Because we were prepared and had practiced our Centra session ahead of time, the transition from one partner to the other was seamless, and participants didn't know the difference.

In an asynchronous course the shared facilitation gave us the chance to take a bit of a break from the demands of replying to participants posts, and to also have someone else to discuss issues and problems arising within the group. In a recent Moodle session, I was tied up with meetings for a few days and wasn't able to access the course as often as I would have liked. My co-facilitator made sure that she was available so that participant comments and questions were responded to promptly. Having two facilitators responding to posts also helps add variety, and it doesn't seem as if one person is doing all the "talking".

A co-facilitation model can be a great help in both synchronous and asynchronous online training. It offers variety for the participants, and it also means that the facilitator doesn't feel overwhelmed.

—(GO researcher/writer Vicki Trottier)

Top Tip #10: *Be genuine and authentic*

In any facilitation or instructional role, it is important to be genuine and authentic. This is especially true in an online learning environment. Without being able to physically see the facilitator in an asynchronous or synchronous online course, students often depend on the "feeling" they get from watching and listening to the facilitator connect and interact with others online before deciding if the facilitator can be trusted.

An authentic voice is critical for online communication. If your voice online (spoken or written) reflects an attitude of good intentions and respect for others, students will sense your sincerity. It's uncanny how students are able to "read between the lines" and pick up on the genuineness of a facilitator.

I've learned that honesty is key. I was afraid once to admit to a class that I wasn't as comfortable with some new technology being tried as I'd hoped I would be before the class started. I thought the students would think I was incompetent (which is how I felt!). Instead, the group rallied together and basically said, "No problem; we can learn it together!"

It's okay to be open and honest with a group about your limitations as well as your strengths. That way, you're setting an example that will encourage students to do the same. We all appreciate and naturally respond to honesty.

Remember to keep it human. Be yourself. Try not to lose sight of the human aspects of online facilitation and interaction. Online learning is not just about technology; it's about sharing ideas and generating knowledge with other human beings … and it's about being real.

—(GO researcher/writer Deborah Morgan)

Conclusion

Online teaching amazes me because we can link students from all across our province, across our nation or even across our world to discussed issues. The ability to learn from diverse voices who would never get the chance to meet in a face-to-face learning setting is just one of the many things that I believe makes teaching online extremely rewarding.

—GO staff researcher

Online facilitation leads us to new and fascinating arenas of teaching and learning. Many of us came to online facilitation from our experiences in face-to-face teaching. We had to identify which aspects of our personal facilitation style worked well for us in face-to-face situations, and then figure how (and if) we could translate and adapt them to online settings. Through trial and error, we had to decide which of our teaching "tricks and tools" we had to totally abandon and what new skills we had to learn. For some of us, the experience of being online learners ourselves helped us to understand how to work with the complexities of what the participants in our courses were experiencing.

Despite the newness of the medium, the fundamental approach to working with learners applies equally in an online setting as it does in a face-to-face classroom. It is important to remember Principle Four, as noted by Henry and Meadows in their article *An Absolutely Riveting Online Course: Nine Principles for Excellence in Web Based Teaching:* "Great online courses are defined by teaching, not technology". Please be inspired by the technology available for online learning, but don't become a slave to it, or intimidated by it. Enjoy the challenge of developing your facilitation skills in this new realm and remember, many people have gone before us so there are a wealth of excellent resources available to provide guidance and ideas. We hope ours was useful. Best of luck.

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Bridging Distance

Promising Practices in Online Learning in the Canadian Literacy Community

Case studies

During the Getting Online research, we learned about many successful online learning opportunities that were occurring across Canada. We have included information about many of these opportunities in the *Bridging Distance* resource guide and in the GO research report.

However, within this chapter of *Bridging Distance,* the GO team wanted to share two case studies about online learning in more detail. We picked two scenarios that are well-known to us: our very own GO online training course and the online learning activities of one of the Getting Online partners: Community Literacy of Ontario.

CASE STUDY 1: GO Online Training Course

Introduction

One of the goals of the Getting Online Project was to develop an introductory online course for literacy practitioners who wanted to experience this environment for the purpose of learning and/or teaching online. This case study will present our experiences and learning in the planning, development, and delivery of the pilot course and the subsequent delivery of three courses to literacy practitioners from across Canada. The course was called *Introduction to Online Learning.*

Pilot

The purpose of the Getting Online pilot course was to introduce online learning as an optional tool for professional development for literacy practitioners in Canada. The technical support for the course was supported by Athabasca University. The foundation for the pilot came from our previous experiences with online learning and the GO research. For the pilot, we wanted to find participants who would be willing to take part in the course and provide some feedback to the GO project team about their learning experience. Three of the participants were experienced online learners, and three had no experience with online learning. This course was delivered using Moodle, Elluminate, and teleconferencing. The pilot course was six weeks in length and was delivered from April 14 to May 23, 2008. The learning objectives were the following:

► Participants will develop online learning skills.

► Participants will participate in the creation of an online learning community among literacy practitioners.

► Participants will be exposed to several distance learning delivery/communications/support platforms.

► Participants will be informed about the potential application of distance learning to the literacy field.

► Participants will work within the model of the principles of adult education.

To prepare ourselves and learners for the course, the GO team sent a package of information that included: a welcome letter and contact information, information on how to access Moodle, the course schedule, and the text book used for the course (*Building Online Communities*

by Pratt and Proloff). In addition, a pre-assessment questionnaire was emailed to participants. This questionnaire gave the course facilitators an understanding of each participant's background with online learning as well as their attitude toward this type of learning.

Pilot Course Content:

The pilot course consisted of 4 units over a 6-week period. These units were:

1 Getting Started

The purpose of this one-week unit was for participants to get personally and technically ready for the course. Prior to the start of the course, all participants were invited to phone into a toll-free bridge for an hour long teleconference. This meeting was used as an opportunity to ensure participants had received all the course materials, as well as to review course material and expectations. The teleconference also started the process of getting to know each other. On the first day of the course, a welcome email was sent to each participant. During this unit, participants posted their bios and pictures online, did some preliminary research on the Getting Online project, as well as explored the Moodle site.

2 Welcome to Online Learning

Unit 2 was a two-week unit in which participants identified and discussed common characteristics, requirements, roles, and attitudes towards online learning. At this point, participants were introduced to Elluminate, a synchronous system with text, audio, and video capabilities. This session had two purposes: to demonstrate the features of Elluminate and to have a discussion about the differences between face-to-face and distance learning. Other activities were to complete readings and post discussions regarding group guidelines.

3 Online Learning Communities

Unit 3 was a two-week unit where we summarized the key components, attributes and behaviours of a well-functioning online community. We also introduced the concepts of teaching presence. Learning activities to achieve these goals included completing online learning style assessments, partnering activities related to reading material, and posting discussions and responses.

4 **Online Learning and Literacy**

The goal of Unit 4 (a one-week unit) was to consider how online learning might benefit literacy practitioners and the broader literacy field in Canada. Participants were encouraged to find and share examples of how distance education was being used in literacy. We held a final evaluation session by Elluminate to discuss the course experiences of the participants and to get feedback on how the course could be improved. In addition, an evaluation form was sent by email to each participant by the Getting Online project evaluator.

Key Findings from the Pilot

The discussion and written evaluations from both participants and facilitators of the pilot program resulted in the following key findings:

► A relaxed, informal approach was effective for the participants and facilitators

► Expectations for interaction need to be clear at the onset of the course

► Interaction between participants did not happen until the mid-point of the course

► Early engagement of participants is necessary for their success

► Participants did not catch up when they missed the first sessions

► The occasional lulls in group participation affected the energy of the facilitators

► Participants have a need to know basic background information about fellow participants

► Isolation for participants disappears as a learning community emerges

► Overall, the participants enjoyed the technology

► The participants are eager for more learning

► Collaborative learning creates enriched learning

► Email, teleconferencing, Moodle and Elluminate meetings worked well together

► Do not assume anything about the knowledge and skills of participants related to technology

► A good way to learn about online learning is to be an online learner

► Participants and facilitators learned together

Introduction to Online Learning Courses 1, 2 and 3

The *Introduction to Online Learning* course was a non credit distance learning opportunity. Based on the pilot feedback, recommendations, and identification of key findings, for Course 1 we did the following:

► Extended the course from six to eight weeks in length, extending units one and four to be two weeks long

► Kept the course materials and outline

► Clarified and established expectations for online participation at the beginning of each course

► Introduced an additional Elluminate session, for a total of three sessions per course.

We practiced continuous improvement for the subsequent courses, making changes based upon participant feedback during the course and obtained through formal evaluations. For example, in Course 2 we cleaned up the Moodle site, making the site more sequential. In Course 3 we incorporated the use of Web 2.0 technologies like wikis and YouTube videos, and other interactive web tools. We also explored the use of more learning activities available through Moodle.

The three Introduction to Online Learning courses attracted literacy practitioners from across Canada. With the exception of the last course, each course was co-facilitated by two GO team members. The courses were delivered on the following dates:

► October 6 to November 28, 2008

► January 12 to March 6, 2009

► March 23 to May 15, 2009

Recruitment

The participants in the pilot program were identified through the surveys conducted as part of the GO research. Each participant was invited to participate and was paid a small honorarium for providing feedback on the course to the GO project team. Participants for the three additional courses were recruited through advertisement in provincial literacy newsletters. Each class had approximately 15 participants, with an average of 12 participants completing each course. There were no course fees charged; however participants were responsible for purchasing their own text book.

Facilitation

Our approach to the facilitation of the pilot and the *Introduction to Online Learning* courses was based on proven adult education principles and practices. In particular, we:

► Adopted a respectful, learner centered approach

► Viewed ourselves as guides to the learning process rather than the sole providers of knowledge

► Remained open to learning from and with participants throughout the course

► Emphasized enjoyment of the course and tried to make it fun

► Continually monitored and updated activities and methods to keep participants fully engaged and satisfied

► Continually tried to anticipate learners' needs and interests while exploring ways to meet those needs

► Promoted and encouraged the development of a learning community

► Among facilitators, communicated and shared successes and frustrations

► As co-facilitators, shared responsibilities and online "checking in" commitments.

Technology and Course Materials

The pilot course and the three sessions of the *Introduction to Online Learning* course used a variety of learning technologies. Our course used Moodle as the delivery platform. We were provided with technical assistance by Athabasca University. We also used Elluminate, a synchronous learning system with text, audio, and video capabilities. Teleconferencing was used at the beginning of each course as a method of introducing participants to each other and as a way for the facilitators to provide a course overview. We also used personal email and phone calls throughout each course as needed.

Conclusion

As a result of facilitating the delivery of the pilot and the three *Introduction to Online Learning* courses, we have noticed that the nature of the participant profile has evolved. Course participants originally wanted to know what online learning is and now, because of increased skills and knowledge about learning technologies, are increasingly

interested in learning how to facilitate and develop online learning for their programs. With the explosion in the availability of online learning opportunities, the needs of literacy practitioners have changed and become more advanced.

More information about developing online content, exploring online learning technologies and being an online learner can be found in the other chapters of *Bridging Distance.*

CASE STUDY 2: Community Literacy of Ontario

Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) is a provincial literacy network serving 105 literacy agencies across Ontario. CLO has developed and delivered online training for the past 10 years. CLO has extensive experience in developing online curriculum and an in-depth knowledge of effective techniques for facilitating online learning. Along with Capilano University, Literacy BC and Writing Out Loud, Community Literacy of Ontario was one of the partners in the Getting Online project.

Given that CLO is a provincial network serving both large and small community literacy agencies in communities all across Ontario, technology has allowed us to effectively provide training and resources to our member agencies. Our agencies have small budgets and travelling to central locations for face-to-face training presents many barriers including costs and time.

Literacy practitioners in Ontario's community literacy agencies have appreciated the opportunity to participate in online learning and the access to training that it provided. CLO has received overwhelmingly positive evaluations to our online training activities.

Community Literacy of Ontario's online learning activities have included:

▶ Facilitating an online discussion group for Ontario's community literacy agencies for over 10 years (1998–2009).

▶ Offering two asynchronous online workshops: Board-Staff Relations (1999) and Volunteer Recruitment (2000).

▶ Delivering live, interactive online workshops on five different topics related to organizational development using Centra Symposium (2001–2002).

► Collaborating with the Centre for Family Literacy in Alberta, and offering live, interactive National Foundational Training in Family Literacy online on Centra to three different classes (2003–2005).

► Delivering live, interactive online workshops on a variety of topics including: Volunteer Management; Learner Follow-up and Exit Strategies; Volunteer Management; Program Evaluation; Marketing; Strategic Planning; and the Essential Skills on Centra Symposium (2005–2008).

► Creating its highly regarded self-study online training website called Literacy Basics. Between 2005 and 2008 a total of 11 online training modules were added to the site covering a wide range of topics from Learner Recruitment to Instructional Strategies to Learner Assessment. See: **www.nald.ca/literacybasics**.

► Currently creating a classroom on Moodle about performance management in literacy agencies. This classroom was launched in May 2009.

For more information on CLO, please visit: **www.nald.ca/clo**

While CLO has offered online training on diverse topics and has used many different technologies, using effective online facilitation techniques has remained a constant priority for us. Here are some of the key online facilitation techniques that have resulted in CLO delivering successful online training for many years.

► Carefully considering the technical issues facing our audience, including their computer hardware, software, connection speeds and comfort and experience with online learning platforms and adapting our online training to meet these needs and barriers.

► Carefully considering the needs and interests of our audience and adapting the online content accordingly.

► Engaging in extensive planning and preparation to ensure high quality online content and activities.

► Field testing our registration instructions and technical instructions with literacy practitioners for clarity before releasing them generally.

► Field testing our online content and activities with literacy practitioners prior to delivery.

► Focusing on developing excellent online content and activities not on "wowing" people with technology.

► Choosing user-friendly and appropriate online learning platforms that were suitable for our target audience.

► Encouraging literacy practitioners in the use of technology and making it comfortable, non-threatening and often even fun for them!

► Building on the strengths of online learning and letting people know that they could easily and effectively learn and interact with their peers all across our province.

► Sending personal email to each participant to create a welcoming environment right from the beginning.

► Developing group guidelines to ensure that the online environment was respectful and safe.

► Committing to active, daily facilitation and ongoing interaction with participants.

► Using a team approach to facilitation to ensure that participants heard different voices and perspectives and to ease the time constraints on the facilitators.

► Carefully considering the training needs and time constraints of our audience and offering timely and relevant content based on their identified training goals.

► Carefully evaluating all training to determine what worked well and what could be improved and then incorporating ideas for change into future training opportunities.

► Keeping abreast of developments in online learning and incorporating new ideas and technologies as appropriate.

► Not trying to replicate face-to-face delivery of content but rather taking advantage of the technology and using it in new and creative ways to deliver content effectively.

► Taking time to "play" with the technology and discover new and interesting ways of using it. CLO's online facilitators dedicated specific time during each online training project to try out the various features of the technology being used and experiment with it.

Community Literacy of Ontario also prepared two resource guides about online learning and facilitation that are freely available online:

► *Tips and Tools for Developing and Delivering an Online Workshop:* **www.nald.ca/clo/resource/tandt.htm**

► *Workshops the Wired Way:* **www.nald.ca/clo/resource/wired/cover.htm**