OALCF Goal Paths and E-learning

A preliminary review

At AlphaPlus we have defined e-learning broadly as teaching and learning with digital technologies. E-learning can happen at a distance or in a blended model, combining face-to-face and online learning. We have used this broad and simple definition in order to capture the wide range of formal and informal learning that is available as digital technologies proliferate[1].

In order to be able to take advantage of the full range of learning opportunities in each of the goal paths, students increasingly need to be enabled and comfortable in an e-learning environment.

This brief review of e-learning in the goal paths is intended as a starting point. We need to do more work to develop our understanding of the transitional competency requirements related to

e-learning. We know that e-learning is becoming an increasingly important component in workplaces, in further education and training and in daily life. In order to support students to face the challenges and embrace the opportunities of e-learning, we need to ensure that learning activities in adult literacy programs prepare students for those challenges and opportunities.

OALCF Goal Paths & E-learning
A preliminary review

In this e-bulletin we take a look at the competency requirements in each of the OALCF goal paths.

Much of this information will already be familiar to experienced adult literacy practitioners; however, we want to highlight the ever-increasing reach of e-learning in workplaces and in education.

As we undertook this brief review, we had the following questions in mind.

- What do we know about e-learning demands and opportunities in each of the goal paths?

- What do learners need to know and be able to do in relation to e-learning in order to support a successful transition to their next step?

- What do instructors need to know to support students in developing the necessary e-learning competencies?

- Where and how does e-learning fit with the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF)?

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What do we know?

This section of the e-bulletin identifies the connections we know exist between e-learning and each of the goal paths.

Employment

Our preliminary review of e-learning and activities in the food services, hospitality and retail sectors in Ontario revealed that e-learning is now an established component of workplace orientation and training. Employers increasingly embrace e-learning as a cost-effective means to provide "just-in-time" rather than "just-in-case" training. For instance, we discovered that it is quite common for entry-level employees to be required to participate in e-learning as part of an orientation program and for health and safety training. In many workplaces, employees are required to participate in ongoing training using e-learning platforms. Employers such as Tim Hortons, Sobeys, and Canadian Tire provide online orientation and health and safety training for entry-level employees. Canadian employers purchase a wide range of e-learning courses, including WHMIS, from the Canada Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS). Students who want to work in the food services industry may need to take the safe food handling preparation course offered online, for example, at In Good Hands.

Students who want to work in hospitality may encounter Ontario Tourism Education Corporation (OTEC) e-learning courses designed to provide training for a range of occupations in the tourism and hospitality sector in Ontario. OTEC is an Ontario not-for-profit organization that offers customer service and interpersonal skills training products and services for a range of industry sectors.

Secondary School Credit

We found that students who have chosen further education and training goals have the option to use e-learning to earn an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) through the Independent Learning Centre (ILC). The ILC courses are delivered using a blended learning approach. Using online and print materials, students work online and submit their coursework online. In Ontario, the Ministry of Education also supports a provincial Learning Management System (LMS) through which high school students may participate in E-Learning Ontario courses offered through local school boards. Students who choose these options to complete high school credits will need to be familiar with online learning and to have basic digital skills to succeed.

Postsecondary

We found that the same is true of the Postsecondary goal, where many community colleges offer online and distance education opportunities. Students can also work towards an Academic & Career Entrance (ACE) certificate through ACE online. However, in order to participate in ACE online, students must successfully complete the prerequisite Learn to Learn (L2L) orientation course in which they must demonstrate or confirm that they have the necessary personal, computer and academic skills to successfully undertake ACE online.

Employment counsellors often ask that clients take the SmarterMeasure (READI) assessment which assesses readiness to learn and academic skills, including learning style, technical competency, on-screen reading rate and recall, and typing speed and accuracy. Access to the assessment is available on the ACE online site.

Apprenticeship

The apprenticeship and skilled trades system in Ontario is in the process of modernization. The Ontario College of Trades, a regulatory college, was established in 2009. The College was led by a Board of Governors drawn from all trade sectors, employers and employees, union and non-union, and from compulsory and voluntary trades, as well as members of the public. The College has conducted extensive consultations across the sector and will accept members as of April 8, 2013. When fully established, the College will certify tradespeople to industry standards.

In Apprenticeship and Skills Training, colleges also offer online and distance options. Students who have identified an Apprenticeship goal may need to participate in ACE online in order to obtain high school equivalency or, for example, to work on math skills to succeed in the college portion of apprenticeship training or to prepare to write the Certificate of Qualification exam.

In 2012-2013 the Mid North Network, in partnership with Literacy Northwest and Literacy Network Northeast, worked on a project, *Supporting Apprenticeship Completions – Model of service provision*. The project developed and piloted models of integrated LBS service provision to address the literacy needs of apprentices preparing for the Certificate of Qualification exam as well as those who need to obtain a high school diploma or equivalency. The project had a focus on serving apprentices in rural and remote communities in the north and on how using blended learning (a combination of face-to-face and online learning) assisted apprentices in staying on the Apprenticeship goal path.
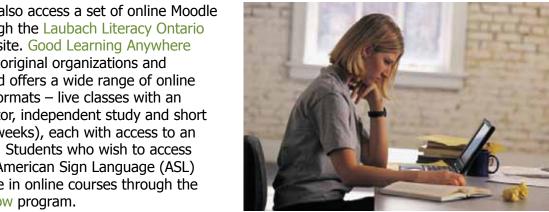
Independence

As with students on the Employment, Secondary School Credit, Postsecondary and Apprenticeship goal paths, students who have identified Independence as a goal can participate in e-learning through the e-Channel initiative, an MTCU-funded initiative for online learning.

Students in the Anglophone stream can pursue learning through the LearningHUB. The LearningHUB offers online Literacy and Basic skills upgrading through live classes, independent study courses, short courses (which can be started at any time, run for up to 5 weeks and require a commitment of 3-5 hours each week) and blended study – a combination of live classes and independent study.

Students can also access a set of online Moodle courses through the Laubach Literacy Ontario Training Post site. Good Learning Anywhere works with Aboriginal organizations and individuals and offers a wide range of online courses in 3 formats – live classes with an online instructor, independent study and short courses (3-6 weeks), each with access to an online mentor. Students who wish to access e-learning in American Sign Language (ASL) can participate in online courses through the Deaf Learn Now program.

Students who wish to participate in online learning in French can access a range of live and independent courses, with mentor support, through F@D – the distance learning service of the Coalition ontarienne de formation des adultes (COFA).

Adult literacy program students also work independently and with instructors and tutors to upgrade literacy and numeracy skills to work on new skills using web-based content on sites such as Skillswise, GCF LearnFree.org and the Khan Academy. In addition to learning literacy and numeracy skills, students can use applications and sites such as YouTube, E-How, Wiki How, Podcasts and other sites to learn something they need to know "right now," just as employers use e-learning to provide "just-in-time" training.

What do learners need to know?

While it is certainly the case that students need to have basic digital skills to participate in online and e-learning, those skills alone are not sufficient. Learning online requires a range of skills, including literacy and digital skills, but also the ability to manage learning, to work to schedules and deadlines, and to communicate effectively using email, chat features and forums. A critically important skill, given the ever-changing nature of interfaces, applications and sites, is the ability to be confident in confronting and navigating unfamiliar sites and interfaces.

What do instructors need to know?

So what does this mean for adult literacy programs? Well, it means that as instructors work with learners to develop learning plans and map learning activities to support learners to achieve their goals, the concept of e-learning has become increasingly important. Tasks and activities need to reflect that learners in each of the goal paths are likely to encounter e-learning as they move along that path and make transitions to the next level of learning and training.

While instructors can try to replicate all of the learning situations that learners may encounter in workplaces and in further education and training, it may be more efficient to support learners to manage learning and to deal with unfamiliar interfaces rather than specifically "teaching" individual programs, applications or devices. For example, it will be helpful if students have opportunities to become familiar with online quizzes, a common feature in workplace orientation programs, with using dictionaries to learn unfamiliar vocabulary, with using on-screen help buttons, and with managing pop-ups and multiple windows. It will also be helpful if students have keyboarding and well developed listening skills, experience dealing with onscreen distractions, and experience reading online so that they can work on reading speed and comprehension.

As we thought about this and the ways in which adult literacy programs can help to support learners to become familiar with e-learning, we looked at the concept of "self-efficacy" based on the work of Albert Bandura[2] in the field of psychology, with particular reference to the development of mastery as a means to develop and enhance self-efficacy. Researchers in the field of education have looked at the ways that educators can support students to enhance self-efficacy:

Mastery experiences – Students' successful experiences boost self-efficacy, while failures erode it. This is the most robust source of self-efficacy.

Vicarious experiences – Observing a peer succeed at a task can strengthen beliefs in one's own abilities.

Verbal persuasion – Teachers can boost self-efficacy with credible communication and feedback to guide the student through the task or motivate them to make their best effort.

Emotional state – A positive mood can boost one's beliefs in self-efficacy, while anxiety can undermine it. A certain level of emotional stimulation can create an energizing feeling that can contribute to strong performances. Teachers can help by reducing stressful situations and lowering anxiety surrounding events like exams or presentations.[3]

In the adult literacy field the key elements that support students in achieving self-efficacy are well known and in general practice in programs:

- setting appropriate goals
- providing feedback to achieve appropriate attributions for success and failure
- monitoring progress[4]

The concept of self-efficacy provides a useful framework in which adult literacy programs can develop learning activities that will provide students with the means to gain mastery in the area of e-learning. This sense of mastery is critically important in enabling students to participate successfully in e-learning in whichever goal path they decide to pursue. Research shows that anxiety about computer use has an influence on students' perceptions of their ability to learn online and that computer self-efficacy plays an important role in mediating anxiety when people are confronted with unfamiliar interfaces and online learning systems.[5]

Self-efficacy goes beyond digital skills and provides a useful way to think about how students can become not just self-confident, that is, have a sense that they have the skills to use digital technologies to learn, but have a sense of their own capacity to learn, to manage learning, to engage in problem-solving and to deal with new and unfamiliar interfaces and concepts.

"Learner goals are fundamentally transitions-oriented because they look beyond the LBS program. An identified goal helps learners to express their desire to engage in learning that will support them at work, in their homes, communities and broader education and training."[6]

Where and how does e-learning fit with the OALCF?

The six competencies as described in the OALCF cover the range of abilities that learners will most likely use as they transition to their goals. In e-learning, all of the competencies are involved. Find and Use Information and Communicate Ideas and Information are integral to e-learning, and Use Digital Technology and Manage Learning need to be looked at very carefully. These competencies are critical in developing learning activities and tasks that will support students to enhance skills and abilities that are meaningful and practical in e-learning.

Competency D. Use Digital Technology describes the digital skills; we could call them the "hard" transferable yet sometimes transient skills that will support successful e-learning. Competency E. Manage Learning covers the foundational abilities or "soft" skills needed to manage learning in the literacy program and, perhaps most critically, to manage learning in other environments, e.g., workplaces, further education, college programs and skilled trades training.

Useful starting points

There are two very recently developed resources that will be helpful to practitioners as they consider the implications of e-learning on the goal paths for students in their programs. These are easy-to-use tools designed specifically for use in adult literacy programs in Ontario. The first is an online course (in Moodle) called *Are you ready to learn online?* The course is structured to provide learners with a sense of what online learning is like and to help instructors assess how comfortable learners are with online learning. It offers learners an orientation to online learning, self-assessment activities to check their computer skills and levelled learning content. To learn more, check out the web page describing the course (scroll down to find the webinar audio recording and presentation slides).

The other resource is *Manage learning using digital technology*, which includes sample tasks and practitioner notes. This resource offers sample learning activities and tasks to support learners who are preparing for independent and online e-learning opportunities, whatever their goals are and wherever they may encounter them – at work, in further education and training or in their daily lives.

What I hear, I forget. What I see, I remember. What I do, I understand.
 Kung Fu Tzu (Confucius)