

OTAN Distance Learning Forum:

Building the Skills Adults Need to Succeed as Online Learners

October 23, 2009

This document presents background information about AlphaRoute and distance learning research managed by the AlphaPlus Centre in Ontario, and the e-Channel distance learning program called the LearningHub, managed by the Avon Maitland District School Board in Ontario. Summary snapshots of this information were presented as part of the OTAN Distance Learning Forum Series by Matthias Sturm and Nancy Friday from the AlphaPlus Centre and Heather Robinet and Courtney McGee from the Avon Maitland District School Board in Ontario, Canada.

ALPHAROUTE ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Managed by AlphaPlus, AlphaRoute is an adult literacy online learning environment developed for the Deaf, Aboriginal, Francophone, and Anglophone communities of the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program, the publicly funded Adult Basic Education (ABE) program of the province of Ontario, Canada. AlphaRoute has come a long way since its inception in 1996 as a small Ontario pilot study on the feasibility of using online learning in adult literacy programs. AlphaRoute has been unique in Canada because it

- targeted adult literacy students who wanted to learn online (since 2000)
- offered adult literacy students ongoing mentor support from trained LBS and ABE program practitioners
- offered ongoing learning opportunities which complements and reflected learning goal areas expressed by adult literacy students
- offered an online community for adult literacy students to learn online together within a password-protected learning environment
- offered short asynchronous online courses for adult learners to take (since 2005),
- provided opportunities for adult literacy students to developed leadership skills within a pan-Canadian community
- provided Canadian online content for adult literacy students, and
- provided the adult literacy field with research data about the state of e-learning in Canada.

16,000 Ontario adult learners supported by 1,400 Ontario mentors have registered in AlphaRoute since 2000. AlphaRoute has welcomed as well 1,000 learners and 300 mentors from 6 provinces and 2 territories outside of Ontario. Since 2005, 37 online courses developed on WebBoard and in Moodle have been offered to hundreds of AlphaRoute learners and mentors across Canada.

Ontario and Canada have a long history of promoting e-learning within an adult literacy context. AlphaPlus welcomed in 2007 the addition of three e-Channel Literacy programs to forward the further integration of technology into literacy practice and extend the reach of literacy to a broader audience within Employment Ontario.

To learn more about AlphaRoute and use the 60-day public trial access go to <http://www.resources.alpharoute.org>. To read research reports about AlphaRoute click on the History link.

DISTANCE AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING PILOT PROJECT RESEARCH

From 2003 to 2005, with support from the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) and the federal Human Resources and Social Development (HRSD), AlphaPlus led distance and flexible learning pilot project research to explore possibilities for distance and flexible delivery of the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program in Ontario.

The research, informed by pilot site experience, explored how distance learning and flexible delivery of Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs can address the various barriers often experienced by adult learners who require literacy learner support. These barriers include significant distance to existing services, child care needs, work schedule restrictions, lack of enrolment space in on-site programs, needs for learning at a different pace or on a different schedule, discomfort or lack of confidence when participating in large groups, and more.

AlphaPlus Centre coordinated the research and provided the MTCU with research results to inform policy and practice in distance learning on an ongoing basis. AlphaPlus Centre also provided ongoing support to the four pilot sites, including professional development, resource distribution, and training and support for using AlphaRoute. AlphaPlus coordinated communications across the pilot sites and provided participants with training and support for using Centra virtual meeting software in the attempt to create the beginning of a “community of practice” for distance learning in Ontario.

The four literacy programs involved in the pilot project included an urban Francophone community-based literacy program, a remote Aboriginal community-based literacy program, a rural Anglophone community-based literacy program, and an Anglophone college upgrading program with an urban and rural reach.

Across these four programs, 154 learners ranging in age from 27 to 39 participated in the research study. Almost three-quarters of the participants were women, the preferred language of two-thirds of the participants was English, and half of the learners were not employed at the time of the study. On average, almost two and a half years had passed since the participant's last upgrading course in an on-site environment. Almost half of the participants reported their learning goal was to pursue further training and almost the same amount said they would rather work independently toward achieving their goals. Each of the four programs differed in population served, method of instructional delivery, and curriculum.

The results were extremely promising. The pilot study found that distance delivery is a viable option for serving students who are not otherwise able to attend traditional programs or who are in more isolated areas. The study also found that, with proper support and training, distance learners can use technology as a valuable adjunct to learning and can make good learning

progress with some level of teacher contact and support. Specifically the study showed that distance learning can be a valuable tool in providing services to rural and isolated populations, and very effective for learners with relatively low levels of literacy. But it also showed that distance learners don't differ greatly from traditional learners who have done well in a classroom setting although they do seem to have slightly higher preferences for working on their own.

The results of the Distance and Flexible Learning Pilot Project were so successful that MTCU launched its e-Channel Literacy Initiative in 2007, supporting three literacy programs serving the Aboriginal, Francophone and Anglophone communities to provide e-learning opportunities to learners and instructors across the province. The government committed to adding e-learning programs for the Deaf community by 2009.

Currently, the three e-Channel Literacy programs offer a mix of online learning options in reading, writing, math, computer and employment skills that literacy programs can offer in addition to face-to-face instruction.

To read the research report *Crossing the Great Divides: Distance learning and flexible delivery in Adult Basic Education*, go to <http://distance.alphaplus.ca/>

THE LEARNING HUB

Avon Maitland District School Board (AMDSB) was awarded the contract for delivery of e-Channel literacy to the Anglophone stream in August 2007, and hit the ground running. The initial period of the contract was used to formulate a program, hire and train staff, consult with other e-Channel deliverers, review curriculum needs, and develop an intake package, on-line registration form, assessment tools etc. Although the original intent had been to modify an existing website to host this initiative, this proved too costly and too complicated to be considered. Instead, a new site specific to e-Channel, was created on the AMDSB server.

The Avon Maitland District School Board branded its e-Channel (or online literacy) program as the "LearningHub". The website, which bears the same name (www.learninghub.ca) allows learners to investigate the program and if interested, fill out and submit an online registration form stating their needs and goals. A literacy practitioner responds to the learner within 3 business days to complete a one-to-one intake assessment, then the learner is assigned an online practitioner who creates a learning plan, and assigns curriculum and programming as per the learner's goal and skill levels. This online practitioner mentors the learner through the learning process, and for the duration of their time with the LearningHub. Learners are assessed again at exit, and at regular intervals throughout their training.

LEARNING PROGRAMS

The LearningHub uses both asynchronous and synchronous methods of program delivery. Asynchronous Learning involves learning activities that are completed independently when it is convenient for the learner (not scheduled for a particular time of day). Synchronous Learning

involves learning activities that are scheduled in “real time” where everyone logs onto a program or website and participates in the same activity as a group or one on one in real time.

For **asynchronous** delivery, LearningHub currently uses two third party “off the shelf” online resources – Plato and LearnScape. In 2008-2009 additional self-generated curriculum was also made available through Moodle.

Plato has been a resource for classroom literacy programs for several years and offers basic skills curriculum in math, reading, writing and science. More advanced lessons are outlined by a number of National Occupation Codes (NOC) and packaged lessons dealing with Essential Skills required for each code are available. This is an extremely valuable tool for learners with employment related goals who prefer an independent learning style of study. Plato activities are geared to all five LBS levels, but are most effective for those with Level 2 and up. It is recommended that learners with less than a Level 2 reading level have supports in place before accessing Plato. Once registered in the LearningHub, learners can access Plato curriculum 24 hours/day, 7 days/week. Plato is accessed through 100 concurrent licences purchased by MTCU for use by e-Channel hosts. In 2008-2009 the contracted Plato curriculum was expanded to include science and additional assessment tools.

LearnScape also permits learners to access curriculum 24 hours/day, 7 days a week and targets a range of LBS levels. AMDSB uses this tool with learners whose goal is to upgrade towards the GED test since it offers Canadian content that is lacking in Plato, as well as a number of Pre-GED assessments. Preferred learning style is independent study. Learning modules include; reading, writing, math, Canadian Social Studies, science, life skills and essential skills, as well as packaged courses based on the learner’s job specific goal. AMDSB accesses this program through licences it has purchased for its own use.

Moodle is the LearningHub’s current course management system (CMS), or website that houses interactive tools to deliver online asynchronous courses or training. In 2008-2009 LearningHub introduced two blended courses using Moodle and Centra together. Weekly classes on Microsoft Word 2003 and 2007 were held on Centra with coursework assigned on Moodle between live classes. In the fourth quarter of 2008-2009, the LearningHub was awarded extra capacity funding that allowed the expansion of its Moodle course inventory. Five new courses were contracted to be developed by literacy professionals in the field. They include: Apprenticeship Math; Maintaining Healthy Self-Esteem On and Off the Job; On the Job Report Writing; Becoming a Better Speller; and Improving Your Job Skills. These courses are scheduled for delivery beginning in November 2009.

For **synchronous** program delivery, Learning Hub uses the **Saba Centra 7.6** learning platform hosted by Contact North. Centra is a virtual meeting space for learners and LearningHub practitioners to learn and teach online, in the comfort of their own home, or in a public computer lab. Centra is a powerful conferencing tool that uses visual slides, audio and video technology to host classes online, in a “real time” delivery format. It even allows participants to mark up a public whiteboard to share their ideas with the class. A microphone and speakers (or headset)

are required to participate in Centra classes. LearningHub offered its first Centra courses in February 2008 and continues to offer a new slate of courses each month, based on needs of registered learners, and natural progression of skill sets as well as feedback from the literacy field. All Centra classes are taped for playback capability, and increased accessibility to learners.

LearningHub Centra courses address a number of subjects, including employability and essential skills. In 2008-2009 128 courses were offered over three semesters – spring 2008, fall 2008 and winter 2009. Traditionally there are no Centra classes offered during July and August in order to accommodate staff holidays, and allow for planning of future offerings.

ANTICIPATED USE

The LearningHub significantly exceeded its' anticipated client use in 2008-2009, registering 676 new learners over the year in addition to the 57 carryover learners from 2007-2008. Registration was slowest at the beginning of the year (April and May), probably due to the newness of the program, but picked up considerably after the summer when more synchronous programming was offered and people became more aware of the LearningHub. Registration was highest in January with the introduction of the winter slate of Centra courses. Overall an equal percentage of learners accessed the synchronous and asynchronous learning platforms (36%). At year end, 60% of learners exiting the program had met their LBS goal.

MARKETING OF PROGRAM

AMDSB has employed a variety of methods to market e-Channel to potential learners, service providers and the literacy field since it was named one of the e-Channel lead agencies. These include: connecting with the literacy field directly using a quarterly LearningHub newsletter; connecting with the literacy field through provincial literacy networks, Ministry reps and literacy support agencies; connecting with literacy support agencies/partners (ie. Laubach Literacy Ontario, Community Literacy Ontario, Ontario Literacy Coalition, AlphaPlus etc.) and contributing to their newsletters and/or presenting at their annual general meetings; participating in applicable organizational conferences; creating and dispersing of brochures, flyers etc.; advertising in newspapers located in selected rural and remote areas around province; establishment of links on other websites with ties to literacy, including NALD (National Adult Literacy Database); and promotion through libraries, community colleges and literacy delivery networks.

LEARNER SATISFACTION

All learners exiting from the LearningHub, or individual modules of curriculum, were asked to fill out a learner satisfaction survey developed to coincide with a research project conducted from January-December 2008. This project drew some conclusions about asynchronous vs. synchronous program delivery, in terms of success rates and supports required by students in order for them to succeed online. Even after project completion exiting learners were polled on their experience with the LearningHub. This information was, and continues to be, evaluated and used to make modifications to program delivery and ensure learner success in meeting

their goals. LearningHub also informally polls traditional literacy service providers who are utilizing the services of the project to get their comments on the effectiveness of the program and recommendations for changes or improvement. A more formal poll is planned for 2009-2010.

PROGRAM EFFICIENCY/EFFECTIVENESS

The LearningHub analyzes its statistics on a monthly basis, in order to identify gaps in service, learner success, and glitches in program delivery. This analysis allows AMDSB to identify areas of concern and react to them in a timely manner. The Project Coordinators also meet with MTCU online monthly to provide project updates. Quarterly reports, containing project update narrative and stats sheets, outline quarterly activities and achievements, keep the LearningHub on target with its goals. These reports are also shared with MTCU.

SUSTAINABLE MODEL FOR THE FUTURE

To date AMDSB feels it has an online LBS delivery model (LearningHub) in place that can be sustained into the future. Regular analysis of statistics allows AMDSB to respond to needs of online learners and make modifications to the program to meet those needs and ensure learner success. Staff attention to learner skill attainment and goal attainment, has resulted in positive learner outcomes at exit. Each quarterly report not only details statistics of note, but also identifies and analyzes such things as the program's registration process and progress and technology used to date. This identifies potential needs for future online delivery of LBS services as growth occurs and results in a proactive approach to program delivery rather than a reactionary one. As an example of this, registration forms have been modified to identify the number of displaced/laid off workers who are accessing online literacy upgrading.

To learn more about the LearningHub, go to www.learninghub.ca.