

Stories from the Field 3:
An Exploration of Programming
through Innovation in ESL Literacy

Sandra Loschnig

Quick Press -
first 4 articles.
Enjoy!

This third *Stories from the Field* project is a collaboration between the Centre for Excellence in Foundational Learning (CEFL) and the Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement (CEIIA). This series of stories explores innovations in ESL literacy programming in the CEIIA at Bow Valley College. We thank all of the practitioners who have generously contributed their time, wisdom, and passion in the building of these articles. We especially thank Diane Hardy for being an engaged and enthusiastic partner in this endeavor.

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Adult Literacy Research Institute

Centre for Excellence in Foundational Learning

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Stories from the Field 3:

An exploration of programming through innovation in ESL Literacy

Who are ESL literacy learners and what is ESL literacy?

The term ESL literacy describes a distinctive group of learners who are facing two significant challenges: they are learning English and simultaneously developing literacy skills.¹

Bow Valley College practitioners coined the term LIFE (Learners with Interrupted Formal Education) to describe this group. LIFE “have had between zero and ten years of formal education, often interrupted by war, political unrest, famine, displacement, or poverty” (Bow Valley College 2009, 3). Given this span of years in formal education, ESL literacy learners present with a wide range of literacy levels.

The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks uses the following categories to capture this diversity:

Pre-literate

Learners come from oral cultures where the spoken languages do not have written forms or where print is not regularly encountered in daily life. They may not understand that print conveys meaning or realize how important reading and writing are in Canadian society.

Non-literate

Learners that do not read or write, even though they live in literate societies.

Semi-literate

Learners who have some basic reading and writing skills, but are not yet functionally literate.

(Canadian Language Benchmarks 2015, 5)

¹ Currently, the term ESL (English as a second language) is still in use. However, there is a movement toward using the term ELL (English Language Learners) which recognizes English may be a learner’s third, fourth, or even seventh language.

While they bring many strengths into the classroom, ESL learners with limited to no literacy generally do not thrive in mainstream ESL classes. ESL literacy practitioners at Bow Valley College advocate “for a separate stream of ESL literacy classes with the recognition that LIFE have different needs, different advantages, different ways of learning, and often different goals than mainstream ESL learners” (Bow Valley College 2009, ix).

‘Necessity is the mother of invention’² aptly describes how the ESL literacy field grew out of the need to provide training and develop resources for practitioners working with the unique needs and challenges of ESL learners with low literacy skills.

Building Capacity – Professional Development for ESL Literacy Practitioners

Many of the practitioners I interviewed during my research for these stories talked about entering the mainstream ESL teaching field ten to twenty years ago and gradually moving into ESL literacy as more learners with interrupted formal education (LIFE) began showing up in their classes. At the time, research, resources, and professional development for practitioners working with this group of learners were limited or non-existent. Practitioners essentially taught themselves and created their own teaching resources. Several described it as “baptism by fire”. However, over the past decade, this has changed largely due to the collaborative work of the ESL literacy faculty at Bow Valley College under the leadership of Diane Hardy.

The Beginnings of the ESL Literacy Network

“Over the past ten years, the Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement has become a recognized leader in the field of ESL literacy. We’ve produced a wealth of resources that have been developed and vetted by ESL literacy experts. The Network was launched in 2011 with the purpose of sharing Bow Valley College publications, resources, and expertise,” Shelagh told me. Their initial target audience was ESL literacy practitioners in Alberta; however, the reach of the Network extends far beyond, including practitioners at a national level, in the US, and around the globe.

2 ‘Necessity is the mother of invention’ is an English proverb meaning that difficult or impossible scenarios prompt inventions aimed at reducing the difficulty (Wikipedia, 2015).

Shelagh Lenon is manager of the ESL Literacy Network, a respected and recognized professional development website that provides resources and ongoing training in the field of ESL literacy. In her role, she oversees the development and maintenance of the site; her responsibilities include creating blogs, hosting and producing all the professional development webinars, managing social media, and collaborating with practitioners to create professional development in their areas of expertise.

I asked her how it all started. She explained:

“At the start of this project in 2009, we conducted a survey across the province to determine the needs of ESL literacy practitioners. The survey explored this question: What do ESL literacy practitioners need to effectively address the unique learning needs of learners with interrupted formal education? We discovered several things. Practitioners have limited time and resources. People couldn’t find information, they couldn’t access resources or even classroom materials. They wanted relevant materials and information they could use in their class to teach adult learners. We also discovered that many practitioners lacked specialized training in this area. 87% of respondents said that there are not many professional development opportunities that are specifically designed for the ESL literacy practitioner. ...And lastly, we discovered that practitioners feel isolated. Almost 80% of respondents said that they weren’t connected to or unable to connect easily with other ESL literacy practitioners across Alberta.... We realized that there were three different areas – there was a need for resources, there was a need for training, and there was a need for community. We wanted to create a website that could support practitioners in these three areas.”

The Network began with concentrating on offering information and resources.



Sharing Resources and Expertise on the ESL Literacy Network

The ESL Literacy Handbook, ESL Literacy Readers, ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework, and the Financial Literacy Toolbox are only a few examples of the Bow Valley College resources available on the Network. In addition, practitioners provincially, nationally, and internationally share their resources including curriculums, lesson plans, learning activities, digital books, and more. All are available online to download for free at User Resource Guide.

In my reading, I came across research that supports this concept of sharing skills, resources, and information as a way of building capacity and strengthening ESL literacy practice. Perry and Hart encourage practitioners to:

Share what you know: Once you gain experience, be sure to pay it forward – remember that you have knowledge and expertise to contribute, too!

- Offer to mentor a new instructor.
- Blog about resources and successful lesson plans you've used.
- Post videos of your own effective teaching.

(Perry and Hart 2012, 121)

The Network excels in all of these areas: mentoring, blogging about successful resources and programs, and hosting webinars on teaching practice and techniques.

The Development of Training on the ESL Literacy Network

Next, the Network focused its eye on training. “We started to think about how to address the ongoing need for training. That’s when we started to offer workshops,” Shelagh explained. Initially, Val Baggaley and Katrina Derix-Langstraat, Bow Valley College practitioners who were part of the ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework project, went around the province providing face-to-face workshops. The training workshops introduced practitioners to the newly developed framework, and additionally to the ESL Literacy Network. Although the workshops were successful, Shelagh soon realized that the Network wanted to reach a wider audience. “We needed to offer training with a bigger return on investment. When you do a face-to-face training in a small location you might reach 10 people and once it’s over, it’s over. Although we blogged about the workshop, people who missed the training couldn’t access the actual content.” That’s when the idea grew to offer online professional development through webinars. In 2012, Val offered the first webinar, a two-part series on using the ESL Literacy Readers. “We had about 24 different people from across North America participating which was really exciting,” Shelagh told me. She and her team realized that practitioners embraced the online delivery method, which had the added bonus of connecting and reconnecting

Quotes from ESL literacy practitioners about professional development on the Network:

“I honestly feel that the network is setting a global standard in ESL Literacy – the best and most comprehensive “go to” for professional development and direction, and I must say that I also feel proud that it is all happening right here in Calgary.”

*“I’m so excited about this class, you have no idea. Last night some issues I’ve been fretting about were cleared up. In a big city like New York, you’re on your own with low literacy ESL adults.
Many, many thanks.”*

“I ran a 6-week study circle in Minnesota for low literacy ESL teachers this spring, and my participants LOVED the short, informative, clear nature of your videos. I told them to set a timer before opening your site, or they might lose a few hours with all those great things to see and read.”

practitioners regardless of location. Now, in addition to its face-to-face workshops, the Network hosts online professional development webinars every fall and spring. Recorded sessions are archived on the website for others to watch and learn from. To date, they have produced over 30 webinars and instructional videos for the Network. Many of the videos are also posted on YouTube. And people are definitely watching. For example, Val Baggely's video on Portfolios has over 1200 views to date and there are over 8000 views on the Language Experience Approach video by Julia Poon, another Bow Valley instructor.

"I am really inspired by Centre faculty who have stepped out of their comfort zone to share their expertise in an online format. They are generous with their time and the resources they have developed, and demonstrate an ongoing commitment to lifelong learning." Shelagh continued on to say, "We've also been delivering targeted professional development to ESL literacy organizations, tailoring the workshops to their specific needs. For example, Centre faculty have delivered training for organizations in Edmonton and Vancouver. Through the Network, our Centre has also consulted on curriculum and assessment practices."

As the Network continued to develop, attention shifted to the third goal of addressing the need for community for ESL literacy practitioners.

Connecting and Collaborating with Community on the ESL Literacy Network

Shelagh described some of the community connections made through the Network. “From the instructors who operate the ESL literacy bus in Tennessee to a practitioner that connected with us from Portland who was writing a manual for volunteer tutors to an ESL literacy practitioner from the Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association...the Network has provided many opportunities for connection and collaboration.”

Along with offering the webinars and workshops, the community section includes a Blog, Discussion Forum, and Showcase.

1. Blog

The Blog promotes exchanges of information and inspiration. ESL literacy practitioners post articles sharing their experiences and information about classroom practices, new programming, and curriculum development. Some recent posts have included the Low Literacy Employment Program by Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association, a Pre Beginning ESL Curriculum created by the Minnesota Literacy Council, and Creating a Peer Teaching Community posted by the ESL Literacy Bridge program staff at Bow Valley College.

Shelagh shared a story about an experienced Bow Valley College practitioner who was new at blogging and initially shy about the process. “Beena is passionate about using music in the ESL literacy classroom and I thought that would be a great entry point. She agreed and did two different posts which generated lots of discussion, over 30 different comments. She realized that blogging and sharing what she was doing in her class allowed her to reflect and be reflective. She said that there were conversations happening on the blog that she thought wouldn’t have happened face to face, even with colleagues in the same building because of people’s work schedules or people not having enough time. The Blog allowed this exchange of information.”



2. Discussion Forum

The Discussion Forum encourages practitioners to enter into reflective discussions about their participation in the online training and study circles and how that affects their teaching practice. Past topics have included Integrating Technology, Creating Digital Books, and Teaching Immigrant Youth among many more. Participants include new practitioners interested in expanding their knowledge and teaching repertoires as well as experienced practitioners sharing their expertise.

Research strongly supports the value of reflective discussion around teaching practice. In a pilot study by Vinogradov (2012), practitioners working with adult ESL emergent readers described some of the benefits:

- First the teachers developed a sense of loyalty and commitment to the group. This led to dedication to the tasks and thoughtful reading and preparation for meetings.
- Secondly, teachers were able to share resources, ideas, teaching tips, and other professional wisdom with each other. The facilitator provided readings and tasks, but the most useful sharing appears to be from the collegial conversations themselves, from having a place to finally meet others who do similar work and to bounce ideas off them.
- Thirdly, participants found that the study circle helped them to break their sense of isolation in their teaching, to realize that their frustrations and challenges are in fact widely held.

The study concluded: “In an instructional setting as complex as teaching ESL to low literate adult immigrants and refugees, this sense of shared work and collaborative learning was reassuring and hopeful to participants” (Vinogradov 2012, 41-42).

3. Practitioners' Showcase

The Showcase invites practitioners to share instructional materials, approaches to teaching, learning activities, lesson plans, and worksheets, and collaborate with peers. This repository features over 50 resources created by both Bow Valley College faculty and ESL literacy practitioners elsewhere.

Shelagh cited another example of the Network's success in promoting professional growth and sharing expertise. "Kelly Morrissey was a new ESL literacy practitioner from Windsor, Ontario, who attended one of the very first webinars on using the ESL Literacy Readers in 2012. Through our discussions in the webinar, I realized that she had created a blog for her ESL literacy class. We featured her in a two-part ESL Literacy Network blog series, focussing on how she uses a blog with ESL literacy learners. She also uses Bow Valley College resources in her classroom. For example, she uses the ESL Literacy Readers and has developed numerous companion activities that support the use of the readers in the classroom – all of which she has shared on the Network's Practitioners' Showcase. Just this past month, she facilitated a webinar on creating an ESL literacy blog. She's moved from being a new ESL literacy practitioner to mentoring other practitioners in her area of expertise."

Some Final Words on the ESL Literacy Network

A "community of practice is a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. This definition reflects the fundamentally social nature of human learning" (Team BE 2011). The evolution of the ESL Literacy Network from providing resources and online training to building community connections has succeeded in creating an online community of practice which supports the professional development of ESL literacy practitioners.

“The Network is an inclusive learning environment for practitioners to connect, share ideas, and grow professionally. You can be a novice practitioner looking for mentorship or instructional resources. You can also be an experienced instructor, like many of the instructors at Bow Valley College, and share your expertise,” Shelagh explained. “The biggest success [of the Network] is that this high quality professional learning and sharing has a ripple effect. It impacts ESL literacy instruction which in turn impacts the lives of ESL literacy learners.”



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and receiving feedback, clarifying information and messages, initiating social contact and conversation, and refusing requests (Westwood and Pearson 2005, 3).

I spoke to Kelty Christensen, Learner Engagement Officer at the Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement at Bow Valley College, to learn more.

She explained how the program evolved. “Prior to coming into the position there was a Leadership program in existence whereby students would engage in different school and class activities to enhance leadership skills. I realized that there was a definite desire for students to be involved and to learn more practical hands-on skills that would support them not only in their schooling but within their community and work life. The leadership program grew out of that need. The Bridge Leadership program has evolved over time. The intent is to increase learners’ communication skills and their levels of self-confidence in public speaking, and by building these skills have more success within their school setting, their life and their community. I found that they had the most success and the most impact when those skills could be applied to real life situations. As I worked with this group of immigrant youth, I realized that they were intimidated by their lack of English, and yet still really wanted to get involved in their communities. They didn’t know how to get started, and they didn’t know how to gain skills to promote their success. There are many barriers that prevent learners from doing that, prevent them from understanding how to get involved, and how to learn those skills. They wanted to engage in leadership activities and improve their communication skills, which is why they gravitated towards this leadership program. It runs each semester for approximately 12 weeks. The program varies each semester and allows different learners from the Bridge program to have the opportunity to become involved.”

The demand for the leadership program has steadily increased as the numbers of learners in the Bridge Program has increased. Currently, 24 learners enter the program each trimester. Participants meet once a week to go over different topics and learn interpersonal and communication skills using a sociocultural competency training model.

The course culminates in a community engagement piece that varies each semester. Kelty explained: “During the course, we focus on presentation skills, communication skills, confidence building, and intercultural competency. These are the kinds of skills that the learners can use in multiple facets of their lives. At the end of the 12-week period they participate in a community engagement opportunity – engaging not only within our College community, but within the greater Calgary community. The program helps the learners gain self-confidence so that they can turn around and access community volunteering opportunities on their own. They reflect on their experience and how it has changed them, and how they can take the skills they’ve learned forward.”

Learners choose organizations based on their passion and interest. One past community engagement project included working with Operation Christmas Child¹; the learners volunteered in the warehouse, filling and checking the shoeboxes before shipment. In another project, the learners organized and participated in a learner-led orientation for all of the English Language Learning students when they moved from the classrooms at Rocky Mountain Plaza to the newly expanded Bow Valley College. Working in groups of three, the leadership program participants provided tours of the North and South campuses for over 600 students to orient them to their new location.

Over the past six years, leadership program participants have worked with the Mustard Seed, the Calgary Drop-In Centre, the Calgary Food Bank, the Calgary Children’s Festival, Brown Bagging for Children and the Royal Bank Pennies for Water campaign. “Often, after learners leave the program, they get involved in volunteering in other capacities, either through Propellus² or other volunteer organizations,” Kelty added.

1 Operation Christmas Child is a program of Samaritan’s Purse®. Volunteers fill shoeboxes with hygiene items, school supplies and toys. The shoeboxes are then shipped around the world to children in need. http://www.samaritanspurse.ca/rss/operation-christmas-child/resources/about-this-project.aspx#.Vh18m_lVikq

2 Propellus is a non-profit organization that helps strengthen other community organizations through networking, collaboration, mentorship and shared experience. They also help connect volunteers to organizations. <http://propellus.org/about-2/>

Kelty shared a success story from the leadership program. “I had one learner who had a very strong stutter. It was so strong that his ability to articulate himself was a word by word effort. He did not let this stand in his way. He pushed himself to take on challenging speaking roles and constantly put himself outside of his comfort zone. The class was very supportive of him and gave great feedback. I think that the leadership program gave him the tools to help him in increasing his self-confidence, and he began to understand that something that might prevent people from taking on new challenges was not going to hold him back. He was very involved and inspired other learners within the program to take on roles, which was very impressive and spoke to his natural leadership. He has moved into High School upgrading, but he remains connected to College community through the Intercultural Centre’s ICan Volunteer Program. His ability to navigate the challenge of moving from the Bridge program level of leadership to the College-wide level of leadership and engagement tells me that we’re doing something right.”



A final word

Literacy-level learners “may be beginning learners but they are not beginning thinkers” (Brod 1999, 5). They are thoughtful about their connections to the world, and, like all of us, want to make a valuable contribution to their communities. Innovative courses like the Bridge Leadership program, using techniques such as cultural mapping and experiential learning, help learners improve their communication skills, which results in an increase in self-confidence and self-advocacy skills. Importantly, these newly learned attitudes, skills, and values are transferrable into other settings: family, further education, work and the larger community, and contribute to the creation of a sustainable society.

Leadership was very interesting to me. I learned from leadership. I didn't have any confidence to stand in front of an audience. But when I was in leadership...first time [I spoke] I was feeling very kind of scared. Second time I was kind of a little bit scared. Third time I was feeling I can talk, doesn't matter how many people are there.... After leadership, I was feeling that I can ask anything I want, and volunteering, oh my goodness, it was very, very good for me. (personal interview with Venantie Nyibabashumba, a learner in the Leadership program)

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Using Technology to Learn and Learning to Use Technology: Transforming Teaching and Learning Practices at Bow Valley College

It is the first week of classes in the Bridge program at Bow Valley College. Mohammed, an ESL literacy student, is just starting his first term. He is happy to learn that he will be receiving a laptop computer of his own to use while in the Bridge program. He eagerly signs it out and carefully carries it home excited about exploring this (new to him) tool. Mohammed is one of over 60 learners in Bridge who will be receiving laptops this trimester as part of the program.³

The Bridge program serves immigrant youth between the ages of 18 and 24 with interrupted formal education. They are ESL learners and literacy learners, working on improving their skills in reading, writing, learning strategies, and essential skills. The goal of the program is to help learners identify and transition into the next step in their educational or occupational pathways. These may include adult basic education, high school upgrading, secondary education, or workplace training. Bow Valley College's Vision 2020⁴ document articulates and supports the development of these kinds of seamless learning pathways for lifelong learners.

While the Bridge program is highly original itself as a state-of-the-art transitioning program,⁵ a key innovation within the program is the distribution of laptops to each learner and their incorporation into the curriculum.



3 The College distributes 150 laptops each trimester to learners in Bridge and the Youth in Transition program.

4 Vision 2020: Learning into the Future: A Report to the Community is Bow Valley College's blueprint for programming directions (<http://web.bowvalleycollege.ca/pdf/BVCVision2020Report2011.pdf>).

5 Bridging the Gap: A Framework for Teaching and Transitioning Low Literacy Immigrant Youth reports on the development of the program and describes the “key elements of a successful transition program for young adult literacy learners who have exited high school but are still in need of focused literacy training in order to transition to further educational studies or workplace training” (https://esl-literacy.com/sites/default/files/Bridging%20the%20Gap_0.pdf).

Daniel Merryfield and Donald Morris, ESL literacy practitioners who teach in the Bridge program, have been instrumental in implementing the laptop program. I recently spoke to them to find out more about how the program works and how it has affected teaching and learning.

Don started the conversation. “With the introduction of laptops in 2013, our approach to teaching has changed. The expectations, the way we present things, the way we work, the way learners manage work, all that has changed. And it continues to change. As the laptop program develops so does our understanding of how to best use laptops in the program.”

Dan described how the laptop program works. “We give the students a laptop the first or second week of the term and they keep it. While the learners have the laptops, they are their responsibility. The main goal of this program is to get our learners comfortable using computers and prepared for academic upgrading or other pathways. Many of our learners come with very little exposure to technology...when I say technology what I mean is using a computer, say a laptop or a tablet. The exposure they’ve had is basically through cell phones and social media so they’re quite comfortable using things like Facebook... And as literacy learners, they are still learning to read and write. If they were given an assignment in the first week of classes that involved writing something, typing it and emailing it, many learners would struggle because they don’t have the literacy or the technology skills to complete this task.”

Bow Valley College utilizes D2L (Desire to Learn), an online teaching and learning platform,⁶ as part of its commitment to ‘learning anytime anywhere’. This becomes especially relevant within the laptop program.

Don explained how the two work together. “With D2L, learners are able to access the work that we have in the classroom and everything is very organized for them. It’s easy for them to find the work that they need to do, to submit their homework, to communicate with their classmates, or to communicate with the instructor. It’s a very good platform. In my classroom, the way I use D2L has changed a lot of things.

⁶ “D2L allows you access to course materials, assignments, quizzes, grades, calendar, email and class discussions using the internet.” <http://bowvalleycollege.ca/campus-services/library-and-learning-commons/desire2learn-introduction.html>

For example, in paragraph writing, the first draft would be done in writing and then I'll correct it, and give it back to them. Learners use Microsoft Word to do their second draft and send me their file through D2L. I look at their second draft and either give them a printed copy or send it back to them through D2L. Everything we do in the classroom, whether it's a paper copy or electronic copy, I put up onto D2L so they have easy access to it."

Dan added, "Teaching and learning responses to D2L have been very positive. It serves as a repository of all our work. We have midterms approaching next week and my learners can access every reading that we've done, they can access all the vocabulary words, they can access all the writing assignments as well. They have that copy, that's always there. And as for teaching, I've saved all of the learning materials each trimester, so I can go back three trimesters and see what I did, the readings are all right there. So it's a great tool for organizing.... It's an extension of our classroom."

Bridge has four levels: Intermediate, High Intermediate, Advanced, and Advanced Transition. They correspond roughly to Canadian Language Benchmarks 2-6. Learners work through the different levels, moving on to the next when they have achieved competency in a given level. They may repeat levels if necessary. Upon completion of the Advanced Transition level they will have met the requirements to transition to Adult Basic Education or Upgrading. The expectations of what the students can do with technology (laptops and D2L) increase in difficulty as the learners work their way up through the levels of the Bridge program.

Success Stories

Don described some of the successes he has seen coming out of the laptop program. “We see a lot of success stories of our learners who have moved on to Upgrading or into Career programs, or who are actually working now.... We have alumni coming back to the program and saying how much it meant to them in preparation for their education or in their jobs. ...Because when they go into a career program, they’re expected to know how to use Microsoft Office, they should know how to use Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Publisher, applications like that. So with the laptop program, we use technology to learn but we also learn to use technology in the classroom. You can see a lot of transferable skills. The fact that they are now able to use applications such Microsoft Word or PowerPoint gives them confidence and gives them more opportunities. I believe, for the younger generation like our learners, technology is a necessary tool. Without it, it’s a definite hindrance to whatever career or educational path they want to take.”

Dan added, “I’ve had students come back to me quite happy, quite pleased because they were able to apply online for a job. If I walk into a store with a resume they’re going to tell me go to the website. For our learners this was an access issue. They were being shut out of certain jobs, and the opportunity to even get into some industries. But now they’re more comfortable being online and they’re more comfortable using a computer. The task of filling out a resume is one skill but the task of filling out a resume online is another skill and it was too much for them. They feel empowered that they can go online, they can put it in their application and for them it’s quite rewarding. We’re talking about literacy and digital literacy for our students.”

“Literacy in the year 2015 includes digital literacy. Quite often people make the assumption, they’re young so they know how to use computers. And when learners don’t have those skills, they feel they’re being shut out from a lot of opportunities. Being able to read and write also means being able to read and write online, there’s a lot more involved in it than just simply pen and paper.” - Dan Merryfield

Access to Technology and the Digital Divide

When we talk about digital literacy and participation in our digital society, it's important to acknowledge the effects social and economic class have on accessing opportunities. According to a 2010 Statistics Canada report, socioeconomic factors are the most significant barriers to increasing digital literacy among adults, and the digital divide is significant in Canada. It reports that 94% of individuals in the top income bracket (above \$85,000 per year) used the internet while only 56% of those in the lowest income bracket (less than \$30,000 per year) report internet use (Statistics Canada 2010, cited in Greig and Hughes 2012, 20). Greig and Hughes go on to suggest "one way forward would be to increase and expand publicly funded digital literacy classrooms and spaces that afford those adults in most need open access to the Internet and rich, ongoing opportunities to develop digital literacy skills" (20).

Dan concurs. "One thing we learned as a program is a lot of our learners had difficulty accessing the internet at home due to the cost. It's just too much money. At one point half my class didn't have internet service at home due to the cost. When we put things online I always tell my learners that they can access it at BVC or in the Calgary Public Library. A take away from that is that having public WiFi and having free Wifi in institutions like Bow Valley College becomes very critical."

One final aspect of access needs to be emphasized. Traditionally, learners attend a computer class once or twice a week and have access to computer labs in between classes. It can be difficult for ESL literacy learners to access technology independently. There is a world of difference between learning how to use technology in a lab once or twice a week, and actually putting a laptop computer into learners' hands for them to have and to work on for the duration of the program. The laptop program not only provides the hardware, but also provides the instructional support needed to increase learners' digital literacy skills within the context of learning language and numeracy skills.

Something to Consider in Implementing a Laptop Program

Don shared an important learning from the program. “I think we realized that in order to introduce a program like this, you need a larger community behind you. And what that means is you’re going to need the financial support to pay for these laptops and as the program is growing, to buy additional laptops. You also need IT support, because you can’t expect the instructors to be IT specialists. We also have people who help distribute the laptops at the beginning of the term and collect them [at the end]. We learned that you need a big team and a lot of support behind you in order to make this program a successful one.”

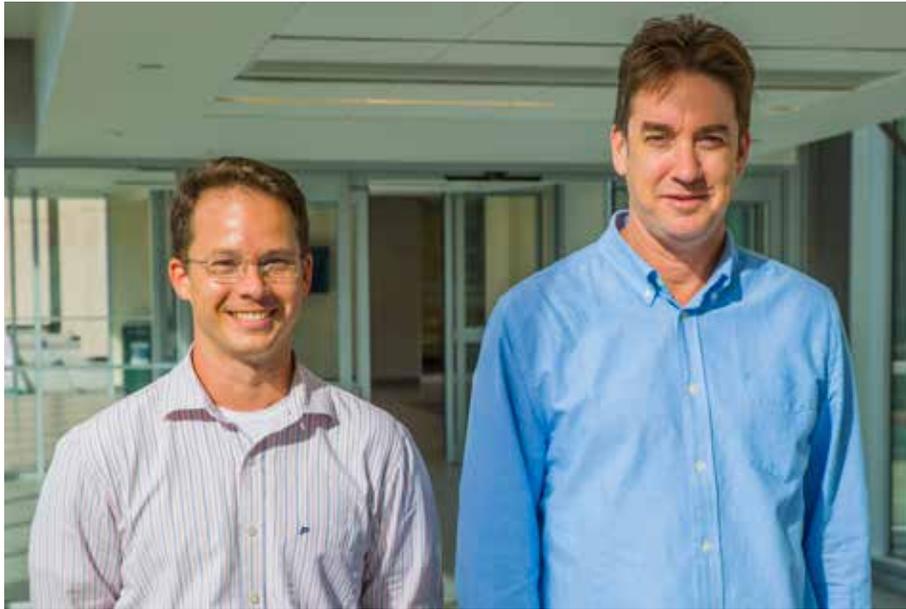
Dan agreed. “We’re very fortunate that Bow Valley College is the size that it is and that we have the IT infrastructure like D2L. We also have an IT team to support us.... I think a smaller school or smaller provider would have to invest a sizeable amount to have the hardware, enough WIFI, and the IT support.”

Some Final Words

Don concluded by saying, “I think where we are in the Bridge program, having this laptop program, we are in some respects on the forefront of what’s happening in technology for young adult learners.... I also think our main purpose is to share what we’re doing...and how successful it is and how useful it is and we hope by doing things like webinars and communicating with a larger audience, that it will spread.”⁷

It is clear that digital literacy is an essential skill in the 21st century. ESL literacy practitioners Donald Morris and Daniel Merryfield, and their colleagues in the Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement, successfully demonstrate the many benefits of introducing laptop computers into the curriculum. The laptop program used in conjunction with the D2L learning platform provides an effective and innovative way to help young adult immigrant learners prepare for life in a digital world.

7 In Spring 2014, Don Morris, Dan Merryfield, and Emily Albertsen, another faculty member in the laptop program, presented a webinar titled *Learning with Technology* on how they integrate technology into the curriculum. This and other professional development webinars are posted on the ESL Literacy Network website.



Daniel Merryfield and Donald Morris, ESL literacy practitioners who teach in the Bridge program at Bow Valley College.

“...the computer is not a toy; it is the site of wealth, power and influence, now and in the future. Women and indigenous people and those with few resources cannot afford to be marginalised or excluded from this new medium. To do so will risk becoming information poor. It will not be to count; to be locked out of full participation in society in the same way that illiterate people have been disenfranchised in a print world.” (Spender 1995, quoted by Moriarty 2011, 15)

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ESL Literacy Comes of Age:

Developing promising practices in programming and instruction

The field of ESL literacy has come into its own thanks to the dedication and efforts of practitioners and researchers working locally, nationally, and internationally to understand how to best serve this distinct group of learners. The development of best practices in programming and instruction was a natural step in creating a context for working with ESL literacy learners. The Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement (CEIIA) at Bow Valley College played a leading role in researching and developing innovative promising practices.

Early in 2009, the CEIIA embarked on an ambitious project: the research and creation of a practical resource for instructors, program coordinators, and other stakeholders in the field that would give them promising practices in program considerations and strategies for the classroom.

ESL literacy practitioners Valerie Baggaley and Emily Albertsen headed up the research team under the guidance of Diane Hardy. They spoke to me about the project and their process and purpose.

“The ESL Literacy Handbook project was an attempt to gather together the collective knowledge, understanding, and experience of the CEIIA faculty working with ESL literacy learners. Val and I were editors of the book. Val did a huge amount of research and the literature review. I did the bulk of the writing, taking what our many contributors said and writing from there, as well as writing from scratch. The idea for the book was to pull together our accumulated knowledge in one place. I think one of the strengths of the book is its breadth – it is broken into sections such as program considerations and creating programming, and other sections designed for teachers as a resource in the classroom. But I think the most important part of the book was capturing what we have tried and feel are best practices in ESL literacy,” Emily explained.

Val added, “Even now there isn’t a lot written about ESL learners with low education, but 6 or 7 years ago there was even less.... If you really dig, there is research, but a lot of it is more academic writing than a classroom-based, how-to manual. I feel very privileged I got to work on this because it allowed me to read what other people who work in the field say

about ESL literacy, to talk to people working in the field at that time, and then have the time to process and reflect on my own teaching and to go ‘aha’. A lot of what we were doing already was validated. In those early days of teaching ESL literacy, we figured it out as we went. It was trial and error, but it worked. Seeing the research validate what we were doing in the classroom was really reassuring. And it was really exciting to be involved in developing the best practices.”



The project was truly a collaborative one, drawing on the shared knowledge and expertise within the CEIIA, as well as extensive research including a literature review, focus groups held in Alberta and at two national conferences, and a survey of 100 ESL literacy practitioners worldwide. However, the first source of information was the learners themselves and “what they have told us about their lives, needs, and goals, and how they responded to different approaches, theories, practices, and activities.... Our primary intentions are to be true to the needs and goals of our learners and to be useful to instructors.” (Albertsen and Millar 2009, 6)

The project culminated in *Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Handbook*, a resource intended to be a detailed introduction to program design and instruction in ESL literacy. The first section looks at program considerations; the second section focuses on strategies for the classroom; and the third section looks at the four levels of ESL literacy (based on the Canadian Language ESL Literacy Benchmarks). The Handbook is meant to be a real world resource: well-used and well-thumbed.

The Handbook has certainly been successful in reaching the wider community of ESL literacy practitioners. Emily elaborated, “We sent out as many complimentary copies as we could all across the country, trying to reach as many programs as we could, and we’ve gotten excellent feedback. It’s even used as a course text.”

Val shared a story about the national reach of the Handbook. “My daughter went to university in Queens and I was out there visiting her.... I was working on another [ESL literacy] project and...I knew there was one program in Kingston where I was so I phoned and asked if I could meet with the person in charge. We met and I was asking her some things about her program. And she said, ‘Well there’s this great book that’s out there, it’s just my bible’, and she pulled it out. And I laughed because it was the ESL Literacy Handbook!”

Val and Emily both spoke passionately about how working on the project validated the teaching practices and work being done in the CEIIA. Val explained, “I was doing the literature review and I loved it. I like research so it was great to go on the internet and pull everything I could find and have the time to examine it. Researchers were describing some of the best practices and I got excited because we were already doing some of this at BVC, and this research echoed what I too felt a program should be to best serve the ESL literacy population. I remember thinking, we got it right!”

Emily agreed. “I think one of the things that I learned was that we were making good decisions with what we were doing in our classrooms, what kind of programs we were trying to create. This project gave me confidence in articulating why it is that we do what we’re doing. And I think in seeing what other people are doing and in seeing research that supports us, it gave us the confidence to say we are making some good decisions about what we do. I began to understand our place within an international community of ESL literacy.... That was a big piece of learning for me. It took me out of my classroom to see a much, much bigger picture.”

Bow Valley College’s work is recognized within LESLLA (Low Education Second Language and Literacy Acquisition) for Adults, an international community of researchers and practitioners working to increase the knowledge about low literacy second language learners and inform practice.¹

1 “LESLLA (Low Education Second Language and Literacy Acquisition) for Adults brings together researchers and practitioners from many countries to establish an international and multi-target-language research agenda. During annual symposia and information sharing throughout the year, LESLLA participants will increase the body of knowledge and outline areas of research that require investigation for low-educated second language learners.” (<http://www.leslla.org>)

What are promising practices in ESL literacy programming?

Based on the results of the project’s extensive research both in the literature and with experienced practitioners, the Handbook outlines eight promising practices prevalent in programs of excellence.

1. *ESL literacy is recognized as a distinct stream of classes, separate from mainstream ESL and from mainstream literacy.*

As discussed in the first story in this series, learners with interrupted formal education have unique learning needs and challenges. Experience and research suggest that these learners do not thrive in mainstream ESL classes. Having a separate stream of classes helps ESL literacy learners “progress through classes where their specific learning needs are addressed” (Handbook, 354).

2. *The ESL literacy stream is comprised of a series of classes progressing in small increments along the literacy continuum.*

Theorists and practitioners support a series of ESL literacy classes which progress in small increments. In its ESL literacy programs, Bow Valley College uses the standards set out in the Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000; classes are organized around stages within in each of four phases (Foundation, I, II, III). This means that there is a Foundation Phase class, a Phase 1 Initial class, a Phase 1 Developing class and so on. Learners progress through each distinct phase, acquiring the skills and strategies, before moving on to the next. Progress can be slow. Having small increments allows this progress to be observed and measured, and enables the learner, practitioner and funder to honour the progress being made (Handbook, 355).

3. The ESL literacy program offers higher-level ESL literacy classes.

ESL literacy learners in Phase III may have higher literacy skills and higher oral skills and are sometimes overlooked and misplaced in either mainstream ESL classes or mainstream Adult Basic Education. They lack the literacy skills needed to cope with the textual demands of an academic class and get left behind.

These advanced learners still require the “scaffolding and explicit strategy instruction found in ESL literacy classes”² to help to develop their strategies for higher level concepts such as “inference, identifying main ideas, summarizing, and writing” (Handbook, 357).

4. The program provides professional development opportunities for instructors.

A program of excellence provides training specific to ESL literacy to all practitioners in the ESL literacy stream, ongoing professional development, and opportunities for practitioners to engage with one another on relevant topics. “Instead of placing the inexperienced or those lacking seniority into the ESL literacy classroom, a program of excellence places instructors highly trained in ESL literacy into these demanding classrooms” (Handbook, 358). Research shows that “the most successful teachers were trained and experienced in both language and literacy education, adapted their curriculum as needed, and were culturally aware” (Millar 2008, cited in Centre for Literacy of Quebec 2008, 5).

5. Instructors are allotted time to make materials.

There is a general lack of suitable materials available to teach adult ESL literacy. This means practitioners must modify existing materials or create their own. In addition, materials “must be related to the learners’ skills, interests and personal surroundings” (Ontario Literacy Coalition 2007, 28).

² “Explicit strategy instruction is characterized by a series of supports or scaffolds, whereby students are guided through the learning process with clear statements about the purpose and rationale for learning the new skill, clear explanations and demonstrations of the instructional target, and supported practice with feedback until independent mastery has been achieved.” (Archer and Hughes 2011, 1)

Consequently, practitioners are constantly creating teaching materials tailored to learners' changing requirements.. A program of excellence recognizes that instructors require additional prep time to create their own materials and builds this time into the program (Handbook, 358).

6. There is a program into which the learners can transition.

ESL literacy learners need viable and clear pathways to transition into once they have completed the ESL literacy stream programming. At Bow Valley College, these options can include mainstream ESL, mainstream adult basic education, upgrading, further learning, workplace skills training programs and employment.

7. There is a numeracy component in the instruction.

Numeracy is an essential skill every bit as important as reading and writing. In an ESL literacy numeracy program, “it is important to teach both the language of math as well as the concepts” (Handbook, 359). A future article in this series will focus on the importance of teaching financial literacy to ESL literacy learners. The Financial Literacy Toolbox, available on the ESL Literacy Network, is a great resource of lesson plans and ideas for teaching this.

8. There is support for the program and for the learners.

An ESL literacy program of excellence requires stable funding and full administrative support in order to be successful. This includes dedicated funding for professional development, resources, and materials.

Broader life supports for learners may include mental health and career counselling, information about affordable housing options, subsidized childcare, assistance in accessing financial aid, scholarships and awards, and referrals to appropriate community resources.

A specific type of classroom support for ESL learners is ‘access to first language’. The What Works Study found that “in classes where teachers used the native language as part of instruction to clarify and explain, students exhibited faster growth in both reading comprehension and oral communication skills” (Condelli and Wrigley 2008, 17). The Handbook suggests two ways of addressing first language support: having a person come in once or twice a week to translate important concepts; and using a student mentorship model, where learners from higher level ESL classes are paired up with learners in the lower level classes who speak the same language. This model has proven successful on two levels: providing bilingual support for the learners, and offering volunteer opportunities for the student mentors (Handbook, 361).

“ESL literacy teaching could be defined as supporting adults with little English and little formal education in their efforts to understand and use English in its many forms (oral and written, including prose, document, and quantitative literacy), in a variety of contexts (family, community, school, work), so that they can reach their fullest potential and achieve their own goals, whether these be personal, professional or academic.”

(Wrigley and Guth 2000, 14)

What are promising practices in the classroom?

The Handbook project also compiled information on promising practices in the classroom and this resulted in the identification of the following six elements:

1. Learning must be learner-centred, meaning-based, and linked to the community.

“Literacy instruction for those who are non-print literate should be part of a larger vision in which learners’ lives, oral culture, and other skills and knowledge are all part of the curriculum and classroom. There is a high degree of consensus in the literature that classroom learning for the non-print literate should have a highly functional, personal focus – more so for them than for other adult language learners” (Bigelow and Schwarz 2010, 14).

The Handbook project found similar practices to be effective. Using authentic materials found in the learners' lives is one way of making literacy meaningful. They also recommend using realia (actual objects, such as coins, fruit, cooking utensils) instead of images (line drawings, pictures), as they help make the connections more real (Handbook, 361). Going into the community for walks and on field trips are other ways that help connect learning to real life.

2. Learning is repeated and recycled.

“A classroom of excellence recycles the material and concepts each day and over time, thus enabling learners to fully incorporate this new knowledge and make it their own” (Handbook, 362). Many of the practitioners I spoke to for this series of stories talked about the ongoing need, and challenge, to come up with different ways to present the same concepts.

“Having a central theme for classroom activities provides many opportunities to repeat, reinforce and recycle the previous sessions' learning. Learners' familiarity, understanding and confidence increases when new information is recycled or repeated” (ESL Literacy Network n.d., recycling).

Recycling can extend beyond one class. BVC practitioners explained that concepts are recycled through the different phases in the curriculum so learners will encounter the same concepts in their next level class.

3. There is a large dedicated classroom for each ESL literacy class.

Researchers recommend large spaces dedicated solely to teaching ESL literacy (Cummings et al. 2007). This way, practitioners can create a stimulating learning environment with walls covered in print rich material, and store realia and authentic materials for use when required. Unfortunately, this is not always possible as many classrooms are shared spaces. For example, the Pebbles in the Sand program, run by the Calgary Immigrant Women's Association, takes place in mostly donated spaces (church halls and rooms) and the practitioners bring the classroom in a rolling suitcase (Loschnig 2014, 40). Practitioners at Bow Valley College also bring their own authentic materials and learning aids moving them from classroom to classroom as needed.

4. Class size is limited.

The Handbook project found agreement among the literature, survey respondents, and practitioners that ESL literacy learners require an individualized approach, which creates greater demands on teacher time. “A classroom of excellence needs to be small enough to address the demands of these learners who have limited ability to work independently” (Handbook, 363). In one study, expert teachers recommended 10 to 15 students for an optimum class size. The numbers should not exceed 15, and numbers above 10 should be supported with a second teacher or trained volunteer (McPherson 2007, 4).

5. There is specific oral and vocabulary development.

In a classroom of excellence, learning is done first in the oral before it moves to the written. “Because LIFE³ are oral learners, it is important that they have oral control over the material before it is introduced in writing” (Handbook, 363). Practitioners can help learners develop oral skills by recycling vocabulary through chanting, singing, and using rhymes and drama (Handbook, 363). The literature supports this approach.

“Adult learners from high-oracy cultures not only bring with them adult cognitive and social capacities, but also a particular set of well-developed strategies for learning. Consequently, such learners may benefit from classroom learning that includes opportunities for: repetition and memorisation; rhythmic activities such as clapping, chanting, poetry, and singing; and ‘imaginative’ texts such as stories and poetry” (Achren and Williams 2006, p.1).

Val shared a story about the value of chanting and repetition. “We had practiced a greeting chant and we were out on a field trip. A stranger said hello to my learner and the learner responded just perfectly from the chant, the woman must have said ‘how are you’ and the learner said ‘I’m fine thank you and you?’ And the way she said it was exactly from the chant. I knew because she didn’t just monosyllable a word or anything. That’s a learner success.”

³ Learners with Interrupted Formal Education.

6. There is a focus on strategies for reading, writing, and learning.

“In a classroom of excellence, the instructor explicitly teaches strategies for reading, writing, and learning, and spirals them throughout the learning” (Handbook, 364). Strategies can include asking the instructor for help, word-attack strategies, and brainstorming ideas before writing. “Learning strategies help learners become more successful in reading, writing, language learning, and test-taking. They also help learners to become more effective language users and learners both inside and outside the classroom, and help them prepare for the demands of post-literacy study” (Leong and Collins, 2007, p.125).

The ESL Literacy Network section on Strategy Instruction gives practitioners practical ideas for incorporating explicit strategy instruction into teaching. As well, Bridging the Gap, a framework for teaching and transitioning low literacy immigrant youth, has a section and toolbox to help practitioners integrate strategy instruction into their curriculum.

“Teaching at its heart is about communication because it’s saying something in a way that somebody can understand you, and listening to what it is that they are saying, and bringing those two together as best you can.” (Emily Albertsen, interview)

Some Final Words

“This project was about helping practitioners gain the knowledge, the skills, and the resources to create a [positive] learning environment for ESL literacy students.... I think everybody who teaches in our programs uses the things we’ve talked about in here. It’s a book for teachers on how to be better teachers,” Emily summed up.



Val felt it was important to add, “All of our students have an amazing amount of skills. They’re adults and they come as a full package, but often our society just sees their deficits. We recognize their strengths.”

The ESL Literacy Handbook provided a first step in attempting to pull together the knowledge from both experienced practitioners and the ongoing research in the ESL literacy field, nationally and internationally. For Emily and Val, and the Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement, it serves as a jumping off place for further exploration in and out of the classroom in their mission to better serve ESL literacy learners.

“ESL literacy remains a challenging field, but there are clear directions in which we can develop in order to best serve our learners and help them thrive in school, in employment, and in the community.... We hope to build on this learning and to support the continued development of communities of practice in ESL literacy” (Albertsen and Millar 2009, 364).

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