

Building the Skills Adults Need to Succeed as Online Learners

October 23, 2009

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Heidi Silver-Pacuilla: (Audio starts mid-sentence) Scroll back up (Slide 4) and you can see the URL to go get that. It's the Power of Technology and it's very relevant to what we're talking about now. They talked about the learning's in Canada, referenced John's work on USA Learns and referenced the NIFL report we're talking about. So these kinds of finding are still being used and people are starting to think now 'Okay so now what? So how do we make this happen?'

So the balance I mentioned and the social networks I mentioned. Definitely learning technology is about a social environment. And targeted sites, I found, were really being found and that's what we're going to look at today; what do these targeted sites look like? But also importantly we're not seeing evaluations of these sites being funded so we have very little data of what students and learners are doing once they're there. So I'm going to say something about that a little later.

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So if you and your learners were to go on Google today, a nice clean site right? You look here, and yet you get here and some new adult learners say 'okay so do I type the words all connected in that box or is this the place where I stretch them apart?' And that's a question that I forget about. I forget that I had to learn whether I type it all one word like a URL or if you type sort of free language into the Google search box. There are so many things that those of us who are using technology all the time, we forget what the barriers are and what the challenges are. There is absolutely nothing on this page that tells you what to do, right? There's nothing. You don't know what to do. So it's just instructive once in a while to stop and look at things with a fresh eye.

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Once you've typed in the word 'literacy' you get a nice search back but what does it mean and why are there different lists? And again we are probably all so familiar with this that we've forgotten what's difficult. But why are there things in yellow up at the top? You know very, very small print says 'sponsored link' up there, very small. It's not what you see first. What are these second lists going down the right? What does that mean and what are these dot, dot, dots? Nothing's a full sentence.

For those of us who use it every day, we look past these things and we make meaning out of these bits and pieces but we really need to be teaching our learners how to succeed online and making use of what they find.

We also need to get smarter ourselves. Look at the sponsored links. You will notice that the sponsored links are all full sentences. They have figured out how to get a full sentence that actually means something to appear with their title. We need to do a better job with the sites that we create and we

promote, including our program sites, to be found by individuals in the community using the tools that we use now to find things; Google. Everybody goes to Google now. Again, I'm just trying to show you some of the sticking points of the environment that new readers find themselves in.

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But there are sites that were developed specifically for low level readers who are adults, right? And these sites are really getting used and they're just great. They've been used in programs; they've been used by individuals not in programs. TV411 is a great one. They developed it for independent use with supplemental print materials so they've got kind of a multimedia thing going on. They've got over 100 lessons, many of which, I think 6 or 7, are in Spanish. In 2006 nearly half a million unique visitors viewed 17 million pages, kind of amazing. There were 27,000 downloads of the teacher resource materials. So clearly this is being used and when you get here you realize 'oh here is a page that was laid out with usability by a new user in mind.' There's not a lot of confusion. You click right to what you want to see and Alex Quinn was talking to us in our expert groups about how much usability testing they did and how do they deal with a wrong answer and what kind of feedback. They did their homework and it shows.

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So we're just going to look at a few of these and then as you listen to our other speakers you can hear them talk about these kinds of usability issues.

Here's your California Distance Learning Project site. Also very clean, you can see what you want to click on right away and it's getting found.

Last I asked, and John maybe you can catch us up, but last I asked there were over 3.5 million visitors a month. WOW! Most of whom were not affiliated with a formal learning program. So this is a site they can come to, they can get simple text, they can get audio narration, they can get videos, learning activities and they can work on their own and self-study as Steve Reder writes about.

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English For All is another site that people are finding and they're finding it all over the world. Last I asked there was 75% of the total was from the U.S. which meant that there's a quarter of the millions of people who use English For All coming from outside the U.S. and we know the largest English language learning market is outside the U.S. You think about all the people in the developing world trying to learn English so they can be online so they can do business. That is what they are trying to do, is learn English and this free online site has been found and is serving that purpose.

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And the newest one that we know about is USA Learns so John is going to talk us through this one. Again, the interface is so clear and easy. You know what you are going to click on before you click. You know what to do.

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So as you listen to the other speakers today, my role is just to provide this bit of context and throw some questions at you, think about the interaction between the learner's that you know, their skills, the opportunities they encounter online and the supports that are embedding in the program or on the site itself and how can that help them with their independent online learning.

Now as program directors or administrators you also need to think about how are you going to assess this kind of learning, how do you match learners to the opportunities that exist, how do we get the word out, and how do we get the word out about the strategic supports that are available? Sometimes learners don't even know that there are supports when we see these learners every day. They are not processing what we are saying when we say 'you can get a tutor, there's someone in the lab', etc. How do we train instructors to support learners in various ways and how do you as an administrator plan and prioritize your resources for these opportunities and supports. So these are some of the questions that I'd like to just plant in your mind and I'm anxious to hear the other speakers so I'm going to turn it back to Marian. Thank you.

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Marian Thacher: Thank you Heidi and I think the next slide is we're starting with John Fleischman and USA Learns.

John Fleischman: Thank you Marian. Can everyone hear me okay? I'm assuming so and thank you Heidi. I see the green checks so you guys are hearing me. It's a pleasure to be here this afternoon and Matthias greetings to you in Germany where it's, what, close to 11 o'clock now.

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USA Learns has been really a fascinating project on lots of different levels. Originally the project started out as a feasibility study and it was a project done in partnership with the University of Michigan and Sacramento County Office of Education and it was really designed to look at the feasibility of providing web-based instruction for independent learners and after about a year and a half of doing research, Jerry Johnston and I at Michigan decided we really needed to develop a prototype to test some assumptions after looking at all the research. So we got approval to move forward with a prototype and that was during the discussions going on at a federal level and in congress about immigration reform which was shot down by congress so President Bush, at that time, decided that he was going to develop his own plan and one aspect of that was to launch a Web site for independent learners for immigrants to learn English. So what was a prototype became something that we needed to launch. We quickly assembled a team and in less than a year we had 22 people, most of them working part-time, we crafted a Web site which we launched on November 7th.

Interestingly enough the Department of Ed. Office of Vocational Adult Education wanted a site primarily designed for independent learners. We really had to wear them down and convince them we needed also the capability for teachers and tutors to support their learners because that's what research shows is that when it's supported distance learning works best. We ended up with a system which I'll show you

in just a bit. The site was designed for learners functioning at low/beginning ESL through high/intermediate NRS Levels 2 and 3 for first level course and 4 and 5 for the second level course.

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The numbers have amazed me. On any given day we have between 800,000 and 900,000 page views which is pretty much off the charts. Frankly I am amazed that our servers can handle all that traffic. What's even more amazing is the amount of time the average visitor spends on the site which is about 28 minutes. So it's pretty interesting the sheer amount of time that once learners find the site that they're spending engaged in instructional activities.

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Heidi mentioned earlier, and this is very, very similar to the kind of traffic with English For All. English For All actually formed the basis, it kind of formed the basis for USA Learns, the second level course, USA Learns takes it a lot further in terms of interactivity. Internationally it's visited by about 192 countries, a lot of traffic from Spanish speaking countries, but very pleased that 74/75% of the traffic is coming from the United States.

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This next slide will show you a break-down of traffic from each of the states. Interestingly enough Florida is now surpassing California. Knowing that we have majority of immigrants immigrate to California it's interesting that the numbers in Florida, we're not really quite sure why, perhaps it's being more embraced by teachers in more formal programs, and I'll get to that in a second, but if you compare the numbers here, it is very similar to an immigration census map. If you take a map and look at the patterns of use it's very, very similar in terms of numbers to immigration patterns in the United States. What that's telling us is that it's working for those that it was designed for.

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Now although this was not built, it's for use in a supported environment, and again it's almost embarrassing the limited features that we have in terms of the management side or the teacher side, it's very gratifying to know that almost 10,000 teachers and tutors have already registered to use the system and are currently using it with anywhere from 1 to an entire classroom of students. As you can see by the spread, a lot of them are from traditional, what I think of as adult schools, but it really kind of covers the gamut.

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This is also a really fascinating statistic and when I talked to developers of commercial Web sites and I say 'oh yeah, the bounce rate is about 19%' their jaw drops. What that basically means; for an average, typical Web site 50-60% bounce rate, for a good bounce rate would be 30-35%. What that basically is, is that visitors come to a Web site, like a lot of you, you go to the first page, it doesn't have what you want and you go away, you find another Web site. So that would be considered a bounce. It just comes and

they go. So a bounce rate of 19% is really very, very good. So the site has a lot of stickiness. Users come to the site, if they can find it, they stay at the site. This is also expressed on the number of repeat visits. To have visitors, over 50,000, that have come to the site at least 100-200 times is pretty amazing and to have a significant number that have come over 200 times is especially gratifying.

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It's pretty difficult and it's really easy to kind of use different numbers to determine cost, but you know, this is the bottom line for a lot of programs; we have so many people out there that need to improve literacy instruction, need to improve language/learning English, and although it costs upwards of a million dollars to develop USA Learns, which is actually pretty cheap when you consider the depth of instruction, and a lot of it's because we repurposed a lot of materials, but on an annualized basis we figured it's about just over 6 cents per hour of instruction. This is based on a couple of different things. It's based on the cost of replacing servers; we run 4 or 5 different servers, so a life of a server is about 4 years; the cost of having a part time staff to do tech support; the cost of backing up content and so on. So our best guess on per-hour of instruction is 6.3 cents versus a traditional classroom based instruction; The Migration Policy Institute determines it's about 10 dollars per hour.

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So what are the kinds of factors, and Heidi got a little bit into this; you know so many Web sites are so comprehensive and so difficult to navigate. As we all know you go to a lot of Web sites that's just filled with information. It's difficult to know what to do on those sites. So the primary factors that I think keep learners coming back and using, what might be considered loyalty, three primary elements; the way the site is designed, the content that's on the site and the flexibility of access to the materials and let me give you just a little bit more information on each of those.

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Screen design – intuitive, simple, clear, white space, real clean design, real consistency in terms of the user interface. A user could go through the entire course or courses just by clicking on the *Next* button. Always the instructions are in one place, the instruction material is presented in one area, the response line is always consistently placed. The user always knows what course they're in, what unit they're in, what activity they're in and always has the ability to navigate through the menus to go to previous screens. So that, to me, is really, really critical for users that are low literacy with limited language skills.

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The other thing that's important is having multiple levels of help. With USA Learns there is a greeter that welcomes learners to the course. For more information they would click on an *Introduction* and get an animated introduction to each of the activities. Or they could, at any point throughout the content they can click on *Help* and see a brief animation of what to do on that particular screen. The other factor is minimal computer skills required; point, click, very, very simple navigations and that's one of the things that we did in our usability testing is really try and figure out what are the absolute minimal skills that a user would need to navigate through the material.

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The other thing is very relevant content. Yes there are other materials out there. There are some wonderful commercial materials, but are they really appropriate for immigrants to the United States that really need to learn the real functional aspects, real fundamental life skills of understanding agreements, dealing with teachers, those critical aspects that they need to do for their every-day life. So there is a strong focus on life skills.

The other critical things is engaging media; video, audio, realistic graphics.

And as much as possible, a variety of activities that try and really stimulates the users and emulates what might happen in a classroom so that there's listening, reading, speaking and writing skills that are integrated in throughout the courses.

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Flexible Access – real critical. Adults stop in, stop out, go back to their home country, you know that's just the nature of adult learning isn't it? So the other important thing, and one thing real critical that our advisor said is 'don't require users to register, don't require it.' I said 'but if you don't how do they get back to where they left off?' Well our advisors were right. We have significant numbers that just go into the content, they use it, they find their way back but they may be intimidated to put their names in. So users can come in without registering, they can come in as independent registered users; and in that case they have to put a password in but it drops them back in where they left off and keeps track of their scores, or they can come in as registered users under the auspices of a teacher.

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Are they learning English? Well, that's the big question. They are coming to the site in amazing numbers. They are completing activities. We have data both in terms of the analytics of use but we also have a database that we are able to draw on and we know their completing significant numbers of activities/units with really good scores.

On a very regular basis, daily, I get messages from people throughout the United States and they're really fund to read. Praise from learners, independent learners and those working with teachers, but we desperately, desperately need to validate what's going on, both in terms of users that are using independently and in a supported learning mode.

One of the good things I'm really happy to say, this week a McDonald's corporation, yes McDonald's restaurant is now pilot testing USA Learns in Florida with a number of owner/operators. We are real excited about it. They will be doing both pre-testing and post-testing using standardized tests so it will be a great opportunity for us to learn 'are they really learning English?' So I'm excited about that.

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A lot of discussion at the federal level. If you have not seen this recent report from the U.S. Department of Education, take a look at it. It's really generating a lot of excitement in distance learning across all

sectors of education. Really it's a meta-analysis of a number of different studies and what it shows is "on average, students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction." Of course that is for a variety of different reasons. Often times because there is more learning taking place, there is more contact.

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It is possible, and does the technology exist to create an environment where learners could actually do well in a "lesser supported" mode? Yeah, I believe it's possible and I think there are a number of other people out there that believe it's possible as well. There's a lot of push both in terms of policy and legislation now to move it ahead but I really do believe that if appropriate resources were available the technology is there today to create an awfully engaging and supportive learning environment to really do a lot more with learners that are functioning independently.

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So, kind of in summary, what do we need to do to kind of continue down this pathway? We need to, I think, focus on using content that's really appropriately designed for adult learners. There are a lot of great things going on, a lot of wonderful projects in terms of using learning management systems such as Moodle, BlackBoard, certainly foster more of that where adult educators, developers are creating the environments to really be appropriate for adult learners.

The other thing that I think is important; this is increasingly a social networked environment; building on and incorporating a variety of different tools for both real-time and not real-time communication and collaboration. I think that's a real critical component. Unfortunately it's not been a major part of what we've produced in this office in the past but we would hope to in the future; building more communication/collaboration tools.

And then finally encouraging learners to take control of their learning and much of the work of Steve Reder, University of Portland, shows that there is a tremendous amount of learning that is happening independently. So continuing to support that, support learners that are working both in a blended or supported mode or working in a more unsupported or independent mode.

So that is it. Feel free to either contact me off-line for more information and I'll turn it back over to Marian.

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Marian: Thank you John. You guys are doing a fabulous job of staying on our timeline. So we're going to move on now to Matthias Sturm and Nancy Friday from AlphaPlus and their colleagues from the Learning Hub and I'm not sure who's going first so I'm turning it over to you.

Nancy Friday: It's Nancy here.

(Sound went out)

Marian: Ok, can you hear now? I think we're having a little server problem here. Can you give me a green check if you're hearing me? Thank you, okay. So Matthias and Nancy are you having a problem?

Nancy: It's Nancy.

Marian: Yes

Nancy: Can you hear me now? Okay great. I don't know what happened there. I just sort of blipped out. I'm just going to introduce the group of us. There's 4 of us are talking from Ontario and we're just going to switch around between us and what we're saying. I believe that I need to; I can advance the slides...

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Okay. Very quickly, just a little bit about AlphaPlus where Matthias and I work. We are not a delivery agency. We don't assess or deal directly with adult literacy students. What we do is we provide literacy agencies across Ontario with resources and introduce them to technologies that act as resources for them to us as supports for their own delivery of literacy directly with students.

At AlphaPlus we work to support Deaf, Aboriginal, Francophone and Anglophone communities in their efforts to reach and deliver training to adult literacy students. Also what we do is we do a lot of research and we do a lot of evaluation of different technologies that would prove to be useful and affordable for adult literacy programs in Ontario. There's over 300 adult literacy programs across Ontario that are supported by our provincial funders.

We have a lot to say and not enough time to say it all so there is an attachment that you were directed to at the beginning that you can download that has a lot more information about what we're saying today and I would invite you to do that because we're just going to touch very quickly on some of the things that we can talk about here.

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I'm going to introduce you first to sort of where we've come from. A lot of people seem to be very interested in what we are doing in Ontario and as you can see on the slide we've been doing it for a long time.

AlphaPlus manages an online learning environment that is called AlphaRoute and that environment started back in 1997. So we're talking a long time ago back. It was very new at the time. AlphaRoute began as a small village, as you see up in the slide at the top here – 1997, and the little text above each of the buildings I've added so that you can sort of see what these different elements were. But when students would come on this first online environment all they saw were buildings and the buildings attempted to indicate perhaps what they were about at that time, so it was very clean; very, very little text recognizing that text would often turn students away.

AlphaRoute has always been developed within research and so in 1999 research was conducted based on the interest that was shown by learners in the early online learning environment. And there is a research report you could read. That report informed, it sort of asked learners at the time in pilot groups

'do you think you could learn online?' 'do you think this would work for you?' and the report indicated absolutely and students gave lots of input into what they wanted to see in a learning environment.

So following that our provincial government in 2000 came up with a strategy and we're very fortunate to Ontario for this. We're very lucky that this happened, but in 2000 a strategy was developed called Tools for a New Beginning, A Strategy for Computer-Based Learning in Literacy and basically for the 5 years, our government seeded all 300 literacy programs with computers including internet access and expected programs to begin to use online learning or online opportunities to be introducing that to students. So what happened, AlphaRoute was very much a part of that.

By the year 2000 AlphaRoute had a new look. You can see that it still has a village look. Some text has been added to identify what the buildings were; that came from the students. There were links to the Deaf AlphaRoute site and the Native AlphaRoute site and the Francophone site had its own site as well. There was more content added to AlphaRoute and at that time and in the early time the content was all HTML-based; so lots of activities where students would go online. There was audio support for levels 1, 2 and 3 which was very appreciated by students. They loved the audio and that they could read and listen to what was being read online at the same time. They loved having that support and I think that enabled students to work a little more independently than if that wasn't available to them.

But what happened as well is that by 2000 or 2003 we started to see interest in more active activities that included Flash so at that time we started to use Flash.

We moved from, we had this village and in 2005 we began to look at a new interface and at that time it was felt that what we needed to do was replicate a little better other Web sites online that students would come to that would require navigation with text. So you will see that by 2005 we started to add more text to the actual homepage along with icons that students could use. So that's sort of how the interface worked.

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In terms of the content, as I mentioned, the earliest content that we used was HTML, fairly flattish kind of content that students could get immediate feedback on the activities that they did; lots of click and drag kind of things or just click kind of things. And then we moved on to Flash, using Flash content. That involved much more interactivity. Students actually had to click to make something happen. So in this example up here of a driving activity they could actually scroll through a little bit of a curriculum and they would have to click on things to make things happen there.

The other part of AlphaRoute, there's another area that includes activities that students could download. Paper-based activities that they could download, do at home or do themselves with a paper and a pencil and then they could check their own answers. So this started to support independent 'I'm going to do this activity and then I'm going to check my own answers'. It also enabled cheating because you could print the answer page and then you could do the activity and get perfect. But what students then learned was they're really just cheating themselves.

So the Flash activities came in and began, there's a lot of activities in AlphaRoute that are based on sort of a newspaper look and students could click on different activities there and those were Flash-based.

And then we got to 2003 when we started to do more Blended learning. We did a series of activities in Flash that were called Skills at Work. Those activities were supported by a series of paper-based manuals that students could use to sort of assess their skills for the workplace and within those manuals they would be directed to AlphaRoute to do some of the activities online. So it was more of a Blended model.

Then by 2006/2007 we started to do activities in Moodle and most of our new content was online courses in Moodle so we've kind of come a long way in AlphaRoute. Everything that I've shown you here is included in AlphaRoute. Now if you go in you can see HTML, Flash is there, Blended is there and Moodle is there, it's all there.

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I'm just going to hand off to Matthias and he'll tell you a little bit more about the research.

Matthias Sturm: Hi everybody. I was having a little bit of audio problems there. Can everybody hear me? Maybe just a couple of check marks so I know. Okay. Good. Just like Nancy said I'm just going to talk a little bit about, just introduce you quickly to 2 research projects that we did and I will invite you and give you the links to read up on them if you'd like. I don't want to waste too much time on this especially since Courtney and Heather are going to tell us about what's happening in Ontario now.

The slide that you see just there is, it just comes out of the research.....

Marian Thacher: We lost your audio Matthias.

Matthias: Okay I'll try this again. Sorry about that. It seems to fade out or something like that. I'm not sure where I lost you.

Anyways, the slide that you see there is from a research project we did in 2003 and we asked learners there working with AlphaRoute if they thought that working with AlphaRoute improved their learning overall in different ways. You can see for example, again this is based on not actual results but on the perceptions of learners themselves, that they thought that using AlphaRoute, using an online tool helped them to read more easily or better understand what they read. Or for example to feel that they wanted to go on learning or even that they felt that they are smarter than they thought. So those were really positive results and they encouraged us to go on with the research. Positive results in the sense that students perspective seem to have a positive impact on their skill acquisition.

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This is the report here on the left-hand side, which is called 'What difference does it make?' and you can have a look at that at the link that's just below it. You're free to download it. It's a PDF. It will just take a little while but we think it's a good read so if you have some time I think you'll enjoy that.

The other research that we did, and this is the pilot project that preceded the work that Courtney and Heather will talk about more, was a pilot project involving 4 literacy programs in Ontario, across the different streams that Nancy mentioned earlier.... (sound stops)

Marian: We are experiencing some of the challenges of technology here of having people on various continents trying to talk to each other. So just hang on a second. Let Matthias try to get his mic back.

For those of you that were having a hard time hearing, Matthias if you can hear this if you could speak a little louder that would help, but for me turning up my volume made it fine, my own volume on my headset.

Matthias: Okay. Sorry about that. Let's hope I will stay on a little bit longer this time.

The second report we started I think it was in, I keep forgetting, I think it was in 2005. It was about a 2 year study and it was with 4 literacy programs across Ontario basically to find out if online learning worked for them, in what kind of model it worked, they use Blended models, a lot of experimental models, and in a way it informed a new distance learning strategy by our funders, the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities here in Ontario, that then designated 3 literacy programs as e-Channel sites and one of those e-Channel sites is the Learning Hub that Heather and Courtney will be talking about shortly.

AlphaPlus now supports the e-Channel efforts like Nancy said a little bit earlier and now we work exclusively in the area of training adult educators to also support those efforts.

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Marian: Okay hang on a minute. He's been doing a good job of coming back every time so far.

Matthias: Okay, it seems I'm losing the audio when I'm switching the slide. I'm sorry about that.

This is just to show you in that research study is a couple of interesting things. One of the tools that we used with the project group and the control group was a questionnaire that looked at self management comparisons. The couple of things that are interesting here are the project groups, these are the online learners, thought that sticking with a task was a little bit more important than the control group that were learning exclusively on-site.

The other very interesting thing, I thought, was that the online group thought seeking constructive criticism, the second one from the bottom, was a very important thing. So a lot of, I think it goes in line with what Heidi and John were saying is that a supportive learning environment is the best option if that's possible and that independent learning doesn't mean necessarily learning independently but taking responsibility and learning independently with available supports.

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Marian: Matthias, oh did we lose you when you changed the slide? If you want to just say something and I will change the slide for you maybe that will help. Or actually maybe this might be one of your last ones.

Matthias: Thanks Marian, yes this is my last one. Thank you for doing that.

Just a couple of things to wrap this up and like I said I'll invite you to have a look at the reports. The links are also in that handout so if you weren't able to download them right away you can still do that.

The most important point here I think is that there are, in online learning, there are opportunities for non-traditional adult basic education learners, that using online learning is not necessarily, or should not be done as a cost-saving issue and it's not necessarily so but it provides other opportunities and it caters to learners with different learning styles than on-site classrooms.

One of the very important things that we found in that study is that involving other organizations in the community is very important to break common barriers that learners face and to make that learning experience successful.

And the last point I'd like to make is that technology is a tool for literacy learning, also for low-literacy learners and that's I think, one thing that we found in this research study and we didn't necessarily expect to find at the beginning but it definitely supports also what Heidi was saying, I think, in the beginning that literacy learners should be able to use computers and online learning and use those tools to learn what they can.

Thanks for bearing with me and I'll hand it back to Nancy and to Courtney and Heather.

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Nancy: It's Nancy speaking. I don't know if you can hear me. Okay. Very quickly I've got one minute to just kind of wrap up here a little bit. So you've seen AlphaRoute. You've sort of seen the evolution of it and the fact that everything we've done has been researched with lots of reports and things and very quickly, what we would say that some of the things that concur with what Heidi's been saying particularly in the last session and earlier today is that what we've learned is that self-management/self-direction skills are really critical and really important and very reinforced by when students learn online. I'm sure that's what Heather and Courtney are finding as well. And that through HTML and Flash activities in AlphaRoute, the percentage score results that enabled students to determine; they got to decide when to move forward, when to move backwards, how often to repeat activities in privacy was really important. That came through in our research very strongly.

In the Moodle courses, the online courses that we offered students through Moodle, the kinds of decisions they made there were deciding even to enroll in a course 'will I take a course or not and how will I manage my time over 4 weeks of the course to complete that work to achieve a certificate?' Certificates at the end, if you completed the course you got a certificate. That was a real drive for students to complete and maintain those self-management skills.

The other thing that's critical in terms of learning online, we found, is having a mentor. Everyone in AlphaRoute is matched with a mentor. The mentor may be a volunteer or a staff person in their literacy program. Somebody they could turn to for support; very, very important. Also important was peer support; very important and very reinforced online. Students found and met each other even across Canada we had students coming in from other provinces. And online facilitator feedback and support in the Moodle courses; very, very important for students to know that there is somebody out there that knows that they're there online.

Student access to a wide range of learning styles is something very supported by online learning environments; the HTML activities in AlphaRoute that include audio support and then moving into the Flash activities that required listening and following instructions. That was sort of our next content move was, it's not just you're listening to something that you're reading online but it's you got to listen to the instructions and they tell you to do something and they may tell you to click on a button and if you're not listening or if you don't pay attention, you don't click on the button, nothing happens.

So then moving on to Moodle where students were actually linking to external activities on the Web outside of the AlphaRoute environment, engaging in forums and chats, messaging, all of that supported a range of learning styles.

And finally just finding that balance between private learning and group learning for students has been something really interesting to watch, just again and supporting learning styles. The different ways students like to learn, the different styles learners like to learn in and giving and receiving peer support is really, really important.

So I'll just hand off to Courtney and Heather now and to say that AlphaRoute is very old, it's now very old, it's a bit like a dinosaur and it has morphed or it has supported and led into these e-Channel sites in Ontario that we're very excited about so I'm going to end and hand of to, I think, maybe Heather's next.

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Courtney McGee: Good Afternoon everyone. It's actually Courtney here. I'm going to start with a couple of slides and then I will hand it over to Heather. I think we've covered the introductions so thanks for hanging in there today.

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Okay, first of all just start off a little bit with what the Learning Hub is and who we are. The Learning Hub is a division of an e-Channel Literacy strategy for the province of Ontario and the Centres for Employment & Learning of our local school board, the Avon Maitland District School Board, in South-Western Ontario was awarded the provincial contract to deliver the online literacy training for the province of Ontario.

We were the successful candidate to do the Anglophone stream of e-Channel learning and we branded our program the Learning Hub. Mostly we do upgrading in reading, writing, math, computer and other

workplace essential skills. Everything is done entirely online through different platforms, programs and email.

We started in August of 2007 and we've been booming ever since and I think Heather will agree. Especially this fall, it was a bit of peak for us, so we're pretty excited about that. We registered our 1000th learner in August and our benchmark has been to serve 120 learners per annum and we actually exceeded that by 600% last year which is quite exciting because it is a fairly new program and it seems to be really well received.

Okay, just maybe a couple more things. We do offer flexible online training, primarily to learners who live too far away from learning centers or who cannot access regular programming for other reasons. We do also work with in-person literacy programs as well as a supplementary aide to the programs that they offer. It's kind of exciting to have the Blended option there as well.

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Good. I'm not having the problem that Matthias did so that is great. The evolution of e-Channel started off with the AlphaRoute program and the history that it has brought to the online landscape for literacy training in Ontario.

We moved out of the AlphaRoute stage and into the e-Channel Pilot phase, which the Learning Hub was not a part of. In 2007 we came on board as the Anglophone Sector for e-Channel and since then we have started the model that we're using right now with the Learning Hub in 2007 of August.

The Avon Maitland District School Board does have quite a history with online learning and online learning projects. We have had, well our school board had started with an online secondary program grade 9-12. That is a program that does run and we are involved in that a little bit.

Then we also have myspeaks e-learning portal and it was an online learning community developed to link a 4 county area in South-Western Ontario, a very rural area, with online learning opportunities. We had literally no post-secondary trainings so we introduced that to our area and also some soft skills with that portal was available with local labor market information.

From those successes we truly feel that we got into the Learning Hub and into the online literacy program and it is really strongly connected to the history of AlphaRoute.

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Okay, some of the learner benefits that we think our program is successful is that we have 3 learning options and learners can kind of move in between these options or they can start off doing a couple; it's kind of up to them how they want learn and what suits their schedule.

We do offer Synchronous training on the Saba Centra program and we also do Asynchronous learning on a few off-the-shelf curriculum portals; Plato and Learnscape. We started doing some Moodle training as well with the help of AlphaPlus. They've been quite a help in that field for us and it's exciting to bridge some of those opportunities to online learning and literacy as well.

And then what we consider as our Blended learning option is any combination of the live classes on the center, very much like this meeting we're having today and any of the independent study or Asynchronous learning programs.

We do find that it does help with their confidence and the technology and working online. There is quite a bit of support whether it's through their practitioner that their working with at the Learning Hub or in their own classroom program if it applies to them. So that works very well for us.

Slide 45

Okay, and I will hand it over to Heather.

Heather Robinet: Thanks Courtney. Okay, so basically the way that the Learning Hub operates is learners go to our Web site, they may explore our Web site, but if they decide they would like to register for some of the curriculum or programming that we offer there is a link to a registration form on the Hub. They basically fill that out and that comes to us. Once we receive that and then we take that information and we send an email back to the registrant and we basically are looking to make sure that their email address works and that we are able to communicate with them. In that email that we send back to them, we basically ask them to self-disclose some of what their current skills and abilities are.

I should probably mention here that on the registration form it does ask them to choose a number of options in terms of what they are interested in learning. When the questionnaire or the assessment goes back to them, it will ask them for specific skill sets in Math or Language for them to check off as the ones they either can do or can't do or want to be able to do.

Once the learner replies back to the initial email that we send to them, then if they are in a Asynchronous program they are assigned an online mentor or practitioner and that online teacher basically works with them to assign curriculum that meets their goals and also to, to basically answer any questions or problem solve with them as they spend their time with us. So if they need a special tutoring session we will arrange to meet with them on the center platform for one-on-one training with more specific emphasis on whatever their problem area is. Or it may be just a matter of just not understanding how to download the platform that they are using or something as simple as that.

After, I'm talking ahead of what I'm reading so I have to go just back here for a second.

There's ongoing communication between the learner and the practitioner and as Heidi and Nancy and other speakers have mentioned, we have found that the more the student is supported in this atmosphere the more they are able to be successful and that is basically the reason why we offer the practitioner or mentor that is assigned to each of them.

It works quite well and we are finding we are extremely busy right now because like Courtney said at the very beginning we came on to this project kind of last minute we were appointed and had about a month to get up and running and that meant creating curriculum, hiring staff, and we went from 3 fairly part-time staff 2 years ago and we are up to about 13 now and I'm constantly looking for people to hire

because the demand for the service is growing so rapidly and we really feel that the students need to be supported with individual practitioners.

At the end of all their courses that they take or in the case of the Centra classes the students are given an evaluation form or a satisfaction survey to complete where they can tell us what they thought of their training opportunity or the service that they got and we use that to improve our programming and to come up with some best practice. Like I said, we're still kind of, we're only entering, well, we've been doing this 2 years and we're still trying to develop best practice.

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And that brings me to this slide. Currently what we are doing is we are trying to respond to our new registrations within 3 business days or less. We try to use introductory courses to ease the learners into online upgrading. So for instance, for our Centra courses, we do have an introduction to Centra course which the students, we ask that the students attend just to learn which buttons they need to click on to interact with their teacher and our Centra form is much, much like this one so they would have on their, on, they would have yes/no answers, smiley faces, laugh buttons and applause, same as we have here.

We also use the variety of multimedia programs and try to keep our programming fresh so we're constantly looking at what new curriculum can be developed for a delivery in an online classroom-type environment plus we're also trying to create more independent study that maybe builds on what a student might already get in the Centra classroom or it could stand alone so that the learners could use a blended format or they can just choose one or another.

We are trying to use the Moodle platform to fill the gaps in service that (sound goes out).

Marian: Courtney are you able to pick up from there?

Courtney: Yes I should be able..there we go....I'm not sure what happened...

Heather: Sorry. Mine cut out for a minute or two. Sorry. I don't know where you lost me but I'll just carry on from Learners Supports.

I was saying a lot of this information is contained in the handout in a lot more detail so I really encourage you to download that later and read through it because we really are rushing through this information.

So some of our Learners Supports; we have LogMeIn Rescue which allows, we have some tech support staff that if a learners have trouble downloading the platforms or having any kind of computer issues we can arrange a time to connect with them and they can actually go in and gain access to their computer and help them with the download process or whatever other issues they are having. That is a new thing that we've added this fall along with 2 new tech support staff.

We also have our email and phone resources so people can contact us that way.

We have the group and individual sessions on Centra so like I said before, we can arrange to meet a learner in a one-to-one environment in a platform like this and give them individual instruction.

Again, the biggest support is our mentors, which I've touched on already. We try to respond immediately to any questions that the learners do have. We find that that, to them, seems to be the most important thing. They seem to get frustrated if you don't get back to them immediately.

Slide 47

Sorry. I figured out when you put the lock to talk on when you change the slides it goes off so you have to click it back on.

We've done a number of research projects, mostly in our first year. We are looking to do some more. But basically these projects were done to just look ahead at what we might want to consider in future development. For instance, the Supporting Independent Learners Toolkit; it contains a number of ideas that the researcher had for how we could best serve the needs of the adult learner and it deals with understanding the adult learner and using multimedia formats and dialoging with networks and programs within Ontario to make sure that people who will be referring to our program are aware of us and everything that we do. So that was very helpful to us at the very beginning of our project.

The Workplace Learning in a Pioneering Environment; it basically deals with the challenge of learning in a pioneer environment. In other words, because we were creating our curriculum and trying to deliver it all at the same time we basically faced the challenge of the fact that not only are our learners learning, but we're learning this whole online environment as we go along too. So that research project deals with some recommendations on how to deal with that kind of a scenario.

Marian: Heather, this is Marian. We are going a little bit over our time and so we need to wrap up.

Heather: Okay, no problem. Anyway all of those research projects are available for anybody. We can send them out if anybody wants to see them. I'll just wind up.

Marian: Thank you so much. Thank all of you, all 6 of you. We had a lot of presenters on today and we got through a lot of material. I'm just going to switch the format so that you can download any files that you didn't get to download earlier. You can download them right here and if you lose your opportunity to do that they'll be on OTAN. I see a lot of you are applauding. Thank you! We want to give all of you a lot of appreciation for pulling this off. Despite a few audio glitches I think we did great and thank you very much.

Don't forget that we can continue this discussion. We've raised a lot of questions that are very pertinent for us here in California and we'll continue this discussion on the Distance Learning list. I think if we have specific questions for our colleagues in Ontario I am sure we can contact them and get some answers.

Thank you all so much. I'm going to go ahead and close.

End