From traditional to transformative: The evolution of HyFlex at Caledon Community Services

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In the spring of 2020, as the world reeled from the rapid shift to online learning, Caledon Community Services (CCS) embarked on a journey to redefine its approach to language education for newcomers. What began as an urgent response to a global crisis evolved into the HyFlex model—a sustainable, flexible, and inclusive learning framework. This paper outlines CCS's transition from traditional in-person instruction to HyFlex, exploring its challenges, successes, and best practices while offering insights into its transformative impact on accessible education.

The sudden disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic forced educators worldwide to rethink traditional teaching methodologies. For CCS, the shift was not only about adopting new tools but also about reimagining education to better serve its diverse newcomer community. By 2021, CCS implemented the first iteration of the HyFlex model, combining in-person, virtual, synchronous, and asynchronous learning. Today, HyFlex is a cornerstone of CCS's commitment to accessibility and flexibility in language education.

To understand the transformative journey of CCS, it is essential to define key terms how they are used in this paper:

- **In-Person Learning:** Traditional, classroom-based instruction using physical resources like textbooks and whiteboards

- **Virtual Learning:** Fully online with no in-person interaction, primarily utilizing tools like Zoom and Google Classroom

- **Hybrid Learning:** A mix of in-person and virtual instruction, where learners participate in pre-determined, fixed schedules or formats without flexibility; commonly used by colleges and universities for lecture style instruction

- **Blended Learning:** A structured combination of in-person and online sessions, with no flexibility in participation mode; this format is commonly used by provincially funded ESL programs, where certain days are assigned for 100% virtual or 100% in-person learning

- **HyFlex Learning:** A hybrid and flexible model allowing learners to choose between in-person and virtual participation on a class-by-class basis; this model integrates synchronous and asynchronous activities, fostering adaptability and inclusivity.

As conceptualized by Dr. Brian Beatty (2019), HyFlex is more than a delivery method—it is a philosophy of accessibility, enabling learners to participate in ways that align with their unique circumstances.

Before the pandemic, CCS LINC classrooms were wholly in-person. Face-to-face engagement and physical resources like textbooks, whiteboards, and CALL labs were central to instruction. However, accessibility challenges persisted, particularly for students in rural areas with limited or non-existent public transit. For instance, a newcomer father often stayed after class to catch up on lessons due to commuting difficulties. These logistical barriers, once seen as unavoidable, became a catalyst for transformation.

In March 2020, CCS instructors faced an abrupt transition to online platforms with limited tools such as Skype and WhatsApp. Digital literacy and technology access posed significant challenges for students. Yet, these initial struggles highlighted the resilience of both students and staff.

"I recall spending 30 minutes troubleshooting audio issues with one student over the phone. That small victory wasn't just about solving a technical problem—it was a connection that built trust," shared Suma Balagopal, a Lead PBLA Instructor at CCS. These moments of perseverance laid the foundation for innovation.

Over time, CCS moved beyond stopgap solutions, investing in platforms like Zoom, Google Classroom, ELLII, and Kahoot!. These tools transformed classes into interactive, structured learning environments. Training for both students and staff became integral, ensuring inclusivity in virtual classrooms. For example, a quiet student blossomed during a Kahoot! session, showcasing how technology could unlock hidden potential.

These experiences underscored an important realization: The future of education is not about replacing traditional methods but enhancing them to better serve diverse learners.

By 2021, CCS introduced the HyFlex model, which fundamentally changed the learning experience. For students balancing jobs or caregiving responsibilities, HyFlex offered unprecedented flexibility.

One newcomer single mother described it as "a lifeline" that allowed her to remain engaged without compromising her family's needs. By blending in-person, virtual, synchronous, and asynchronous learning, HyFlex empowered students to tailor their learning journeys.

A pivotal factor in the successful implementation of HyFlex at CCS was the introduction of the Digital Navigator role. This position, created to address the digital divide, played a crucial role in ensuring both students and staff could effectively engage with HyFlex technology and methodologies. The Digital Navigator was responsible for:

- Digital Onboarding: Conducting needs assessments and introducing learners to the HyFlex model, ensuring they understood the available tools and participation options

- Technical Setup and Support: Assisting students with device setup, software installation, and troubleshooting; this included personalized one-on-one sessions and group training to build digital literacy.

- Real-Time Assistance: Providing immediate technical support during classes to address connectivity issues, software glitches, or user challenges

- Ongoing Technology Training: Supporting instructors and clients in mastering HyFlex tools such as the Meeting Owl camera and Smartboard, while also guiding them in integrating digital platforms like Zoom and Google Classroom into their teaching

By bridging the gap between technology and education, the Digital Navigator empowered learners to overcome initial barriers, enabling them to focus on their studies rather than technical challenges. This role also ensured instructors could confidently manage the complexities of HyFlex delivery.

Implementing HyFlex was not without hurdles. Key challenges included:

- **Technology Infrastructure:** Issues such as lagging internet connections and software glitches disrupted the learning process.

- **Classroom Management:** Ensuring equitable engagement for in-person and online students required constant effort.

- **Real-Time Troubleshooting:** Addressing technical issues during class demanded robust IT support and adaptability.

Despite these challenges, CCS remained committed to creating an accessible and inclusive learning environment. With ongoing training and a focus on adaptability, these obstacles became opportunities for

growth.

CCS's HyFlex journey revealed several critical lessons:

1. **Preparation is Key:** Testing equipment and ensuring functionality before class prevents disruptions.

2. **Inclusivity Drives Engagement:** Planning for dual delivery from the outset creates equitable learning opportunities.

3. **Support is Crucial:** Providing flexible technical support builds confidence among students and instructors.

The contributions of the Digital Navigator were instrumental in embedding these practices into CCS's educational framework, ensuring smooth operation and continuous improvement.

As HyFlex becomes a permanent feature at CCS, the focus remains on refining the model. Future plans include experimenting with advanced equipment and continuously adapting to student needs. HyFlex is no longer just a response to a crisis—it represents a reimagining of what's possible in language education.

The evolution of HyFlex at CCS demonstrates the power of adaptability, collaboration, and innovation. By integrating technology with a commitment to student needs, CCS has redefined accessibility and flexibility in Language Training. The pivotal role of the Digital Navigator underscores the importance of bridging technology and pedagogy, ensuring equitable access to learning for all participants.

To educators everywhere, let this journey serve as inspiration to embrace the opportunities within challenges. Together, we can continue transforming language education for the better.

References

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Author Bios

Art Rekhtin, a Certified Project Management Professional and Ontario Certified English Language Teacher, specializes in digital and in-person project leadership. Since joining Caledon Community Services in 2022 as Manager of Newcomer Programs, he has focused on implementing HyFlex service delivery. Art has extensive experience in English Language Training across multiple formats and has volunteered with TESL Ontario in roles including the North York and York Region affiliate executive and the board of directors.

Suma Balagopal has been a dedicated team member at Caledon Community Services since 2007, where she currently works as the Lead LINC Instructor. Her role was pivotal during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading the transition from in-person to virtual learning and eventually to the innovative Hyflex model. Suma has been actively involved with TESL Ontario in various volunteer capacities. She has served as a Facebook manager and is currently a member of the DEI committee. She was recognized in 2014 with the Sparks of Excellence award. Connect with Suma on LinkedIn to learn about her journey: www.linkedin.com/in/sumabalagopal

Gurimandeep is a dedicated professional with over 4 years of committed service in the LINC program at Caledon Community Services. She excels in language education, helping newcomers feel welcomed and prepared for life in a new country. In addition, she has over a year of experience as a Digital Navigator, guiding individuals in developing essential digital literacy skills. Her combined expertise in language instruction and digital literacy enhances her ability to empower others through education and technology.