WebSafe: Tools for newcomers to counter digital disinformation

By Justine Light, NorQuest College, & Meagan Auer, NorQuest College

Abstract

WebSafe is a set of learning resources, organized by units and modules into a comprehensive course which aims to address the knowledge and skills gaps faced by some newcomers to Canada in dealing with digital disinformation. The development of the WebSafe course was part of a wider project which included an extensive community consultation to determine the impact of digital disinformation on newcomer ELLs in Alberta. This community consultation, along with a comprehensive literature review, focused the development of the materials. It provided a foundation for developing course content, strategies, and all of the first-hand accounts used to bring the impact of digital disinformation to life. The WebSafe course was then piloted with several hundred students and adjustments made as a result of teacher and learner feedback. In this paper, we will share how the results of the community consultation undertaken expanded our understanding of what knowledge and skills gaps may exist for newcomer ELLS who encounter digital disinformation, as well as how these findings informed the development of the WebSafe materials. Moreover, we will describe the extensive collaboration which ensured that skills and expertise from across the College combined to provide accurate and effective information for learners. Examples of the WebSafe course will also be described and information about how to access this open educational resource (OER) will be detailed.

The WebSafe course is organized into three nine-hour modules to form a comprehensive online resource which aims to equip and empower newcomers to Canada to respond to digital disinformation. Digital disinformation is defined as false information intended to harm those who receive it. It can include phishing, scams, fraud, fake news, and other threats to individual and social well-being (Lee, 2018). The course has been designed for high flex learning contexts and can be used entirely independently by learners in an online, anytime format. It can also be integrated into a synchronous/asynchronous course or blended learning context. The materials aim to develop knowledge about digital disinformation for newcomers who are adult English language learners (ELLs), and to empower them to support family, friends, and community members in dealing with online threats.

Why is WebSafe needed?

Newcomers are uniquely targeted through the use of digital disinformation by those looking to take advantage of their desire to settle. They may experience greater difficulty protecting themselves since many may not have the English language skills, digital literacy skills, and cultural knowledge needed to recognize and respond to fraudulent information. While this issue is widely recognized, there is a notable knowledge gap at the nexus of digital disinformation and newcomer settlement. In other words, very little is known about how digital disinformation impacts the experiences of newcomer ELLs in the settlement process, and about the knowledge, skills, and strategies that newcomers need to stay safe.

In order to develop appropriate educational resources for newcomer ELLs, WebSafe conducted an extensive literature review and robust community consultation with over 500 newcomer ELLs and service provider organizations (SPOs) in the Edmonton region of Alberta. The consultation filled knowledge gaps by establishing an understanding of newcomer ELLs' information seeking and consumption habits; perceived ability to recognize digital disinformation; lived experience and impact of digital disinformation; current ways of responding to the issue of digital disinformation; and ideas about the knowledge, skills, and strategies needed to address this issue.

The results of the consultation, supported by the literature review, helped to guide the development of the WebSafe course. Results showed that knowledge needed to be developed about what digital disinformation is, about the types that newcomer ELLs most often encounter, and about Canadian culture and government processes. For instance, newcomers need to know what kind of communication can be expected from prospective employers and government agencies. Skills needed to address the issue ranged from critical thinking, to prevention and reporting. For instance, community conveyed the importance of how to evaluate the content and format of emails and ads, as well as how to put digital security measures in place. The community consultation also encouraged the development of a versatile curriculum that built confidence,

encouraged community leadership, and took seriously the mental health impacts of digital disinformation. Results from the consultation suggested that it would be vital to supplement curriculum with ongoing English language training and foundational skills development in information and communications technology (ICT), and to ensure that curriculum reflected the everyday experiences of newcomer ELLs. Having applied these learnings to curriculum development, the WebSafe course is deeply situated in the lived experiences and unique needs of newcomer ELLs.

What knowledge and skills are needed?

Course organization:

Overview

WebSafe is a modular, online course for newcomer ELLs to support the development of their knowledge about digital disinformation and to empower them to support family, friends, and community members in dealing with online threats, such as scams, fraud, and misinformation. The course is made up of three modules, each made up of three units. The topics for the modules are:

Module 1: Email scams which addresses when scammers contact individuals via email or messenger apps.

Module 2: Website disinformation where the focus is on how being online can lead to encounters with digital disinformation and scams

Module 3: Your digital life which focuses on how to safeguard activity online and understanding how government processes in Canada work, to support learners in being able to distinguish between scams and legitimate government communications.

The course was designed to be used independently by learners at a Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) level four, so it included clear navigation and supportive how-to-videos for accessing different aspects of the online learning tools. Additional activities, at higher levels, CLB 5-6-7, were included to expand the numbers of learners for whom the materials would be relevant and interesting. Although the resources are organized in a modular way, each unit can be parsed out and used individually, should a teacher or a learner identify a particular area of interest or concern. It is expected that each unit could take 3-5 hours for a learner to complete. Of course, this depends on how the materials are used, the language levels of the learners and whether or not additional activities are integrated into a unit.

Narrative description by module

The learning resources which make up the WebSafe course are organized into the following units:

Module 1: Email scams	Module 2: Website disinformation	Module 3: Your digital life
• Email scams • Phishing scams • Common scams in Canada	• Social media & false news • Online shopping • Job website scams	• Safeguards online • Digging into disinformation • GC processes

Module One: Email scams

Module One acts as an introductory module which begins to explore the concept of digital disinformation, and more specifically, what scams are, who perpetrates them, and why. For a learner or teacher at the CLB 4 level, there are many resources included that can make these abstract concepts and vocabulary more comprehensible. The focus of module one is the range of digital disinformation and scams which target internet users through their email accounts or messaging apps. The unit focuses specifically on scams which have been reported commonly in Canada. Included in this module are first-person accounts which describe real life scams encountered by some participants in the stakeholder consultation, including Facebook messaging scams, scam communications appearing to be from the Government of Canada, and scam offers received by messaging apps or email.

Module Two: Website disinformation

Module Two expands the notion of digital disinformation beyond scams that target users through email or messaging, to the types of digital disinformation more broadly encountered by anyone spending time online. It begins with an examination of digital disinformation encountered through social media websites, such as Facebook and Instagram. In addition to introducing the fundamentals of how these sites work and how they organize and present information to learners, the unit considers items such as filter bubbles, clickbait, bots, and influencers. Module Two, unit two looks more closely at merchandising scams online, such as Kijiji or Facebook marketplace, as well as larger merchandisers like Amazon. In the final unit, job websites are discussed as potential sources of digital disinformation. In this unit, resources support skill development in determining how to protect oneself from fraudulent job ads, while still utilizing the power of the internet in employment searches.

Module Three: Your digital life

Module Three builds on the first two modules, by exploring concrete steps learners can take to protect themselves from digital disinformation when online. The first unit looks at the tools newcomer ELLs can

use, including bookmarks, strong password creation, and safe use of public Wi-Fi to reduce vulnerability to online scams. In unit two, the resources take a critical view of online information and strategies for determining the veracity of online information presented. Finally, the module ends with an overview of how the Government of Canada engages with citizens online and how to report digital disinformation. The mental health impacts of digital disinformation are also discussed.

Types of learning activities

The WebSafe modules incorporate a wide range of learning activities, initially selected as representing best practices for online, anytime learning. The courses utilize a white-space design, and all written text is supported by audio which learners can opt to play as they read. Short animations, longer slide presentations, and interactive activities build motivation, engagement, and scaffold learners through the course materials. Much of the vocabulary for learning about digital disinformation is abstract and technical; however, without using this vocabulary, it is challenging to fully get to grips with the content. Each unit begins with a short vocabulary presentation, using matching activities and includes a paragraph level text for higher level learners to see words in context. Interactive audio enables learners to see each word and hear its pronunciation. Throughout the course, video and animated presentations are accompanied by flip card, categorizing, matching and true/false activities to allow learners to deepen their understanding of the concepts introduced and check their comprehension. Each unit ends with a deeper reflection activity that ties together all of the learning outcomes for the unit. An online glossary is included with the course and enables learners to click on a highlighted word to see its definition. Engaging videos use individual case study accounts of digital disinformation experiences to contextualize the information in familiar first-person language. This ensures the complex content is straightforward enough to comprehend and relatable to newcomer learners' own experiences. One critical theme which is woven throughout the modules is empowerment. The purpose of WebSafe is to spread the knowledge and skills to counter digital disinformation beyond just the ELLs who take the course. Throughout the course, there is an emphasis in the videos and activities on giving advice and explaining scams and other online threats to family, friends, and other community members. This philosophy of empowerment transcends the topics of specific units aiming to build confidence in learners that cannot only recognize digital disinformation but that can respond appropriately.

How units can be integrated into teaching plans

WebSafe has been designed to be used as a course containing nine units, or simply as one single unit that stands alone. Having said that, the units probably work most cohesively when taught as part of a module. This is because themes and vocabulary are recycled across those three units, and in this way, they scaffold

language learning and develop understanding of the content more deeply. Because the learning resources were designed to be used independently by learners, they are easily integrated into a flexible learning context. Parts of a unit could be assigned as independent study, with certain videos or areas of content used for a longer class time consideration, whether this happens during face-to-face class time or synchronous online learning time. Moreover, it may be worth considering using individual units from different modules together, where the content makes this logical. For example, Module two, unit one considers Social Media, while Module three, unit two develops critical thinking skills and technical skills to dig into disinformation and determine the veracity of online information. Similarly, Module 1 unit 3 is about job scams, such as an email promising a mystery shopper job, and Module 2 unit 3 considers scams on job websites like Indeed and LinkedIn. The units and modules were designed for accessibility and flexibility for learners and teachers alike.

How to access WebSafe & additional teacher resources

All of the resources which make up the WebSafe course are open-educational resources, freely available to use and adapt to any educational context in Canada. They can be accessed by teachers and learners, with no registration, at the [NorQuest College website](). You are welcome to use them in class with learners or to send learners directly to the website. Moreover, if you contact NorQuest College via [websafe@norquest.ca](), we can share Scorm packages which can be directly inserted into your LMS. In addition to the modules, the website has teacher resources, including an Implementation Guide, a needs assessment tool, language extension activities, and PBLA Sample Tasks.

Instructor guide

The Instructor Guide is intended to support teachers who want to integrate the WebSafe resources into their classroom context. It contains all the learning objectives, and it details the course organization. It is designed to be a useful reference guide as it contains all of the language resources and activities at a glance and also has a glossary reference list. Quizlet sets have been created for each unit and are public. The link to the Quizlet sets is included in the glossary master list in this Guide. All of the videos in the course are posted on YouTube and can be accessed directly external to the course itself. Links to these videos can be found in the Instructor Guide as well as transcripts to enable closer analysis of language and preparation of scaffolding language activities. The Instructor Guide also contains links to additional resources and information about online security.

Needs assessment tool

For instructors who may feel that analysing and selecting the content in the entire 27-hour course is overwhelming, there is also a needs assessment tool on the website. This tool can identify which particular units may be of most benefit and interest to a specific cohort of learners.

Language extension activities & PBLA sample tasks

The learning resources and activities in the WebSafe course are intended primarily as a settlement resource, providing essential information for responding to digital disinformation. While opportunities to learn new vocabulary and practice listening skills are integral to the resources, there are no explicit language learning activities. In the Language Extension guide, sample extension activities that integrate language teaching and learning into the WebSafe resources are included. These activities are not lesson plans, and do not include a full explanation of each topic or grammatical concept, nor the necessary scaffolding learners may need to accomplish that activity. These are intended to provide examples of how the integration of language instruction can be achieved in a seamless way. There are nine language extension activities included in the Guide as samples of how the resources can be easily adapted for integration into the language classroom, whether in-person or virtual.

In order to support the integration of these materials into LINC teaching contexts, we have included a number of teacher-created PBLA assessment tasks, as examples. All of these resources can be found at the website above.

Conclusion

We welcome feedback on your experience using WebSafe with your learners, as well as updates on any broken links or questions you may have. You can contact the WebSafe team at websafe@norquest.ca.

References

Lee, N. M. (2018). Fake news, phishing, and fraud: A call for research on digital media literacy education beyond the classroom. *Communication Education, 67*(4), 460–466. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2018.1503313

This project was funded by Heritage Canada.

Funded by the Government of Canada
Financé par le gouvernement du Canada

Canada

Author Bios

Justine Light is a Curriculum Developer at NorQuest College and has an Adjunct appointment in the TESL program at the University of Alberta. Previously, she worked as Assistant Director of the English Language School at the University of Alberta, and as project Manager of Learning English with CBC.

Meagan Auer is a Research Analyst and Project Manager at NorQuest College. She is also a PhD student in Political Science at the University of Alberta where she studies the politics of higher education.