

Teaching in COVID-19 Times: Challenges, innovations, solutions, and opportunities

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Abstract

Based on the research we presented at the TESL Ontario Conference in November 2020, we examine here the challenges, innovations, solutions, and opportunities in education that have grown out of the sudden disruption and constraints due to COVID-19. We first set the background in a global context; then report on the impact, challenges, and needs in LINC programs in Canada. We then discuss an in-depth case study of a LINC educator's experiences based on her own teaching and teacher development work during this time. We conclude by discussing lessons learned from these COVID-19 experiences and recommend ways forward.

All settlement language training professionals were caught by surprise by the pandemic in mid-March 2020. Almost all Canadian classes for adult newcomers were suspended, and students already dealing with adjustment to the language and cultures of their new homes faced isolation at home and with remote learning. Most, but not all, teachers were caught unprepared. Some teachers already employed a blended learning strategy in their in-person instruction, and their learners had been oriented to applying technology in their learning. But many teachers had previously made minimal use of information technology in their practice. A subset of this second group was teachers who personally had limited skills with information technology. But all teachers were facing the challenge of pivoting teaching and learning to fully online remote delivery.

The challenges extended beyond teachers and learners to administrators and funders. The whole sector was struggling to understand better practices in online delivery, and many found themselves scrambling for the

technology applications, devices, and Internet connections to enable it. Application options ranged from language training enabled learning management system solutions like Moodle to simpler online technology like Google Classroom, Edmodo, or ESL Library.

In their homes, many newcomers had limited devices or connectivity to begin with, and many now found themselves sharing a single device and connection with other family members who were also suddenly learning online.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to present challenges and surprises. Crisis is opportunity goes the old saw, and the innovations in teaching practice required to address the suspension of in-person learning will no doubt have deep impacts on better practices for years to come. Many voices had been advocating for learning technology innovations in settlement language training (SLT) for years. As we emerge from COVID-19, no doubt educators are seeing that the crisis has fueled innovation and adoption across the entire educational sector, and no less so in the SLT field.

Based on the research that we presented at the TESL Ontario Conference in November 2020, we examine here the challenges, innovations, solutions, and opportunities that have grown out of the sudden disruption and constraints of COVID-19. To set the background in a global context, Jill Cummings, Associate Dean for Faculty Development at Yorkville University (Canada), begins by highlighting innovative responses to COVID-19 by educators worldwide as documented in the Handbook publication that she has been developing, *Teaching in the Post COVID-19 Era: World Education Dilemmas, Teaching Innovations, and Solutions in the Age of Crisis* (Fayed & Cummings, Co-Editors. Springer Publishing, 2021). Then, Matthias Sturm, Simon Fraser University and Avenue - LearnIt2teach, reports on the impact, challenges, and needs due to COVID-19 in LINC programs in Canada. Augusta Avram, LINC educator, then adds to this picture through an in-depth case study based on her own teaching and teacher development experiences during this time. Geoff Lawrence, Associate Professor at York University, concludes by discussing lessons learned from these COVID-19 experiences and recommending ways forward.

Global perspectives

The United Nations reports that the COVID-19 pandemic has deprived 91% of students of education in almost 194 countries worldwide because of school closures and lockdowns (United Nations Educational & Organization (UNESCO), 2020). While this situation has severely challenged teachers, we have also witnessed educators' innovative solutions and resilience as they have adapted their teaching to provide education online for learners. During this time of extreme constraints, I have had conversations with

educators who have confronted these challenges in more than 30 locations worldwide. This has resulted in the Handbook, *Teaching in the Post COVID-19 Era: World Education Dilemmas, Teaching Innovations, and Solutions in the Age of Crisis* (forthcoming, 2021), developed with my colleague and co-editor, Ismail Fayed. I am going to share here a few of the innovative strategies and endeavours that educators have shared with us, focusing particularly on chapters contributed by ESL/EFL teacher educators. I believe that they represent the efforts that teachers have used to turn an extreme challenge into an opportunity during this past year. These ideas need to be shared and discussed as ways forward in technology-enhanced education.

Overall, one gets a picture of the sudden and complete shift of ESL learning/teaching to online, remote synchronous delivery via video conferencing platforms like Zoom; plus, the development of more online, asynchronous solutions, and the integration of various apps to enhance interaction in both synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning.

Gary Motteram, ESL teacher educator from Manchester University, details in chapter 9 the responses of English language teachers engaged in settlement English language training in England. Drawing on Trucano's principle that "the best technology is the one you already have, know how to use, and can afford" (Trucano, 2013), this teacher educator explains the use of multiple media by teachers to take advantage of the limited Wi-Fi time available while maintaining contact with a collaborative but widely spread network of English teachers. Use of mobile phones, SMS messaging, and Whatsapp chat and texts keep instructors in touch with each other to share strategies and concerns. Pre-recorded videos and narrated PowerPoint presentations provide asynchronous online instruction for English learners while saving limited Wi-Fi for conversation practice during valuable video conferencing time.

Our neighbours to the south also demonstrated adaptability in providing ESL classes for newcomers during COVID-19. Ally Zhou, a teacher educator working with Oklahoma City University (OKCU), reports on the collaborative solutions implemented in their ESL and Citizenship classes. To resolve the issue of a lack of dedicated study space during this time of closure of public spaces, the program arrived at a solution with the city library system to make Wi-Fi available to students in the library parking lot. Students were able to maintain social distancing procedures by remaining in their cars or at outside seating areas while using their mobile devices to attend classes and study. Student teachers in the TESOL program at OKCU assisted learners in preparing them for classes by phoning them about how to access the courses and get started online in advance. Translation was done by family members who drove with the students to class.

Teacher educators Antoinette Gagne, Shakina Rajendram, and Dania Wattar at OISE/ University of Toronto explain how they intentionally focused on equity in their online course for teacher candidates learning to

support English learners from K to 12 during the shift to virtual classrooms. They found that using digital apps and multi-modal interactions not only increased engagement, but afforded teacher candidates with experience, dialogue, and reflection on how to implement equitable practices with their own learners. As noted by Shakina, this was an opportunity for teacher candidates to develop both the technology and teaching skills they needed for work with their own students during COVID-19. "... I tried to model...checking-in with students at the start of each class. Some check-in prompts that I found helpful were sharing a rose, a thorn and a bud (Gonzalez, 2020) ...Checking in with each other helped us to build authenticity and camaraderie into our online community."

Mindful Reflection: Share your rose, thorn, and bud

 Rose A highlight, a success, or something positive that happened.	 Thorn A challenge you experienced, or something you can use more support with.	 Bud New ideas or something you're looking forward to knowing or understanding more.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was a highlight today? • How have you been successful? • What are you most proud of? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was most stressful? • Identify causes of difficulty. • What made it hard to be successful? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are you looking forward to? • Describe opportunities for learning that excite you. • What needs growth and nurturing?



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Figure 1: Gonzalez, A. (2020). *Mindful reflection: Share your rose, thorn, and bud*. Mindful Schools. <https://www.mindfulschools.org/inspiration/mindful-reflection/>

Although not an exhaustive view of the many solutions and skills that educators have developed worldwide in response to the needs for teaching and learning online during COVID-19 times, it does, however, reflect experiences that demonstrate how second language educators have turned a bad situation into an opportunity for innovation as well as ongoing learning. This shows promise for enhanced technology integration in the future. We next turn our attention to how this has played out in Canada. Matthias Sturm reports specifically on the response of LINC educators in Canada.

LearnIT2teach: Teacher training and online learning for newcomers in times of crises

Resilience during the COVID-19 outbreak is at the heart of the stories about teachers of English Second Language (ESL) and the Avenue-LearnIT2teach project. Together, we enabled rapid responses by programs in Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) to site closures, resulting in an unprecedented uptake of Online Learning (OL). We rapidly changed course to support LINC teachers to use existing Blended Learning (BL) courseware by adapting existing teacher training and course materials for OL. This timely teacher training was evaluated for its impact from March to June 2020, using the professional development (PD) evaluation model by Guskey (2000), further informed by Grebow (2002).

This project has supported BL since 2010, hosting CLB and PBLA-aligned courseware in a Moodle LMS (Learning Management System), first called EduLINC and now Avenue. A four-stage training is provided for LINC professionals on how to use and adapt the courseware, beginning with an in-person orientation that has been offered online since the start of the pandemic. Pre-Stage 1 training (a computer skills diagnostic test) was added, and pre-Stage 2 gives teachers quick access to the courseware. A partnership with TESL Ontario makes PTCT accreditation for Ontario TESL teachers who have completed Stages 3 and 4 possible. The Learning Technology Innovation Leadership course is available to administrators and teachers to lead innovation in their LINC programs.

Between March 15–June 30, 2020, the shift to OL resulted in a flood of LINC providers requesting access to the learner courseware and the training for their teachers. Numerous teachers, who had previously taken the training but had not continued, recognized the value of OL for LINC program delivery. In a BL context, there had been limited demand for a synchronous virtual classroom, but it proved very popular as an alternative to meeting with students in person. The project provided 20 webinars with a focus on leveraging the virtual classroom and other teaching tools in the learner courseware. A teacher-only discussion forum was created for support and sharing ideas, supplemented by links to other relevant teaching and assessment resources. Figure 2 below shows the training uptake and its impact.



LearnIT2Teach PD March 15-June 30

- 512 teachers (8 teachers January-March)
- 263 Stage 1 (4.6 times more than last year), 359 Pre-Stage 2 (5.4 times more), 96 Stage 2 (6.8 times more)
- 5,251 teacher course enrolments in the last two weeks of March (1,085 on average two months before)
- 75-350 connections on weekdays (3-10 times more) and around 50-100 on weekends (10 times more)
- 3 times more visits and 2.6 times more bandwidth
- 538 new courses in EduLINC (338 by new teachers) - highly significant result re. impact

Figure 2: LINC teacher training and EduLINC courses by LearnIT2teach March - June, 2020

Guskey (2000) would agree that the development of 538 new courses is a highly significant result in terms of impact. The formal training and informal supports provided by the project were a means to the end of adopting the learner courseware and adapting teaching practices for OL. Grebow (2002) explains according to the 25/75 Rule of Learning that PD activities at a ratio of 1:3 between formal and informal learning yields most significant impacts on teachers' capacity to use their training experience in their practice and affect program delivery. The evaluation findings to date indicate that the surge in demand in teacher training (formal PD) resulted in mentoring and course development support (informal PD) at a ratio greater than 1:3.

Furthermore, teacher presence is a hallmark of the project's vision of BL and OL. The project's previous research by Cummings et al. (2019) had also demonstrated and substantiated Lawrence's findings (2014) of the potential of BL to extend learning and participation in connection with effective teaching practices and presence in OL (Anderson, 2018; Lowenthal, 2009; Scollins-Mantha, 2017; Swan, 2002). Interaction and connectedness with teachers are central to effective practices for developing student engagement online (Cummings et al., 2019, p. 6). Online learning program delivery can be inspired by the project's mantra that BL and OL puts well-trained and supported teachers at the center of instruction.

Online learning in times of crisis results in increased demand of PD and supports for ESL teachers. Findings show that PD impact on teaching practice and program delivery yield good results when mentoring and supports are available to adopt and adapt to OL. However, PD also needs to be prophylactic to build program capacity to respond quickly and adequately to changing circumstances. There needs to be a recognition of increased teacher time for evolving professionalized practice (Costa et al., 2016, p. 6). Programs need to develop contingency plans with crisis management strategies that include scalable BL and OL approaches for teaching and learning, with well-trained and supported teachers at the center of instruction.

Teaching during a pandemic: An educator's personal response

In mid-March 2020 and the following months, teachers were forced to make quick decisions about the use of technology in the delivery of remote instruction, while administrators and funders had to decide about direction and support. The responses were extremely varied, and so were the debates over tech tools, online course design, choice of instructional and assessment strategies, and level of support, both for teachers and learners. The conversations and debates often took place online, and they were extremely informative but also revealing of both strengths and weaknesses and future needs of different sectors.

As far as my own response was concerned, the responsibility of dealing with the complex task of going fully online under such exceptional circumstances initially felt overwhelming, even though I had experience with the use of technology in education. At the time of the transition, as a LINC instructor teaching a blended class, I was already using Moodle, more specifically EduLINC (later to become Avenue), to which I added the use of Zoom, and I also had access to tech support through LearnIT2teach. To meet the challenges of the sudden shift, I did what many other educators started doing—I immersed myself in information and resource curating and sharing, and I increased my participation in various online teaching practice communities, both the ones I was already a member of, in particular the #CdnELTchat community and LearnIT2teach, and new ones. The benefits were many and included: an exposure to multiple perspectives; an opportunity to reflect critically on my own practice; access to resources and to ongoing support from educators sharing similar interests and concerns; and a chance to support advocacy for an equitable and principled use of technology and resources.

I came out of this immersive and self-reflective experience with the realization that my students' immediate and future needs and goals, my beliefs (especially the ones about the role of educators in a democratic society), and the program vision needed to guide my decisions as always. LINC students are immigrants and refugees, who, in addition to language skills, often lack the information and social networks that can help create a sense of belonging and facilitate participatory inclusion in Canadian society. With all this in

mind, creating a safe and supportive online community, choosing course content and strategies that were context-sensitive and relevant both to students' immediate and envisioned lives, building flexibility and choice into as many activities as possible, increasing the level of teacher support, and offering personalized accommodations took precedence. In the process of turning these priorities into reality, the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework (Garrison et al., 2001) was my main point of reference. The COI framework explains how three presences—teaching, social, and cognitive presence—need to be strategically developed to enhance student engagement in online and blended learning.

While all three COI presences are important, in view of the exceptional circumstances we were in, I decided to focus on enhancing social and teacher presence—more specifically, emotional expression through instructional design and organization. The online class needed to be a space where students could connect with each other and with the teacher on multiple levels in order to learn, share, acknowledge, and support each other. Communication was open and frequent; in April 2020, there were 2,722 teacher posts, 1,027 student posts, and almost 9000 student views for a group of 16 people. The Social Forum attracted a lot of interest and allowed people to connect informally. When it came to developing teacher presence, designing for clarity and consistency (Richardson et al., 2009, as cited in Fiock, 2020) was one of my main concerns—I wanted the students to know what to expect each week and to be able to easily navigate the course, so organization followed a predictable pattern. Instructor presence and availability increased, and feedback was frequent and supportive (Messages/Comments Block/Chats/Email/Video conferencing/Phone/Office Hours). As for cognitive presence, modelling activities and participation, providing “multiple representations of the knowledge” (Richardson et al., 2009; Stephens & Roberts, 2017, as cited in Fiock, 2020), and providing opportunities for learning reflections were at the forefront. The students responded to all this by coming together as a true community of learners, and the levels of engagement and expressed satisfaction were high, which was extremely rewarding.

This crisis has made all of us consider how “language, social practices and technologies are converging in dynamic and innovative ways” (Lawrence, 2018), and has sped up learning technology innovations in SLT and beyond, but to make this progress sustainable, I believe a concerted effort is necessary. Suggestions and recommendations are provided below in Figure 3.

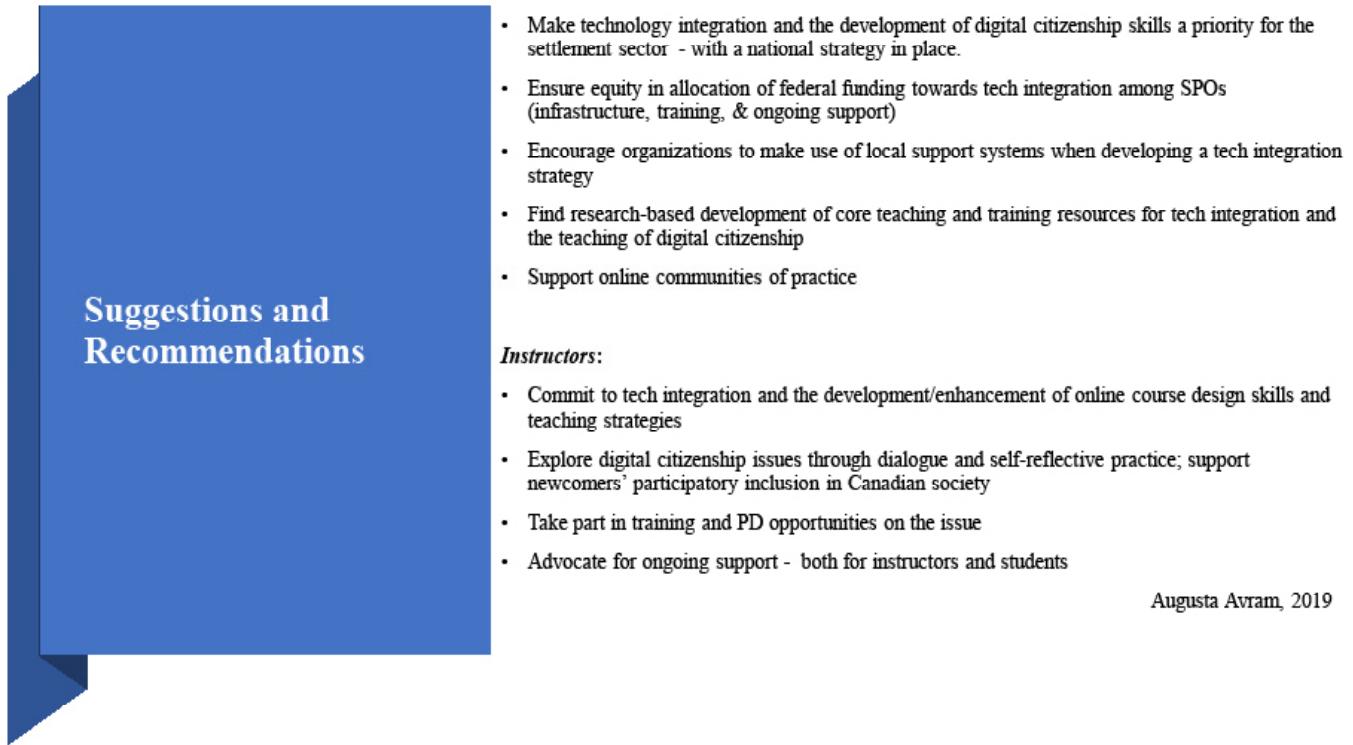


Figure 3: Recommendations for future support of technology integration and instructor training in English language settlement training and instruction

Teaching in post COVID-19 times and beyond

As illustrated in the discussions above, English language teachers and learners have been forced to adapt en masse to remote online language teaching approaches, often without sufficient training. This has reinforced the oft-cited challenges of remote distance language learning: the need to adapt teaching practices to these fully online contexts without adequate training, technological resources, Internet connections, technical support, and digital literacies (Karamifar et al., 2019); the need for educators to enhance their own techno-pedagogical competence (Guichon & Hauck, 2011) while simultaneously supporting learners' digital literacies, and having to fully manage language teaching responsibilities with inherently limited and often uncompensated time. Our dive into remote teaching has also dramatically highlighted the challenge of building community and connection among the learners in our classes. Online remote learning has expanded a sense of distance between learners and learners and teachers, exacerbating the isolation that learners (and teachers) feel and the psychosocial dimensions that teachers end up having to support, again

with limited training. Our rushed remote COVID-19 ‘onlining’ has amplified the call for maintaining the human feel in online language teaching and learning (Lawrence, 2014).

At the same time, this global remote online teaching venture has revealed a number of potential benefits and affordances. Getting to ‘class’ has been exceptionally time-efficient, avoiding hours of weekly commuting and scheduling disruptions, and expanding access to language learning programs. Online teaching can offer individualized, self-paced, and multimodal opportunities to personalize the learning process and enhance language acquisition. This can help educators meet the needs of a range of learners in inherently multi-level classrooms. Online pedagogy, and today’s videoconferencing tools, can offer the chance to connect learners and teachers from varied different geographical regions in rich, collaborative learning networks. In addition, Web 2.0 technologies can be used in inherently interactive and intensely collaborative approaches that can deepen social practices, skills, and strategies to meet the needs of today’s ever-present technology-mediated communicative practices (Coiro et al., 2008; Johnston & Lawrence, 2018; Kessler, 2018).

In order to leverage these benefits, there are a number of factors to consider. One is the crucially important role of online language teacher education, and the benefits achieved when teachers learn about technology-mediated language pedagogy as ‘students’ in online learning environments. By learning as students in online professional development (PD), educators can more easily relate to student needs, emotional reactions, and challenges within these same environments. Such experiential learning can help educators work with the affective and cognitive dimensions of learning, allowing teachers to see how learning ‘feels’ while appreciating the cognitive benefits. Such learning can help educators develop the skills to identify the affordances of specific tools and approaches, and to be able to see how these may be suitable (or not) for their specific language learning context (Haines, 2015). This type of PD can help orient teachers to notions of teacher, social and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2001), as highlighted in the community of inquiry and teaching practice explained above, and to appreciate that these need to be explicitly developed in online teaching.

Such experiential online PD can help teachers tune into the role of teaching presence in fostering social presence, an essential element of community formation in remote learning. Social presence can facilitate spirit (a feeling of connection), trust (the need to rely on other members), interaction (sharing personal information and building empathy) and common expectations (a commitment to shared goals) (Lomicka, 2020); social presence creates the ‘we’ feeling in a group (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 721). Ways to do this include integrating synchronous video/audio communication with self-paced asynchronous modalities, prioritizing dialogue over structure, and actively working with learner identities, their linguistic and cultural resources

in action-oriented, project-based approaches (Piccardo & North, 2019) to build strong connections within an online learning environment (Lomicka, 2020). A strong social presence can help reduce isolation, increase online engagement, interaction, and satisfaction which can lead to enhanced performance and learning success.

Although our forced rush into pandemic online teaching has been extremely challenging, these efforts may have helped forge a path into the future. Technology-mediated approaches offer unprecedented opportunities for our students to communicate and collaborate with others in linguistically and culturally rich communicative contexts. They can also help students further develop the critical digital literacies needed to communicate effectively in today's technology-mediated societies (Kessler, 2018). As highlighted here, effective technology-mediated language teacher education is at the core of forging this path ahead.

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Augusta Avram is a LINC educator interested in the impact technology has on the way we learn, communicate, share our voices, and build communities. She is grateful for the opportunity to accompany her students on their learning journey.



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