Innovations in Literacy Learning:
Reaching the Remote Northwestern Communities of Ontario

by Michelle Eady

The Sioux Hudson Literacy Council in partnership with AlphaPlus Centre in Toronto, Ontario and Confederation College, Sioux Lookout Campus, is making groundbreaking strides to reach adult learners who reside in remote, isolated communities of Northwestern Ontario. This First Nation literacy organization services learners within the community of Sioux Lookout and the surrounding area. The thirty-five communities in the area, which have a total population of approximately 35,000 people, are often accessible only by plane in the summer months and by ice roads during the winter (see figure 1). Many of these local residents are First Nations community members who do not have strong, structured educational backgrounds and who have not had the opportunity to improve their existing reading, computer and employment skills. There are currently programs in these communities offered to high school and college students via video- and audio-conferencing. It appears, however, that those adults who would benefit the most; the people who need assistance to attain the literacy levels for employment, are those who have had the least educational opportunity.

Good Learning Anywhere

Generous funding from the National Literacy Secretariat in collaboration with AlphaPlus Centre, a Toronto-based adult literacy resource center, has made it possible for the Sioux Hudson Literacy Council to deliver "Good Learning Anywhere", a distance literacy education pilot project. Over the last three years the Sioux Hudson Literacy Council has been offering solutions for the literacy learner at a distance. We have created a unique website with direct links to synchronous online classrooms and offer a solution to the growing number of First Nations learners who have had few opportunities to improve their literacy skills. Along our journey, we have discovered many challenges and issues surrounding the obtaining and retaining of both online learners and mentors in Northwestern Ontario. This article will share some insights, experiences and suggestions that have come from our progressive work to reach First Nations literacy learners in the remote, isolated communities of Ontario's North through a mode of distance delivery.

Figure 1. Map of Northwestern Ontario Nishnawbe Aski Nation

From: http://arts.knet.ca/nanmap.html/nanmap.html adapted with permission of the artist Cal Kenny

What is Distance Delivery?

It is important to establish the definition of distance delivery and the perspective that an agency's program represents within that definition. In the context of this document, distance delivery is synonymous with "open" and "distance" learning. The definitions of open and distance learning, however, vary greatly. As the Commonwealth of Learning, (2000) clearly explains,

"There is no one definition of open and distance learning. Rather, there are many approaches to defining the term. Most definitions, however, pay attention to the following characteristics:

- Separation of teacher and learner in time or place, or in both time and place;
- Institutional accreditation; that is, learning is accredited or certified by some institution or agency. This type of learning is distinct from learning through your own effort without the official recognition of a learning institution;
- Use of mixed-media courseware, including print, radio and television broadcasts, video and audiocassettes, computer-based learning and telecommunications. Courseware tends to be pre-tested and validated before use;
- Two-way communication that allows learners and tutors to interact as distinguished from the passive receipt of broadcast signals (communication can be synchronous or asynchronous);
- Possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials, learner-learner

interaction, library study and laboratory or practice sessions; and

- Use of industrialized processes; that is, in large-scale open and distance learning operations, labour is divided and tasks are assigned to various staff who work together in course development teams."

It is extremely important that an agency reviews these definitions as a distance delivery team and that each person on that team understands the parameters of their project in the realm of the larger definition of distance delivery. An agency may only focus on certain aspects of the above definitions, yet still be considered a distance delivery program. It is important for each team to have a common goal in mind when developing course delivery modes and content in order for a program to experience success.

Redefining the Distance Learner

Along with the definitions of distance delivery, the literature also tells us that there are predisposed characteristics of distance learners. Distance learners tend to be motivated, well-educated, middle class individuals who want to continue their education (Grill, 1999). "Good Learning Anywhere" strives towards redefining these characteristics to include any learner trying to further their education, training, employment and/or personal independence despite their geographical location, previous education, economic situation or limited access to organized literacy programming.

In order to do this, the Sioux Hudson Literacy Council focused on pilot groups in three locations. In two of the locations, a mentor/facilitator was available at the site for assistance and support. The third group consisted of individuals who are living in isolated communities across the North. These learners are accessing literacy classes strictly by use of computer. Some are accessing home computers, workstations in the office, and computers at the local school or learning centre. For the most part, these learners are self-motivated and do not have assistance from anyone outside their online learning community. This pilot group began as a group of 18 individuals preparing to upgrade for a college level program. This group has now expanded by community partnerships and word of mouth to over 75 registered learners.

Teaching Our Learners

As of May 1, 2006 the Sioux Hudson Literacy Council has delivered over 85 classes. We have designed these classes with different purposes in mind.

First Nation Management Training – 18 classes

This group of learners consists of people who are currently holding positions in the band offices or other places of administration in their communities. They require training in business, communications, accounting, etc. in order to fulfill the newly legislated

requirements of their jobs. "Good Learning Anywhere" has provided upgrading in language and communications in order to help prepare these students for the college credit courses that they are required to complete.

Pelican Falls First Nations High School - 22 classes

The learners at Pelican Falls have had difficulty passing the required Literacy Test for successful completion of their high school diploma. These learners live in a residential school outside of Sioux Lookout and they are mature students who have returned to a literacy class to fulfill the requirements needed to graduate. "Good Learning Anywhere" provides these learners with a class that supplements what they are doing in school to help strengthen the skills that are needed to succeed in attaining their high school diploma.

Teacher Assistant Career Training – 25 classes

In partnership with Confederation College, The Teacher Assistant Career Training (TACT) program is providing workplace literacy training for those individuals working in schools in remote northern communities. These learners are employed teachers' aides; however, many of the learners have had no training in their field of work. "Good Learning Anywhere" provides a platform for which these students can acquire the skills they need to become experts in their jobs.

Pre Graduate Education Diploma (GED) – 6 classes

Sioux Hudson Literacy Council is adapting the PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) Pre GED (General Education Development) program to suit the platform and geographic circumstances of its learners. These learners watch the DVDs that are sent to them on their computer, do their lessons in their workbook, and come together once a week on Centra (a synchronous web conferencing platform) to discuss assignments, have mini-lessons and have any questions answered by an instructor.

English Primer – 6 Classes

The learners who participate in the English Primer Class are attending in hopes of improving their English language skills. These learners are coming to class as an interest driven program.

The distance project portrays the true meaning of the word "distance." All of our learners live a considerable distance from the learning center in Sioux Lookout. Some learners reside as far away as Fort Severn, Ontario, 450 km north of Sioux Lookout, and most of our registered learners have never met face to face. Our learners are all considered literacy learners and have been assessed using the Literacy and Basic Skills (Literacy Ontario, 2000) leveling criteria.

Reaching Our Learners

"Good Learning Anywhere" has encouraged us to be creative in the types of technology we use to reach our learners and facilitate our classes. There are many modes of technology and considerations for practitioners who are exploring the possibilities of distance literacy learning.

Mail

Perhaps the oldest and slowest mode of reaching our distance students is still our most reliable. Much of the print based material that is prepared for learners is sent by mail. Large packages such as "Good Learning Anywhere" participant binders or textbooks are usually sent this way to avoid expensive airplane costs. Ordering the paper based resources and having them ready to send requires much organization and preparation time. It can take several weeks for mail from Sioux Lookout to reach our learners.

Telephone

The telephone has played an important role in direct communication with our learners. Learners are notified by phone on the day of their class and reminded to attend. Students often call with questions about their work or about problems with technology. The Sioux Hudson Literacy Council has a 1-800 number that students can call to discuss schoolwork questions or technology issues.

Floatplanes and Airplanes

When an emergency arises, someone's headset breaks down, or a workbook is lost, "Good Learning Anywhere" relies on airmail to keep on track. Whether it means racing a package up to the airport or down to the lake to the float planes, we have used these modes of quick delivery when problems arise. We try to send small packages like CDs or copies of sections of the workbooks to tie the learner over until the mailed package gets there.

Fax

The fax machine at the learning center has become very active since we started our pilot project. Whether it is sending notices to learners, or learners faxing in assignments to us it has become a very important tool for our project.

Videos and CDs

Our TACT program and Pre GED program both involve students watching videos for their classes. Our classes are using the PBS Pre GED program material and other relevant documentaries that deal with the subject matter of their courses. We have made DVD copies of the relevant material to send to learners, as is it more convenient and less expensive to send.

Using Centra to Teach Literacy

One of the greatest advantages to our partnership with AlphaPlus is our ability to access the use of Centra technology (Navickas & Yazdani, 2005). AlphaPlus Centre provides us not only with access to Centra but training and support for using it, and also coordinates information-sharing meetings among all distance research partners. Centra technology provides a platform where synchronous online classes take place. This online classroom environment is user friendly, fun to use and provides anonymity in respect that students are not on camera as they would be in a videoconference. When a student enters the environment with a user name and password they can see the other learner's names that are in attendance as well as the instructor's name. The environment allows learners to talk to the instructor, ask questions, raise their hand, and even applaud and laugh with certain icons. "Good Learning Anywhere" has found this a great advantage when working from a Native Learning perspective. Many learners have commented on the relief of not having to be seen on camera.

Our instructors upload a PowerPoint presentation into the environment before class and when the class starts, all of the participants can see the slides on the screen. The instructor can mark up the screen using various tools including a laser pointer, high lighter, arrow etc. to make important points obvious to the learners. The White Board is a wonderful tool that Centra offers. While in this application the instructor and/or students can write freely on the whiteboard to ask/answer questions, draw diagrams and post information and then save it to the agenda so that White Board can be revisited. The White Board feature is one that is used frequently during class.

Centra has other tools such as Web Safari, where the instructor can take a class to a website and share the site with the class. In turn, students can browse the website from their computer. This tool is used most commonly when an item or subject matter arises and the instructor wants to share more than just a description. For instance, in the TACT program we were talking about cushions and instead of just verbally explaining it to the students, I took the students to a website about sensory integration items. This allowed the students to see the items and explore other areas of sensory integration for themselves.

A tool called Application Share allows instructors to share documents previously created on their computer. The instructor can take the students anywhere on his/her computer to share documents that are pertinent to the lesson taught. We find that for our purposes, we use this tool the least.

The Break Out Room tool allows the instructor to break the large group of students into smaller workgroups who work privately and discuss their answers, make and save a whiteboard and then come back to the larger group to share their findings. Often in face-to-face classrooms, teachers send students out into the hallway to do group work, answer questions on chart paper and then return to the class to share their answers. The breakout room allows distance students to do the same thing – it's group work online!

Many of our learners have made comments about how "cool" the classroom environment is. Often, students don't want to leave and we have to have some discussion time each class to catch up with the happenings of the students in our online learning community. Centra technology provides opportunity for group work, presentations, class discussion, lectures, group web searches and application sharing. Centra also allows for classes to be recorded and revisited if a learner should want to go back to listen to the class again or listen to a playback of the class if they have missed a session.

Website

The Sioux Hudson Literacy Council has also designed a unique website with direct links to synchronous online classrooms and offers a solution to the growing number of First Nations learners who have had few opportunities to improve their literacy skills. Our website is hosted by NALD (National Adult Literacy Database) that can be found at http://www.siouxhudsonliteracy.com.

This website is a user friendly solution to help learners find their classes and provides a direct link to classes. A handy reminder card, with our website address and the learner's user name and password to access his/her classes, helps to ensure learner success in entering the class. A number of learners have been concerned about having to miss some sessions because of previous commitments and we are pleased to tell them that they can access the previously recorded classes, listen to them at their leisure and stay on track with their learning goals. Students also use the recording option to review classes they have already attended.

Challenges

Technical Difficulties

With the help of the AlphaPlus technical team, we have had few problems using Centra. There have been occasions when the server has gone down, or glitches that interfere with our classes; however, the team is working hard to make Centra a seamless operation. Our local technology expert has ensured that all of our students have been able to attend class at least once. We find troubles with firewalls the most frequently occurring challenge and most difficult to solve from a distance. Some students attend and can hear, but at times, cannot be heard.

Technical Assistance

One of the best things we did for our learners was to hire a local computer technician to be available to learners when they need assistance. He is hired on retainer and is available whenever classes are running to help the learners take care of glitches in their systems. We have also ensured that instructors are signed onto a chatting tool at the same time as class so that students can text message the instructor if ever there is a problem. At one point we had an instructor teaching online, using a chat system to help a student, and speaking

with another student on the phone all at once. When our computer technician came on board he took over the calls and that made the problem solving workload manageable for the instructor. Students who are in shared lab settings or communities have helped each other in downloading Centra, setting up the microphones or otherwise accessing the classes. Quite often this helpful peer interaction has occurred without the input or direction of the instructors.

Redefining the Distance Mentor

Redefining the distance learner, the types of courses delivered, and the mode of delivery leads to a change in the role of the distance mentor. A number of authors (Blank & Russell, 2000; Burge & Roberts, 1998; Dringus, 2000; Porter & O'Connor, 2001) agree that distance mentors have the following roles and responsibilities. To:

a. create the climate and negotiate ground rules for working in the course;
b. connect learners to peers and other resources (create learning community);
c. confirm new learnings and insights;
d. correct misunderstandings;
e. change the agenda or activities if necessary;
f. check for losses of attention; and most of all;
g. provide support to learners.

These roles and responsibilities involve three crucial success factors that are highlighted throughout the literature on distance mentoring and facilitating. First, mentors must participate in orientation and training of the learning tools that they will be utilizing (Bennett, 2003a; Dringus, 2000; Gibbons & Wentworth, 2001; Greyling, 2002; Hardy & Olcott, 1995; Pratt & Palloff, 2001; Wagner, 1995). Second, mentors, above all else, are there to provide support to the learner. In order to do this effectively, mentors must know the characteristics of their participants, their backgrounds, comfort levels, hobbies, and interests (Bennett, 2003a; Blank & Russell, 2000; Eastmond, 1998; Galusha, 1997; Ko & Rosen, 2001). Finally, mentors need to alter their role as teacher and function more as a resource, instigator, challenger, team player and facilitator (Burge & Roberts, 1998; Ginsburg, 1999; Hardy & Olcott, 1995; Wagner, 1995).

When one is reflecting on the characteristics of distance mentors mentioned above, it must be taken into consideration that these mentors are working with the stereotypical distance learner that Grill (1999) suggested. The "Good Learning Anywhere" project has found that so much more has to be taken into consideration when working with our newly defined distance learner, such as 1) knowledge of assessment procedures and application at a distance, 2) curriculum constraints and development issues, 3) economic barriers, 4) cultural and traditional values and rituals, 5) awareness of flexibility, ownership, partnership, community support, available technology and time.

Keeping it Simple

The most important lessons that we have learned on our journey of distance delivery of literacy skills is to keep things as simple, as user friendly and as organized as possible. We go to great lengths to ensure the simplest route for our learners to download the Centra software to their computers and gain access to their classes. Each learner is provided with a "Good Learning Anywhere" manual that introduces him/her to the program, the facilitators, and contact information and provides a compact disc with the four simple steps to downloading Centra. We also provide the students with a phone number for technical support available most times of the day. The students are also provided with necessary technological accessories and the text/workbooks for their class.

If learners involved in the "Good Learning Anywhere" project are frustrated and confused, they are less likely to stick with the task at hand. It should be a priority for any organization to ensure that all aspects of the online literacy learning experience are thoroughly checked and rechecked. The dates, times, content, and links must be as uncomplicated and fluent as possible. Technical support must be available to learners and instructors as well as training in using the software and equipment.

Sharing Our Strengths

Our learners have been able to experience a supportive learning community in an online environment. Learners are coming together from similar walks of life with similar goals and yet have a great physical distance between them. In the same way, the "Good Learning Anywhere" project aims to share our experiences, challenges and solutions with other agencies that are attempting their own distance delivery literacy classes. We look forward to sharing information, created content, and presentations. And, in turn, create a learning community of distance delivery literacy practioners. In this way, we will be able to broaden our audience by sharing teachable course materials and developed content that will help all agencies reach their goal of bridging the distance between the distance learner and his/her personal literacy goals.

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