Getting Online Project – On the Move!

Getting Online (GO): Distance Education Promising Practices for Canadian Literacy Practitioners Project is a two-year national project designed to research emerging trends, technologies, and promising practices in online learning in the adult literacy community in Canada and other fields of practice.

The research phase of the project is now complete. GO team members have completed the analysis and writing of *Getting Online: A Research Report on Online Learning for Canadian Literacy Practitioners*. This report overviews the research results into trends and issues in online learning in Canada, and includes:

- Research methodologies and initial findings
- Current methods of delivering online learning
- Successes and innovative approaches to online learning
- Online learning technologies
- Effective techniques for introducing online learning
- Differences between face-to-face and online learning
- Evaluation methods and results for online learning
- Perceptions of the future of online learning

The GO research report now enters the editing and production phase and will be ready for circulation in Fall 2008. When complete, *Getting Online: A Research Report on Online Learning for Canadian Literacy Practitioners* will be posted on the GO website (www.nald.ca/gettingonline).

A limited number of hard copies will also be available upon request.

In Spring 2008, the GO team successfully ran an online pilot course with six literacy practitioners from various Canadian provinces. This course was designed to introduce literacy practitioners to the use and value of distance learning opportunities and applications. Pilot results are being reviewed and additional online courses will be more widely offered starting in Fall 2008. Some of the topics covered in this course included:

- The roles and responsibilities of online learners and facilitators
- The differences between online and face-to-face learning
- Building online communities

GO team members were pleased to present project research results, an overview of the online pilot course, and a discussion of project goals and deliverables at the *Distance Education Technology Symposium* held in Edmonton by Athabasca University in June 2008.

Other GO project activities still in progress, in addition to the online training and research mentioned above, include:

- Researching and writing a resource guide about promising practices in online learning
- Developing self-study, web-based training modules about promising practices in online learning
- Writing articles for academic journals and literacy publications (please see the excellent article about GO in the Spring 2008 edition of *Literacies* at www.literacyjournal.ca)
- Presenting GO research results at several conferences

The GO Project is hosted by Athabasca University. It brings together various project partners including Community Literacy of Ontario, Writing Out Loud (Alberta), and Capilano College (British Columbia). GO is funded by the National Office of Literacy and Learning (Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program of the Government of Canada).

The pan-Canadian GO Project team is made up of: Lynn Best (Newfoundland), Pat Fahy (Alberta), Joanne Kaattari (Ontario), Deborah Morgan (Alberta), Vicki Trottier (Ontario), and Diana Twiss (British Columbia).

For more information on the GO project, please visit our website at: www.nald.ca/gettingonline.

Update on the GO Pilot Online Learning Course

The GO project was pleased to offer the *"Introduction to Online Learning Course"* from April to May 2008. This online learning opportunity was a 6-week pilot course designed to introduce online learning to literacy practitioners across Canada. This valuable course was developed and facilitated by Lynn Best, Deborah Morgan, and Diana Twiss, with support from Athabasca University.

Six literacy practitioners from diverse Canadian communities participated in the pilot course. All were new to online learning. The course was developed using the Moodle platform and was supported by other forms of technology including Elluminate, conference calls, email and telephone.

The "*Introduction to Online Learning Course*" had the following goals:

- To gain personal and technical readiness for the course
- To identify and discuss common characteristics, requirements, roles, and attitudes in online learning
- To summarize the key components, attributes, and behaviours of a well-functioning online community
- To consider how online distance learning might benefit literacy practitioners and the broader literacy field

The course content included a variety of online learning activities, selected readings, posting to discussion boards, partnering with other participants on assignments, researching using the internet, and using internet-based assessment tools.

Because the GO team closely tracked findings, we can report the lessons learned from the online course as follows:

- A relaxed, supportive, unhurried approach worked best for this group
- Isolation disappears when community emerges
- Participants enjoyed trying out and "playing" with technology
- Participants were eager for more learning
- Collaborative learning creates enriched learning
- Moodle was an effective online learning tool
- Elluminate meetings, Email, and Moodle work well together
- Don't assume anything about participants' technical knowledge or skills

- The only way to learn about online learning is to be an online learner
- Participants and facilitators learned together

The facilitators and participants also noted areas of improvement including:

- Early engagement is necessary for success
- Earlier establishment of social presence will encourage participation
- Expectations of online interaction could be more clearly defined

The Getting Online Project team will be offering three more online courses in 2008 and 2009. Please read on to learn about these future opportunities!

The last word about this innovative course goes to one of the course participants*:*

"I really appreciated being able to get my toes wet with all this technology. I had read about online learning, but I really didn't get it. This course has been a very helpful experience".

Training Opportunity for Literacy Practitioners: GO Online Learning Courses

Are you curious about online learning? Are you interested in developing skills with learning technologies? Do you want to experience online learning but are unsure where to start? The Getting Online (GO) Project team is excited to offer an **Introduction to Online Learning** course that has been specially designed for literacy practitioners in Canada.

This 8-week online course will explore a variety of topics such as:

- Personal hopes and fears about online learning
- Building online learning communities
- Online learning and the literacy field

Participants will be introduced to various learning technologies including Moodle, Elluminate, and teleconferencing. The course will be offered three times on the following dates:

- October 6 to November 28, 2008
- January 12 to March 6, 2009
- March 23 to May 15, 2009

Participants in the course will be supported by facilitators who are skilled in working with people who are new to online learning technologies. To participate, you will need:

- A computer with internet access
- A headset with a built-in microphone (available for approximately $20.00 at most large department or electronics stores) or a microphone and speakers
- Basic word processing skills and technical ability to send emails and browse the internet

Registration for each course is limited to 15 participants. Course fees are $55.00 which includes all course materials. For further information or to register, please contact Deborah Morgan by email at deborah_morgan@elit.ca. Courses will be filled on a first come, first served basis.

Update on the GO Research into Online Learning in the Canadian Literacy Community

During the first phase of the project, the GO team researched what was happening in online learning both within the Canadian literacy community and in other similar areas of practice, including not-for-profit organizations, educational institutions and government departments. To reach as many organizations as possible, a survey was developed and distributed electronically to all regions of Canada via email and the GO website. Key informant interviews were also held, and web-based research was conducted. Online learning information was gathered about large and small organizations in all areas of the country and included input from organizations with a national, provincial, regional or local focus.

In this newsletter, we will share an overview of the research finding regarding online learning in the Canadian literacy community. In the Fall 2008 newsletter, we will highlight research results of online learning in other areas of practice.

The full research report will be available in Fall 2008 on the GO website, but we can provide a brief overview of the findings below.

Highlights of the research findings related to online learning in the Canadian literacy community

Over 90 literacy practitioners from across Canada completed the online GO research survey; some of these practitioners had significant experience with online learning while others had little or no experience. An additional 25 literacy practitioners provided key informant interviews, and two provincial focus groups were held. The information provided by the responses to the survey, interviews and focus group helped to paint a picture of online learning in the Canadian literacy field.

The first question asked about the type of technology being used for online learning. There was a wide variety of technology reported as being used including conferencing software, asynchronous discussions and synchronous training workshops. The most popular software being used was First Class and Centra, but many other platforms were also mentioned.

Respondents made note of specific courses offered by literacy organizations around the country.

The most commonly cited reason for using online learning in the literacy field was to establish and maintain connections. Saving time and money and keeping up to date with current initiatives were also mentioned.

In terms of the results achieved from online learning opportunities, respondents and interviewees reported a mix of both positive and negative results. Although the GO research asked about online learning opportunities for literacy practitioners, some respondents reported findings from online learning opportunities for literacy learners, making it difficult to accurately report data. Although positive results from online training outweighed negative results for a wide variety of reasons, it is interesting to note that negative results focused on frustrations around technology and learning styles.

Literacy organizations that have been involved with online learning have evaluated their efforts both formally and informally. Generally, formal evaluation has been done through the use of

anonymous surveys combined with documented observations from the delivery organization. Informal evaluation consisted of general feedback about the learning opportunity.

The GO survey asked if online learning produced different results than face-to-face learning; responses indicated that there was no clear preference for one method over the other. It very much seemed to depend on personal preference. Some literacy practitioners have embraced online learning while others find it a difficult way to access training.

Respondents were also asked about the methods used to introduce online training. Many of them reported on the level of support that was provided to help new participants gain a comfort level with the technology and the concepts of online learning. A number noted that an "introduction to online learning" component was included as part of the training itself.

Finally, the survey asked about the potential future of online learning in the Canadian literacy community. Most of those who answered this question stated that there is a great deal of potential in online learning and expressed a keen interest in finding ways to make the technology work and to maximize the benefits. Although there was some reluctance to give up face-to-face learning opportunities, there was also a general recognition that online learning can provide significant savings in terms of time, travel and money for participants.

I see lots of potential! I would not want it to replace face-to-face, but it would be a welcome addition to what we have. Practitioners are generally working part-time and have children at home, to be able to train is a luxury, to do it at home would be a great add on.

(Survey respondent from a community-based organization)

Literacy Technology

In addition to the survey and key informant interviews, a survey about the technology being used was completed by eight leading Canadian literacy organizations. Five of these organizations were provincial in nature, one was a national database, one provided technical support for an online system and one was a training provider. The respondents were located in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia.These organizations reported using quite a variety of online technology and training approaches including Moodle, First Class, Centra, Elluminate, websites, discussion groups and more.

When asked why they chose the software or approach that they did, five of the eight reported that their choice reflected the variety of options and flexibility offered. Cost, ease of use, sustainability and future potential were also cited as reasons for choosing a particular software or online training approach.

All respondents indicated that they were happy with their choices and would continue to offer online learning using the methods currently being used, but most of them also said that they would like to explore new methods and technologies. When asked for a "wish list" of future technology that would be beneficial for online learning, enhancements such as video, podcasting, accessibility software, built-in tutorials, and integrated email were mentioned.

Be sure to watch for more findings from the research report in our Fall 2008 newsletter!

Stayed tuned to the GO website www.nald.ca/gettingonline for more at information or contact one of our researchers!
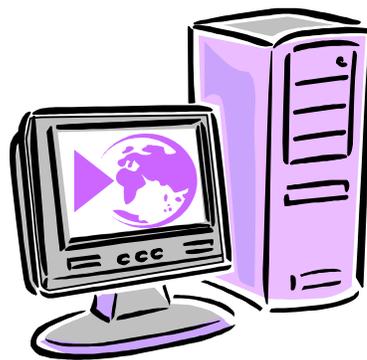
Research Team

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE GO PROJECT KINDLY CONTACT ONE OF OUR RESEARCH TEAM MEMBERS.

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