

Learning technology in LINC – Beyond the pandemic

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Abstract

This article is based on observations from a workshop conducted at the 2021 annual TESL Ontario conference presented by language training professionals and experts in learning technology solutions from the Avenue–LearnIT2teach Project. The onset of COVID-19 in March 2020 was a crisis in immigrant settlement language training. Many teachers and learners were forced to rapidly pivot from conventional face-to-face learning to remote learning. Teachers and learners who had previously practiced blended (or hybrid) learning were well positioned with technology and skills. Teachers and learners who had not were forced to rapidly respond with Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). Observations from the workshop panel and the participants uphold the need for continued sector engagement with learning technology to support the development of digital skills among newcomers, enable better practices in teaching and learning, and support better program access for client learners.

Keywords: *LINC, technology, teaching, learning, pandemic, Avenue*

In March 2020, the EduLINC–LearnIT2teach Project had to pivot to help address COVID-19 and the suspension of face-to-face instruction. Teachers were desperate for online tools to keep teaching and learning going. Teacher and learner accounts, and teacher training were in demand. Our former learning portal EduLINC (now [Avenue.ca](https://www.avenue.ca)) was a scalable practical response, but teachers needed training and support. We saw that we could divide teachers into two groups:



1. Teachers who already employed a LINC blended learning strategy in their face-to-face instruction and whose learners had been oriented to using Moodle or a local LMS solution and information technology in their learning;
2. Teachers who had previously made minimal use of information technology. A sub-set of the second group was teachers who personally had limited skills with information technology.

The first group was well prepared, as were their learners, to engage with online remote learning. The second group needed tools and support urgently.

Two years later LINC professionals find themselves in a transformed learning technology landscape. Many teachers now have digital teaching skills, courseware, and resources. Managers had to implement new and more flexible modes of learning. Learners are now engaged with information technology and blended or online learning and have experienced flexible delivery models.

How can LINC professionals leverage these changes to improve access, equity, language gains, and settlement outcomes? The 2021 TESL Ontario workshop examined and discussed the implications for LINC professionals and clients.

Several key takeaways arose when a New Language Solutions (NLS) panel of experts explored the LINC teaching world in a virtual workshop titled *Learning Technology in LINC—Beyond the Pandemic* (2021, November 3):

- 1) the importance of a mentor/mentee relationship during COVID-19;
- 2) the difference between ERT and online teaching;
- 3) blended learning as an ideal delivery mode of ESL learning post-COVID-19; and
- 4) digital learning is not enough; digital fluency should be the new benchmark.

Importance of the mentor/mentee relationship

NLS uses a mentor/mentee relationship on the Avenue platform for LINC teachers. This relationship has proven to be highly effective over the past 12 years, with the legacy Learning Management System (LMS; in this article, Moodle, with this specific system named EduLINC or Avenue). Under this model, more experienced teachers and advisers help direct teachers who are novice to the system to find solutions to questions and problems.

The closing and/or reduction of face-to-face classes, and the resulting rush to online solutions for classes due to the pandemic had enormous impact on adult settlement language training programs like LINC. In



February 2020, there were 1086 new *user enrolments* on EduLINC, a number consistent with the previous 12 months (McBride & Edgar, 2020). In March there were 5,521, a 500% increase, and a foreshadow of the growth in demand for project services in the months to come. These numbers represented a huge increase in demand for the LMS platform, and mirrored a parallel increase in the demand for a mentor's availability to assist and train teachers.

In March 2020, emergency needs prevailed and 17 project teacher mentors across Canada rose to the challenge of a surge in demand for help. Most NLS mentors are also active teachers, so the mentors needed to make an incredible effort to satisfy the onboarding needs of mentees. Mentors during the initial surge and throughout the months (and year) that followed dealt with not only factual and technical questions, but also provided guidance on some online learning principles. Learning technology can be challenging in the best of times, but during the pandemic everyone was also concerned for the health and safety of themselves, family, and friends. Mentors helped mentees by listening, understanding and empathizing, all the while gently helping novice teachers navigate new territory rapidly and under stress.

Emergency remote teaching versus online teaching

The shift in teaching from face-to-face to virtual spaces is often, inadvertently, called online teaching and, from the students' perspective, online learning. What has happened during COVID-19, though, cannot be 100% described as online teaching. Indeed, teaching and learning was being conducted *online*, but the essential pedagogy from online teaching was not always possible in practice.

For many teachers and learners what happened during the initial weeks and months of COVID-19 was instead a form of ERT. This happens when teachers quickly add activities and documents to an online space or platform. There is no blame or shame for wanting to do this, as the reaction is completely understandable during the first stage of the pandemic. What is unfortunate, though, is that many teachers were totally frustrated by the events because:

- a) It happened extremely quickly;
- b) Many did not have an existing online platform to use;
- c) The learning curve to feel confident on an LMS can be steep and is best achieved in a reduced-stress environment;
- d) Their students were not prepared for online learning, making the teachers' orientation to an LMS urgent;
- e) Teachers often felt panicked and *unmoored*;
- f) Teachers were anywhere from zero to ten on a comfort-with-technology scale;
- g) Some students had more technology proficiency and made teachers feel like imposters;



- h) Service Providing Organizations (SPOs) added training and new procedures that all had to be learned as well;
- i) There was no end in sight to the situation.

The early pandemic environment was not ideal for teacher innovation.

Online teaching, in and of itself, has design and layout at its base, and should incorporate the best available online technologies to maximize learning outcomes. In LINC language learning, that requires communication with learners and colleagues and putting better practices in teaching and learning to work online.

One of the fundamental strengths of online teaching is that it goes far beyond a platform where documents or files are simply uploaded and downloaded. A good LMS supports social engagement between and among teachers and learners and encourages the implementation of social constructivism principles (Walker & White, 2013, p. 25). It is, in essence, a holistic approach to teaching and learning where parties can achieve the same outcomes when they are all at a distance from each other. Teacher presence is vitally important, whether communication with learners is synchronous or asynchronous.

The Emergency Remote Teaching method employed due to COVID-19 could never qualify as online teaching and should not be judged by the same criteria (Hodges et al., 2020).

The circumstances were less than ideal for better practices in the early days of the pandemic, and indeed, many LINC professionals are still trying to *catch up* with innovation.

Blended learning as a delivery model

As a sector, the ESL world has revolved around face-to-face teaching and learning. There are numerous benefits to learning in this setting, not the least of which are the body language gestures that can be used to help communicate when words fail us. But a shift in methods of learning started taking place over a decade ago, as learning technology innovations from the broader post-secondary sector began to spread in the settlement language training (SLT) sector. Many questions arose, and common themes surfaced: Can and should technology be used in SLT? If yes, then why, where, when, and how?

So, where does blended learning come in? Blended (or hybrid) learning is a mix of teaching/learning modes, and usually means a blend of face-to-face and online teaching (using technology to learn when teacher and students are distanced from one another). The *perfect blend* is neither identified nor recommended, because blended learning considers a vast variety of factors that are unique to each teaching/learning context. Thoughtful reflection on the mix of technical abilities, subject matter, available internet, hardware and software availability, outcomes expected of learning, and so on must be considered (Hodges et al.,



2020). In any context, an effective blend would be based on optimal use of what face-to-face does best and what online learning can do.

Consider some affordances of blended learning: Modalities can change from term to term, wait lists can be addressed, learners can be placed in learning environments where they can be most successful based on not only their English needs, but also on their technology circumstances, as well as their working, home and childcare obligations. This, we believe, is the approach that will produce a positive settlement experience for Canada's immigrant and refugee populations, and help address concerns of program access and learner equity.

Current times: From digital literacy to digital fluency

Two years later and with the pandemic still a disruption that prevents any return to *normalcy*, where is the settlement language training sector? What have we learned as SLT professionals, and what is the future of online learning technology? During the workshop, one panel expert observed that ESL teachers do a disservice to their students if they revert to previous practice and abandon technology in education. Learners need digital opportunities for learning. The term technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) represents the idea that information technology (IT) should be embedded in language training to reflect how IT is used in daily life and communications (Walker & White, 2013, p. 33).

During the COVID-19 pandemic and rush to ERT, poor digital literacy skills were an obstacle for many teachers and learners. Basic digital literacy skills are needed not only to learn, but also to be successful in today's workplaces, schools, or as parents, consumers, or citizens. After two years and many personal gains in competence with online teaching, now is the time to leverage these IT skills gains. Even entry-level and lower-paying jobs usually require digital know-how. Students, especially newcomers, need to learn, maintain, and grow their digital skills in Canada.

Panel experts felt that basic literacy skills in the digital world are not enough; becoming fluent in digital skills is where we should be setting the bar. Yes, many people have learned enough to get by, to survive. But where improvement in lives and careers will be seen is when individuals are competent and comfortable in their IT knowledge and practices.

The everyday-living landscape has changed during COVID-19, with more connections, services, learning and even jobs being conducted solely online. We must not let ourselves and our students backslide into complacency or regression. We have started on this journey, so let us continue to develop equity in the economy and in life skills for our newcomer Canadians.



Conclusion

By examining the importance of the mentor/mentee relationship during COVID-19, we have identified the compassion and human contact necessary to keep teaching, learning, and innovating.

By reflecting on the differences between ERT and online teaching, we can see that under the circumstances, our settlement language training sector did the best it could. But as educators to Canada's newcomers, we know we can do better if we have the opportunity and the skills to apply online teaching pedagogy to our course design.

Having now experienced both face-to-face and online teaching and learning, we can see the affordances of both modalities and can carve programs and courses to truly meet the needs of our students.

And finally, by seeing the demand and uptake for digital literacy skills and visualizing a future that requires better competencies, we promote continued digital skill use and better digital citizenship.

References

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Author Bios



Nancy Van Dorp is a Senior Trainer/Mentor/Developer on the LearnIT2Teach Project, where she works with teachers to use and develop eLearning materials for use in blended and fully online classrooms. During the pandemic she has been especially busy providing advice and sharing learning with others! She also teaches culture and technology courses at Sheridan College. Enchanted by EdTech possibilities, she loves exploring and showing new ways to integrate andragogical resources.



Rob McBride has been the Executive Director of New Language Solutions since its inception in 1983 as TVLT. Rob has worked as a teacher, researcher, writer and producer, principally in the settlement language training and adult literacy basic skills sectors. Rob works on projects where building basic knowledge and skills has the maximum positive impact on the work and personal lives of learners.

