

# Digital Literacy Success Stories

In Ontario's Community-Based LBS Agencies

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## Introduction

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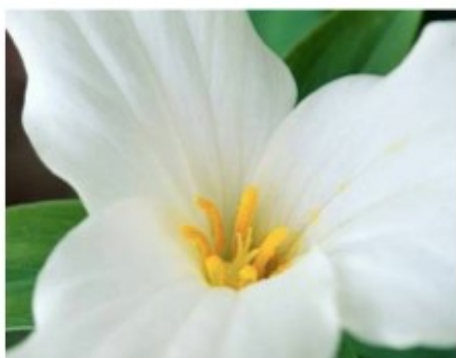
Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) is a provincial network of community-based Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) agencies. We are located in Barrie, Ontario. You can learn more about our organization by visiting our website and following us on Facebook and Twitter.

As part of our 2020/2021 business plan, Community Literacy of Ontario researched eight digital literacy success stories occurring in a variety of agencies across Ontario.

Community-based LBS agencies have been involved in digital and blended learning to support adult students for many years. However, the advent of COVID-19 led to a strong increase in digital learning. We hope that these success stories increase knowledge of the many innovative ways in which community-based LBS agencies across the province are engaging in digital learning opportunities.

CLO is very pleased to share these success stories in our newsletter:

### **Digital Literacy Success Stories** In Ontario's Community-Based LBS Agencies



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## Brant Skills Centre



Brant Skills Centre (BSC) is a community-based Literacy and Basic Skills agency located in Brantford.

Thank you to Lori Bruner, Executive Director at Brant Skills Centre, for sharing this digital literacy story with us.

**Please tell us about a successful digital literacy initiative or strategy that you are using in your LBS agency.**

Brant Skills Centre has been incorporating online resources as a way to modify in-person service delivery for remote delivery. Zoom, Moodle and Google services have all been helpful digital resources for this.

Brant Skills Centre had previously started using Moodle as an online learning system and with the onset of COVID-19, they were able to test it out more robustly. Moodle courses are available online, but they aren't live, so learners can access them whenever this works best for them. When a learner signs up for a course, they get a name and phone number for the instructor as well as "office hours" so the learner knows when to expect a response if they need to contact their instructor. Throughout the course, the instructor will monitor the learners progress, provide feedback and can schedule Zoom calls to do one-on-one instruction.

During the Moodle course, learners will need to complete and submit their work and have it reviewed and approved by the instructor before they can access the next level of course content.

Brant Skills Centre has been providing live courses which require a minimum of five learners. "*Exploring Google Apps*" has been popular. The course is delivered live through Google Meet with learning activities and milestones completed through Google Classroom.

Brant Skills Centre is always working to develop new content. "*Staying Connected*" is a new online course that will get learners familiar with Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams as preparation for doing other remote delivery classes.

Another upcoming course that will be available remotely will be Quickbooks. Brant Skills Centre will provide student licenses so learners can install the program and work with Quickbooks at home. They also have 10 student licenses for Microsoft Office, and each license will be loaned out to a student for the duration of the course, and the Centre is able to reuse these licenses with new learners.

### Could you describe some of the successes and benefits you have seen from this initiative or strategy?

The feedback from online and remote learners has been great and everyone has been satisfied with the delivery.

Lori has found it wonderful to witness the resilience of both the learners and the team at Brant Skills Centre. Everyone has worked to find a way to continue providing services and the learners have shown great dedication to their education. Here are just a few quotes from their learners:

- *“I am so excited about this new opportunity and want to thank you. I never would have had the confidence to apply if it was not for these courses and feedback.*
- *Again thank you for everything, I know the end result in what you do is to help people get jobs, find careers and you have helped me so much.*
- *I tell everyone about the amazing help you give and I wish more people took advantage of your services.”*

### Would you share some of the hiccups and challenges you experienced along the way?

One challenge Brant Skills Centre has faced has been limited technology. While the staff all have dual monitors, most learners do not. This has presented learners with confusion when switching between windows to view the Zoom call and the learning module in another window.

To set learners up for success, staff complete an intake questionnaire and let learners know that using a smartphone won't be ideal and a large monitor or two monitors is best. If a learner doesn't have a computer they can use, Brant Skills Centre has a small lending library that can loan out monitors and other equipment. In fact, they are applying for a grant to grow this library.

Because of technology limitations, there's a portion of the population that they aren't able to serve with remote delivery. With a growing lending library, Brant Skills Centre hopes to better serve those populations.

**Any advice you would give to other LBS programs moving in the same direction?**

Brant Skills Centre started with short, easy community workshops to get people interested in the rest of their LBS program. They are now doing these workshops virtually and have reduced the course length from 3 to 2 hours. These workshops are funded by the city of Brantford and United Way Emergency Community Fund grant.

For these introductory courses, most people are using smartphones because they don't have access to a laptop. Once they enroll in the LBS courses offered by Brant Skills Centre, they will be able to access the lending library of computers.

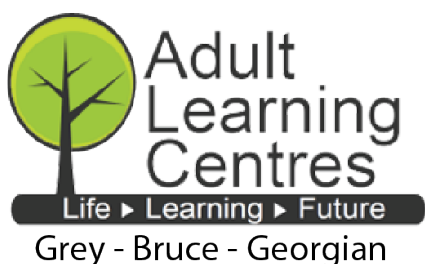
Brant Skills Centre staff had been taking online professional development courses before COVID-19. The timing was excellent, as staff were able to put their new digital skills to immediate use. It's important to invest in continuing education and planning on an ongoing basis. This is especially true now that we've all experienced COVID-19.

If you are working from home, another tip is to set your work hours and stick to them. You don't go into work on the weekends – and therefore, you don't need to answer emails and phone calls on the weekend now that your office is in your home. To help with this, Brant Skills Centre will be starting a rotating return to work plan which will help staff keep their work / life balance.

**Do you have a quote we could share in our report that sums up your digital literacy success story?**

“Your day to day operations may appear to take longer than before, but remember that you're creating brand new operations - this isn't muscle memory! Be kind to yourself and others, by giving extra time.”

## Georgian Learning



Georgian Learning in Collingwood is a community-based Literacy and Basic Skills agency. It operates under the umbrella of the Adult Learning Centres of Grey-Bruce-Georgian.

Thank you to Roger Hannon, Literacy Coordinator, for sharing this digital literacy story with us.

**Please tell us about a successful digital literacy initiative or strategy that you are using in your LBS agency.**

Georgian Learning in Collingwood has several partnerships and other curricula that they deliver remotely. Prior to COVID-19, they began working with The Learning Hub and The Labour Market Planning Board to deliver an online hospitality curriculum. For this, they use the Labour Market Planning Board's proprietary online platform. Georgian Learning also delivers a modified Soft Skills Solutions program in partnership with Simcoe Muskoka Workforce Development Board and the Youth Job Connection program.

Since COVID-19, Georgian Learning has begun to deliver many programs remotely online, like Customer Service Excellence. Learners connect using Google Meet.

**Could you describe some of the successes and benefits you have seen from this initiative or strategy?**

Georgian Learning has found that online remote delivery has been better for shy or introverted learners - many of these learners are performing better in the online classes than they were in person. They have also found that youth are more comfortable using distance online education than the older adult learners.

The sudden requirement to offer remote classes due to COVID-19 has provided Georgian Learning with the opportunity to transfer their in-person paper curricula into Google Docs and other online platforms. While the move was unplanned, storing documents online where they can be easily updated and accessed remotely is a key step in pivoting to remote service delivery.

Because of COVID-19 and these benefits, Georgian Learning is planning to continue offering online remote classes. Some options could be using pre-recorded classes that can be offered on demand. They can also explore blended learning, with some students in class and some online remote.



With all of the fast paced changes in 2020, Georgian Learning is excited to explore new service delivery methods that will serve their learners better in the future.

Georgian Learning also found support by strategizing and networking between literacy organizations, as everyone was searching to find remote delivery curricula as quickly as possible. Georgian Learning reached out to The Literacy Group out of Kitchener Waterloo, who helped by sharing their curricula for Customer Service Excellence.

### **Would you share some of the hiccups and challenges you experienced along the way?**

Getting the required ministry documentation completed has been the biggest challenge, with signatures being the most difficult. They would use Docusign with Google Docs and tried having the learner sign the document on a video chat and then email a picture of the completed form. Now that learners are able to attend the office to sign documents, it's easier.

Georgian Literacy also found it challenging to get learners to commit to the time online for the courses. But, while they have found that online class sizes are smaller than in-person classes were, the smaller class sizes have been more functional for online delivery.

Georgian Literacy experienced issues with learners not having access to computers or Wi-Fi, so they loaned out Chromebooks. But, they did still run into issues of internet access. For example, there was a learner in a retirement community who did not have the internet. Roger was able to attend and provide a Wi-Fi hotspot through a rocket hub, but during COVID-19, the facility went on lockdown so the learner was not able to access the internet.

The Grey Bruce region has many rural areas, so there's not many public Wi-Fi spots and often there are dead zones for cell coverage. In addition to this, there is usually just one internet provider in rural areas and if the learner has bad credit or has previously been unable to pay their bill, they may not be approved for internet or cell phone service.

Roger states that this may be a turning point for adult education. It's already very difficult for some adults to access services in person. With remote delivery, many learners will have difficulty affording the "basic requirements" like a computer and internet, or a cell phone and data. While pivoting to online delivery has its benefits, it will also force LBS organizations to take a closer look at the barriers, such as finances, that exist for their learners.

**Any advice you would give to other LBS programs moving in the same direction?**

Roger recommends working with your fellow LBS organizations and networks. If you see a fellow organization advertising that they are offering an online class - reach out and ask! Also check out support organizations like Community Literacy of Ontario who have a wealth of curricula, tips, and success stories like these. In times of fast-paced change, it's important to keep in touch and share your ideas, resources and solutions.

## Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy



MTML, or the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy, is a regional literacy network serving Literacy and Basic Skills programs in Toronto and York Region. Thank you to Susan Lefebvre, a volunteer with MTML, for sharing this digital success story with us.

Please tell us about a successful digital literacy initiative or strategy that you are using in your LBS agency.

In spring 2020, MTML initiated the **Silver Linings Café**; a highly successful, online peer support meetup specifically designed for LBS practitioners. Practitioners from across the Toronto and York region were invited to meet weekly using the video conferencing platform Zoom to share successes and challenges related to remote learning.

The intent was to create a Community of Practice, which would encourage professional development and inspire confidence in Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) instructors who are navigating the unprecedented remote teaching and learning challenges this pandemic presents to them and LBS adult learners.

MTML created the concept and then solicited the support of AlphaPlus, which played a key role in the implementation of the piloted sessions. Over the course of three months, the number of participants grew rapidly, in large part because participants set the weekly agendas and were provided the space and support to collaboratively find solutions to common challenges. With contributions from AlphaPlus, MTML and the practitioners, a large repository of resources was built and distributed.

MTML ran the cafes from April until the end of August. They plan to offer periodic meetups in the future for Toronto and York region on topics of interest such as a Padlet and learning management systems.

Could you describe some of the successes and benefits you have seen from this initiative or strategy?

Each Silver Lining Café stressed the importance of connection, networking and building skills in an online environment. This was key for LBS practitioners during a pandemic to have the ability to keep learning, sharing and supporting one another. For example, as part of the café, practitioners developed video conferencing guidelines for online learners in their LBS classrooms.

Practitioners learned more about how to teach online and they collectively shared and built best practices. This was key for many, given the rapid shift to supporting learners using digital formats due to the pandemic. Like the LBS learners they serve, practitioners modelled lifelong learning during a difficult time.

The café was designed to be flexible and forgiving so that practitioners would feel comfortable learning and sharing. In a global pandemic, there's enough stress going on! It was important to just be there for one another.

In hindsight, the Silver Linings Café is a robust pilot of “Just-in-Time Professional Development” and has positively benefited LBS practitioners and learners, as expressed directly by Café participants.

Attending the Silver Linings Café benefitted LBS practitioners in a number of ways:

- Increased know-how and confidence with web-based collaboration technologies to deliver learning content remotely.
- Provided an opportunity to meet weekly with LBS peers in a supportive environment and discover best practices for remote learning.
- Empowered practitioners to help learners tackle complex barriers to learning, made worse by pandemic, thanks to information and resources shared by their peers.

### Would you share some of the hiccups and challenges you experienced along the way?

One of the challenges raised by participants was how pivoting to remote learning has highlighted the digital divide.

Complex barriers to learning are amplified in remote settings, including lack of access to digital devices and lack of adequate space or time to learn at home. MTML's online learning survey included a free response section where practitioners highlighted the difficulty of adapting to new technology while contending with daily barriers to learning. Barriers included:

- Difficulty connecting with low income learners: a report by AlphaPlus indicates that 39% of Ontarians with low income do not have internet at home. Low income learners also tend to have less robust mobile phone data plans, which further complicates access to online learning.
- The variety of online learning applications and platforms is overwhelming to practitioners who have limited time and training to learn and apply in a beneficial way. MTML's online learning survey revealed a demand among practitioners to learn more about specific technology platforms such as Zoom, Google Classroom, Padlet, Canvas, FlipGrid, Quill and Moodle.

- There are pockets of instructor excellence and innovation connecting with learners which directly addresses the digital challenges learners are experiencing; however, there is no platform to share these successes with the Literacy and Basic Skills field. Many LBS practitioners expressed feeling isolated.

### Any advice you would give to other LBS programs moving in the same direction?

The technical support MTML received from AlphaPlus was an important part of making the Silver Lining Cafés successful. AlphaPlus staff have amazing skills and patience! During early sessions, training and best practices were provided to literacy educators on the various features of Zoom, in order to make it a successful learning experience for all.

In order to keep everyone connected and to also engage practitioners who were unable to attend, resources from past meetings and information on future meetings were shared with practitioners via email on an ongoing basis.

Susan noted that MTML believed that providing a safe, online meeting space for connecting was important, and that they decided that keeping the cafés informal and not worrying about how many attended was key. Whether many or few, these meetups were beneficial! As Susan noted: *“We’re going to continue doing this until no one shows up”*.

MTML plans on offering meetups in the future on an “as needed” basis. They are currently also finishing up a series of training modules for an LBS agency in Toronto. They have also been approached by an ESL agency with a request to train their instructors in the key features of Zoom, on a fee-for-service basis. MTML is open to providing training on the features of Zoom to others in the LBS community. However, they do not receive funding to do this and must therefore charge a fee for service to provide this training. If you are interested, contact MTML for more information via email at [literacy.mtml@gmail.com](mailto:literacy.mtml@gmail.com).

### Do you have a quote we could share in our report that sums up your digital literacy success story?

“We didn’t make enough time for networking and professional development before. It took a pandemic to bring us together.”



## People, Words & Change



People, Words & Change (PWC) is a community-based LBS agency located in Ottawa.

Thank you to Julie Oliveira, Education Counsellor at PWC, for sharing their digital literacy story with us.

Please tell us about a successful digital literacy initiative or strategy that you are using in your LBS agency.

People, Words & Change (PWC) has several digital literacy programs. PWC targets employment-focused learners (job seekers) and learners who have either been laid off from their job or have a physical job and have sustained injuries requiring them to transition to other types of work.

PWC teamed up with Minwashin Lodge – an Indigenous Women’s Support Centre – to deliver computer classes as part of their Employment Readiness Program. This involved the computer instructor from People, Words & Change going to Minwashin Lodge twice a week to deliver two 2-hour classes in basic computer skills, using the PWC digital modules. Some of the participants were starting at near zero as far as digital skills, while others were looking to upgrade or refresh their knowledge of Microsoft Word. Unfortunately, the third session was cancelled in March due to COVID.

Another successful initiative People, Words & Change created is their partnership with the YMCA-YWCA Employment Access Centre (Merivale location). In this partnership, Julie delivers a weekly class in basic computer skills at their centre using the PWC digital modules. This has resulted in a positive collaborative effort between Julie and the employment consultants at the Y. Both organizations now have more in-depth knowledge about what the other does. The employment consultants now have a better understanding of what LBS is and who a potential LBS learner would be. Cross-referrals run much better now! This class is being conducted remotely until further notice.

Finally, PWC introduced its first course in basic Excel in the winter of 2020. This class was offered onsite at their computer lab. During the initial COVID lockdown, the course was delivered remotely. Most learners have returned to our computer lab (with complete safety measures in place) and things are running well. This course has brought learners to their program to either learn the basics of Excel or to refresh their knowledge of Excel in order to find or maintain employment.

People, Words & Change are currently developing a workshop to offer to their volunteer tutors on strategies and tips for remote tutoring (using Zoom, Google Meet, etc.). They recently delivered training to a few tutors on how to host a meeting in Zoom.

While many learners and tutors have done well with the new remote delivery methods, there is still a need for public meeting spaces, public Wi-Fi, and loaner laptops. For learners who don't have access to a computer or Wi-Fi, or learners with lower digital skills, it has been very difficult for them to transition to remote service delivery.

**Could you describe some of the successes and benefits you have seen from this initiative or strategy?**

One of the learners at PWC worked at a physically-demanding job and injured his back. He came to People, Words & Change to learn computer skills in order to take on a less-physical job at his company. He progressed in their program and is now enrolled in a post-secondary program using the Internet skills he learned at PWC. Another learner was a casualty of the Sears closures. She was a sales associate with no computer experience who wanted to gain these skills for future employment. After completing the course at PWC, she got a job where she is now able to use email to communicate with customers and suppliers.

From the Minwashin Lodge group, People, Words & Change has two success stories to date. One of their program graduates was accepted into an office administration training program and the other completed PWC's basic skills program and is now on her way to completing the Excel course. She will soon be ready to look for work as well.

In the partnership between People, Words & Change and the Y Employment Access Centre, they have had several learners complete the program and be job-ready. One particular learner stands out, however. While she was quite comfortable with a smartphone, she had very little experience using a computer. She completed the beginner modules and now emails with comfort and uses all the basic formatting options in Word. She works as a PSW and is now required to do all her reporting and checking in online and feels much more confident that she can perform her duties appropriately. She also now has fun using images and making greeting cards for her friends and family using what she learned in the Word module!

Their Excel program has produced some success stories as well. One of the learners at PWC came to them because he failed the Excel test he had to do for a prospective employer. With the support of PWC, he completed all three Excel modules. Since then, he has found work in his field and now feels confident that he can use Excel on a daily basis and maintain his employment.

In terms of remote service delivery, one of the tutor/learner matches that has been using virtual tutoring since April has found it to be so successful that they are going to continue to do this long-term. They found virtual tutoring more flexible and convenient, given their family life and work schedules.

### **Would you share some of the hiccups and challenges you experienced along the way?**

Irregular attendance and poor communication with learners are challenges they face in the computer classes offered at the Y Employment Access Centre. Because there is always a wait list for this program, it is difficult when there are attendance and communication issues.

As for the Excel course, the initial assessment process was a challenge because it was difficult to find the learner's level using the online assessment tools that are available. PWC's Computer Instructor, Maura, found that there was no "perfect" online assessment to use. People, Words & Change used the Northstar Digital Literacy Excel assessment tool but found that learners who didn't know Excel still did well on this assessment. As well, because the Excel course is already computer based and learners needed to have a certain comfort level using a computer, most learners were able to transition to remote very easily, so this was a course that was easy to keep delivering during COVID.

For remote service delivery, some learners don't have access to the technology needed for virtual tutoring (either at home or at the library branches which only recently became available again for computer and Wi-Fi usage). For learners this means it can be impossible to print out or scan their homework and lesson materials. In these cases, Julie mails hard copies to the learners and they are usually able to take a photo with their smartphone and email their completed assignments back.

In addition, some tutors aren't comfortable delivering the tutoring sessions either by phone or by video, making them unavailable for learners. To provide a solution to this issue, People, Words & Change has surveyed their tutors regarding their comfort level with virtual tutoring and worked with that feedback to provide skills training.

### Any advice you would give to other LBS programs moving in the same direction?

For the Excel course, People, Words & Change developed three modules, each one with content that corresponded to a milestone. The tasks were also thoroughly tested for glitches so learners are set up for success.

PWC also found it is important to work with other community organizations to promote the classes. Their promotion and recruitment was done through the Ottawa Employment Networking Group. People, Words & Change also has an active presence on Facebook and Twitter.

### Do you have a quote we could share in our report that sums up your digital literacy success story?

It is the learner stories that really showcase the ways in which the digital literacy programming offered by People, Words & Change can impact a person's life.

“Thanks for all the great "working tools" you have given me. I have more confidence now on the computer. When I am stuck, I problem-solve by trying out different processes, whereas before I would freak out. Thanks for believing in me and giving me a chance and the courage to move forward in life and a career.” – Lori

“At the job centre in Kanata, they referred me to PWC and I called Julie and then started my classes with Maura. Since then, all has changed and is still changing. I'm in fact grateful to PWC for all their help and thank you all.” – Francis

## PTP



**Adult Learning and  
Employment Programs**

PTP is a community-based organization delivering Literacy and Basic Skills programs and Employment Services in Toronto. Thank you to Kamran Ahmadpour, IT administrator and instructor, for sharing this digital literacy story with us.

**Please tell us about a successful digital literacy initiative or strategy that you are using in your LBS agency.**

PTP in Toronto has several programs: workforce literacy and essential skills programs, academic upgrading and GED preparation, career planning programs, and a full suite of employment services including employment counselling, job search, job development – as well as sector specific training for the food & beverage sector.

Due to COVID, PTP's primary goal was to reach its clients and students through online services and secure its continuity as quickly as possible. PTP already had Moodle, some cloud computing services, and Google Classroom in place to provide online educational materials in a blended learning model before COVID, which set us up for success. When the school closed, we used the educator Zoom portal, so we did not have the usual time limits on classes. Therefore, we were able to offer many classes right away using a blend of both asynchronous and synchronous online learning.

We have also started to deliver a program in a HyFlex learning model with an in-class teacher using smartboard and a small number of in-class students with more students watching online with Zoom, all at the same time.

You need to register to view PTP's Google Classroom site. However, you can view our Moodle classroom here: [www.myptp.ca](http://www.myptp.ca)

**Could you describe some of the successes and benefits you have seen from this initiative or strategy?**

There's been a change in the way learners want to learn since COVID. In the beginning, learners had more technical issues, some were uncomfortable to connect with Zoom, most didn't feel confident to troubleshoot tech issues by themselves, and they required more support. In time, the learners displayed a sense of self efficacy in online virtual classroom, developed their problem-solving skills and are now able to handle most of their tech issues themselves.



The general technical proficiency of most learners has grown over the past few months of distance service delivery. Learners report feeling more confident. In the same way that organizations were forced to jump into distance education, learners have been forced into it as well and many have increased their skills enormously.

Also, in the beginning, many learners had inadequate digital devices. Most were using smartphones instead of laptops. Now, PTP is able to loan out and also donate some Chromebooks which has been a huge help to these learners.

Another surprising success was that virtual learning classrooms allowed teachers to explore and identify signs of depression, anxiety, and other Covid-19 challenges among some vulnerable learners. Teachers were then able to keep them engaged and help lessen the severity. The schedule of online classes has helped provide structure and accountability for these students, keeping them connected to other people.

One-on-one remote learning has been great for lower level literacy students. Classes are not longer than one hour as it is hard to keep optimal attention while sitting at a computer for that length of time. In group classes, they are seeing a lot of camaraderie and support between the students!

### **Would you share some of the hiccups and challenges you experienced along the way?**

As mentioned before, some of our challenges are related to learners' lack of access to reliable internet services and adequate digital device, some are related to their lack of technical skills, but some are beyond technology.

Having the proper home environment for remote learning is one. Some learners couldn't use their camera because they were in a shelter and therefore lost out on some of the connection that comes with being able to communicate visually with their peers. Some also experienced parenting challenges, such as being interrupted during class times.

Time management is another one, particularly in an asynchronous learning model when the subjects are not taught in real time. Learners need to manage their time well to complete their tasks or assignments. Remote learning has meant learners have to develop more time management and self-management skills which can be challenging at first but a great benefit over time.

There are also Covid-19 challenges. Some learners were experiencing feelings of isolation, fear, and anxiety as time went on. At first, they were unwilling to be on screen or use the mic. The connection through classes at PTP has been very positive for these learners.

PTP has found that there has been much more time required of teachers at the beginning. For example, the teachers need to find or create all of their online lessons and online quizzes now. They also play the role of a technical support if students encounter technical difficulties during the online classroom. Our recent survey feedback shows that over time, our teachers have been adjusting well and have developed the skills they needed to offer e-learning.

### **Any advice you would give to other LBS programs moving in the same direction?**

Just because we have access to technology, it does not mean we are all set. The key is to use technology effectively in online learning to enhance our teaching capabilities and to improve students' learning process and outcomes. There's always room for improvement, so keep tweaking to make it better for learners and teachers as you go.

Don't overload your learners with too much technology, platforms, and information. Give them options to find what works best for them and then keep it simple. Let students get familiar and become comfortable with one tool before adding another one. Having to log into or even navigate several different platforms can be too much to handle at first.

Another point is finding the right balance between synchronous learning and asynchronous learning for a particular learner or program. Synchronous learning such as the use of Zoom comes to be more useful for lower level literacy learners. LBS requires more coaching; real-time instruction with live video has been very helpful to provide this. For higher level classes like GED, academic upgrading, and post-secondary preparation, learners are more likely able to do the courses independently with less support.

### **Do you have a quote we could share in our report that sums up your digital literacy success story?**

“Focus on engagement. Find ways to use technology to engage your students for successful online learning. Use feedback surveys, ask questions, and invite learners, especially those with low levels of digital skills, to interact. Empower them to be active participants.”

## Spark Employment Services



Spark Employment Services offers both employment services and Literacy and Basic Skills programming in Sudbury.

Thank you to Ginette Comeau-Roy, Training and Skills Development Manager, for telling us about digital learning activities at Spark Employment Services

Please tell us about a successful digital literacy initiative or strategy that you are using in your LBS agency.

Spark Employment Services offers two digital literacy courses. The first is *Digital Literacy for the Job Seeker* which teaches basic computer skills. Because of the need for remote delivery, they have created a new introductory module that provides one-on-one phone support to get the learner familiar with their computer before starting the rest of the course. The second is *Microsoft Office Workplace Essentials* which prepares learners for using Office products like Outlook and Word.

Spark Employment Services also partners with Cambrian College to offer Academic Upgrading Level 1. They use a third party platform for the program which provides a web portal, and an instructor uses online video conferencing to guide learners through the class.

They have also started to offer a workshop on the basics of remote video platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, etc. This course covers the basic functionality of each platform as well as etiquette. This prepares learners for personal and professional use of the platforms, such as job interviews, medical appointments, or keeping in touch with family.

Spark Employment Services has used much of the same technology as other organizations: Zoom, loaner laptops, etc. For learners who need more support with computers, Spark has used Team Viewer which is a program they initially used with their IT support. Team Viewer is a program that allows remote use of the learner's computer; therefore, in a classroom setting, it allows the instructor to use the learner's computer without contact - whether in the same room or completely remotely.

Could you describe some of the successes and benefits you have seen from this initiative or strategy?

Spark Employment Services closed its office fairly early during COVID-19 so they needed to set up remote service delivery quickly with short notice. To help with this, they connected with AlphaPlus to move their content to Google Sites and Google Classroom. They chose Google Sites because it is more user-friendly for learners.

Spark will be returning to in-person courses, but will continue to have much of the content provided online. They recognize that most learners with lower literacy and digital literacy skills will benefit from in-person lessons. Their current classrooms used to be able to serve eight or more learners, but with social distancing, Spark Employment Services will only be able to serve 1-3 learners at a time.

Because of this, Spark will work to provide much of their curricula remotely online. Instructors will be able to teach remotely from their classrooms without students in attendance. Spark Employment Services plans to offer blended learning options with in-person lessons when needed, and remote delivery for the rest of the course. For example, intake appointments are currently completed on-site now that they're open again. But, some learners are afraid to take public transit, so remote options can be explored.

### **Would you share some of the hiccups and challenges you experienced along the way?**

Spark Employment Services encountered some challenges. The basic computer skills course has been difficult to provide remotely because the digital skills of many learners are so low. In instances where the learner was having difficulties completing the course online, Ginette printed and mailed paper copies of the course to the learner. Then, an instructor used a phone call or video call for instruction.

Spark found that usually, if the learner doesn't already have a computer, then they aren't comfortable doing the course remotely online. But, because Google Sites and Google Classroom are mobile friendly, Ginette found that some learners choose to use their smartphone or tablet because it's what they are most familiar with.

Another challenge involved barriers to accessing technology. In remote areas around Sudbury, it is difficult to access high speed internet that is sufficient for video calls. As well, there are financial barriers to accessing computers and the internet. To try and serve their learners better, Spark has applied for funding from the Ontario Government for more loaner laptops and internet sticks.

Another challenge has been a downturn in learner referrals during COVID-19. Usually, referrals come from employment services in town. But, because these services closed in the early months of COVID-19, and are open now but with a reduced ability to service clients due to COVID-19 restrictions, the ability to refer learners to Spark is reduced as well. Referrals are now starting to pick up again as Ontario has opened up. Many of the learners who were enrolled before COVID-19 have continued their courses remotely. It

was learners who are more vulnerable and who face unstable life situations (i.e. housing or food insecurity) who needed to stop LBS classes in order to address more pressing priorities.

The quick shift to fully remote service delivery has highlighted the importance of continuing education even for the staff, as this shift has required enhanced use of digital technologies than has been previously needed. The sudden onset of remote work has been beneficial, in that it forced the Spark team to actually do the things they've been putting off, like moving their files online and setting up remote learning functionality.

### **Any advice you would give to other LBS programs moving in the same direction?**

During COVID-19 when all organizations were working from home and providing remote service delivery, the Mid North Network started doing weekly Zoom calls for the network agencies. In these calls, staff were able to have an informal check in with others where they were able to ask questions, share resources, and provide support for one another.

Spark Employment Services also reached out to Community Literacy of Ontario and other literacy organizations for advice and resources. For example, a Toronto organization suggested using hot spots (portable internet sticks) for learners who didn't have internet access.

Ginette also suggests looking for the opportunity in any situation. While it's been challenging to cope with the changes during COVID-19, there have been some benefits to the learners and it's also given the organization the push it needed to get everything online.

### **Do you have a quote we could share in our report that sums up your digital literacy success story?**

“At first, I felt like a fish out of water when COVID-19 hit. We're a small organization with a small budget and I second guessed what we were capable of. Now, looking back, I'm so proud and surprised at how much we could do!”



## The Literacy Group



The Literacy Group of Waterloo Region is a community-based Literacy and Basic Skills agency with offices in Kitchener and Cambridge. Thank you to Lisa McArthur, Program Manager, for sharing this digital literacy story with us.

**Please tell us about a successful digital literacy initiative or strategy that you are using in your LBS agency.**

Learner portal: <https://sites.google.com/view/tlglearnerresources/home>

The Literacy Group, based in Kitchener-Waterloo, has utilized Google products like Sites, Forms, and more to move their service delivery online. This has allowed them to continue serving learners throughout the shut down and to meet the social distancing regulations of COVID-19. The new online system is working so well, and Lisa McArthur shares that The Literacy Group plans to keep many of their COVID digital strategies and they are working to incorporate them permanently into their service delivery.

Online service delivery was in the works for a while at The Literacy Group, even before COVID, but there was always a convenient excuse to not push forward - until the government-mandated shut down due to COVID-19. The Literacy Group already operated out of two separate locations as well as offered off-site modular programming. Like other organizations, they provided service delivery in-person and needed to move their courses and other documentation to a remotely accessible online portal to facilitate multi-site operations.

The first site is the Learner Portal which is a curated collection of links and resources for learners. Everything is ad-free and designed for adults. TLG staff prioritize ad-free, adult resources in reading, writing, math, employment skills, ESL and COVID-19 awareness. By creating this site, The Literacy Group is able to provide one simple URL where a learner can access the resources they need. The Literacy Group is also able to keep the site updated, which has been especially important during COVID-19 when information and social supports have been rapidly changing. The site has seen over a thousand hits from around the province and has reached adults from California, India and Russia. It is open to the public.

For service delivery of Popular Modular programs, The Literacy Group created a highly organized Google Drive with folders for each curricula, containing custom Sites and Forms. The Literacy Group had previously changed from the traditional paper curricula to digital curricula stored on portable USB drives. With having two separate office

locations and then the impetus of remote delivery, wholly online delivery was the logical next step.

Now, teachers and volunteer tutors are able to access a Google Site for each curricula and lead their learners through the coursework. All of the instructor resources for each class/module are in one place. Instructors are able to provide telephonic tutoring via the portal with no other tech needed.

The Literacy Group identified specific groups that they thought would have “slipped through the cracks” by going remote, but it turns out many of these learners were already using digital service like Whatsapp to chat and connect by video with their families. Through Whatsapp or regular texting, the Learner Portal can be shared as a URL and accessed from a smartphone. Learners don't even need to have an email address. What is even better is that learners can access the course content at any time, rather than leaving their work in the classroom or having access to printing at home.

**Could you describe some of the successes and benefits you have seen from this initiative or strategy?**

The larger benefit of moving to their online portal has been the ability to use staff and volunteers' time and talents more efficiently. In the past, it might have made sense to have one person complete all aspects of one project: creating or updating a curriculum and then leading the class and marking homework. Now, it's easy to have many different people: staff, volunteers, etc. complete the part of the project that best uses their time and talents.

With the new online service delivery, lessons are housed in a single Google Site which contains links to each module. It utilizes Google Slides, videos, and other interactive media to lead the learner through the course. Homework is assigned and completed through Google Forms and answers captured in spreadsheets.

In fact, The Literacy Group has been able to retain more volunteers by creating creative jobs for them. While some volunteers wanted to help the organization but didn't have the right schedule or didn't want to provide service delivery with clients - they are now able to volunteer through other jobs like building old paper curricula into the new online curricula and resources.

This has in turn freed up time for the staff so more learners can be served. The Literacy Group has also harnessed the use of sporadic volunteers to deliver smaller modular programs. Before, if there weren't enough learners in a class, it would get cancelled due to limited funding. Now, short-term volunteers can lead small or one-to-one classes.

### Would you share some of the hiccups and challenges you experienced along the way?

The biggest concern with going online is dealing with confidentiality. To address this, the forms that learners fill out only use first name and last initial and identifying information is stored on a separate secure server.

The second issue would be with the limited digital skills and access to technology hardware or services for many Ontarians. TLG is working on several ways to bridge these gaps where possible.

### Any advice you would give to other LBS programs moving in the same direction?

The Literacy Group suggests that you don't tie yourself to outdated service delivery structures that could be easily updated to better suit our quickly changing world. Funding changes, but the learners and the need for digital skills and remote access aren't going away. Figure out how to use your funding in the most effective and efficient way. To ensure you're providing the best services, use Google Forms to collect feedback through exit surveys, on topics like the functionality of your programming.

The Literacy Group suggests that if you are delivering a class online, if you have more than three people in a Zoom class, you should use a co-host for managing the chat and questions. You should also hold learners in a waiting room for privacy control as well as minimizing interruptions. For example, if a learner leaves and tries to re-enter, they would be held in the waiting room until the instructor lets them into the class again. Lisa notes that co-hosting a Zoom meeting is a perfect opportunity to train new tutors and mentors! As well, ensure your online courses are mobile friendly! Many learners don't have a desktop or tablet and will use a smartphone instead.

Lisa reminds us to not overthink it. Find a tech solution that's easy for you and your team to use - and start using it! If you're currently using a platform that doesn't suit the needs of your team or learners find it difficult – then switch to something that works.

As well, note where you need volunteer support where you previously didn't. For example, if you have a wealth of curricula to build into online courses, you can look specifically for volunteers who have those skills, or capitalize on the digital skills of your current volunteers. The work will get done more quickly (and sometimes better!) and allows you and your team to use your time and skills more efficiently. As well, reach out to other organizations to collaborate on shared curriculum and resources.

While LBS is not getting specific guidelines from the ministry at this time, this is also an opportunity to experiment with new ways of doing things. Don't make roadblocks for yourself such as waiting for someone else to tell you how to do it.

Create your own solutions based on what works best for you, common sense, and the previous guidelines.

Do you have a quote we could share in our report that sums up your digital literacy success story?

Work smarter, not harder - and share the wealth!

The right person with the right skills at the right time.

Don't assume a low literacy skill means a low tech skillset!

Support your fellow LBS organizations!

## Wellington County Learning Centre



The Wellington County Learning Centre (WCLC) is a community-based LBS agency serving Waterloo and Wellington County. We are grateful to Elizabeth Debergh, Executive Director, for sharing this digital literacy success story with us!

Please tell us about a successful digital literacy initiative or strategy that you are using in your LBS agency.

As service delivery moved online during COVID, Elizabeth Debergh of the Wellington County Learning Centre recognized the need for the availability of computers and internet in the homes of many of their learners. Elizabeth said *“If the learners don’t have computers, what’s the point in moving our service delivery online?”* She noted that it can’t be assumed that everyone has a computer and internet services, as these come with huge financial barriers.

Acting quickly, Elizabeth was able to secure financing for 25 new computers through community funders. Elizabeth wrote the letter below - a passionate personal letter rather than a typical proposal - and asked several community organizations for smaller amounts rather than one large amount.

*The goal of the Learning Centre is to teach a client how they learn, how to strategize in learning, in ways that work for the client, and for a client to leave the Learning Centre saying, “I couldn’t do it before but I can now!”*

*Our learners have always been front and center when it comes to the programs we design. But, like many of our Literacy Centres, we are now moving these programs into an online environment. Our Centres are equipped with computers, printers, internet and scanners in order for us to do our job effectively.*

*But what about the learners in areas, especially rural areas, where connectivity is poor, nonexistent, precarious in bad weather and minimal hotspots available? Secondly, how exactly does a learner with low literacy attend a virtual literacy program when they do not have a reliable computer or they only have a cell phone?*

*All employment services, Ontario Works services, food and farmer’s markets, clothes shopping among many more are moving online. I have thus developed a strong desire to not leave our learners behind. Thus, I have been working on a proposal for most of the summer in order to:*



1. *Give a brand new computer to learners who want to start connecting with their OW worker online. This means, the clients need to be able to email, attach documents and correspond through email with their Case Worker.*
2. *Give a brand new computer to learners who want to take online training courses through the Ministry of Labour Training and Skills development, safe food handling online training and certificate, join online programs with other literacy providers in Waterloo Wellington via referral, learn how to connect online with local farmers to get fresh fruits and vegetables, learn how to tutor their children via our online tutor program, to name a few.*
3. *Provide subsidized internet that includes taking a financial literacy program and demonstrating on paper, a budget that explains how in 13 months, the learner can pay the full amount of their internet each month.*
4. *Loaning iPads (we have 6), and running a book club, where the book is already loaded and any other activities loaded in advance of the program start date (you could create any type of group with this method including a book club).*

*Finally, all clients will be required to sign for their laptop to say that they received it. If for some reason, the laptop disappears, an explanation will need to be provided in writing before a replacement is given.*

Elizabeth received a very positive response to her letter from the community. In addition to securing funding for 25 computers, the WCLC is hoping to receive financing through the local Credit Union for subsidized internet services for learners. The funding for computers has been received and the computers have been ordered and will be distributed to learners on a first come, first served basis.

Elizabeth notes that most funding is focused on food and basic needs, but digital connection is a big part of that. For example, many learners are on OW and now need to connect with their caseworkers online through email instead of their usual in person appointment. As well, farmer's markets and grocery stores are using online order forms for pickup and delivery.

Elizabeth realizes that being able to use a computer to keep in touch provides more control to the learner and may even reduce stress. When learners are able to email their OW caseworker on their own schedule, they aren't having stressful situations like taking calls in a public place or while their child is having a tantrum.

**Could you describe some of the successes and benefits you have seen from this initiative or strategy?**

By asking for smaller amounts of funding, Elizabeth was able to secure funding quite quickly. As well, the free computers will act as a recruiting tool to get more learners.

Elizabeth calls this first batch of 25 computers a pilot, and with proven success, she will reapply for additional funding. The feedback from learners has been very positive and many are excited to sign up for the pilot program.

The Learning Centre is now working more closely than ever with LBS agencies in their region, via the Literacy Services Plan in their region. In a simple plan, all of the agencies in their region shared information on the current availability of various types of literacy programming so they could refer learners amongst themselves. Before, it wasn't feasible to ask a learner to travel to another LBS agency for a particular program, but now that they are all online, it makes perfect sense.

Referring learners within the larger region will also help with learner numbers. These are all new learners that the WCLC won't have to recruit!

**Would you share some of the hiccups and challenges you experienced along the way?**

Elizabeth noted that the phone lines for many agencies (Service Canada, Ontario Works, etc.) are overloaded and it's nearly impossible to connect with them over the phone. While these agencies have set up online portals that learners can use, if the learner does not have a computer and internet connection, they may have no way of connecting with these much-needed service agencies.

For job seekers, temp agencies and employment services have all moved online so a computer and internet connection are a new requirement for these types of learners. This is a new financial barrier that can put them out of work until they are able to secure the computer and internet.

Elizabeth shares that her County was providing refurbished computers for a fee. OW is also paying back The Learning Centre, \$150 per laptop. In both of these cases, The Learning Centre needs to have the cash in hand to be able to get the computers, so it's important to start writing a letter to funders to encourage them to participate in these programs.

As well, bulk pricing allows for better prices on the laptops but again requires you to have the money upfront to be able to get the computers.

### Any advice you would give to other LBS programs moving in the same direction?

Be flexible. Expand or reduce your plans based on the funding and resources you have available. Do the best you can and build on your successes as you go.

The larger telecommunication companies like Telus and Rogers are sometimes too big to get funding from. Elizabeth has had more success when applying with smaller community partners.

Get connected with all areas of your community. Elizabeth found success with securing funding from a variety of entities: United Way, Credit Unions, even individuals! By keeping the donation amount small - \$200 to \$500 - it's easier for all types of donors to say "yes".

To reduce the instances of being denied funding, Elizabeth sent a letter to many potential funders asking to partner with them on the project. If it was a good fit, the funder would send back their application. This reduced the amount of time spent filling out individual applications.

Elizabeth, like many other LBS agencies, got creative with the changing needs of her learners. She had existing funding earmarked for training supports but now that transportation is no longer needed, she was able to apply it to the new digital needs of the learners. This was first discussed at our LSP then sent to MLTSD for approval.

Elizabeth notes that it's sometimes better to go with a bottom up approach rather than top down mandates. Identify what your learners need and support that via agreement at the LSP level - rather than waiting for the Ministry to tell you how to support your learners. Elizabeth really appreciates that the Ministry is interested in ideas that are outside of the box and change the way we usually use funding in order to improve our abilities to help and work with learners.

### Do you have a quote we could share in our report that sums up your digital literacy success story?

Moving forward together. Let's not leave anyone behind,  
especially the most vulnerable.