Best practices for online or blended teaching

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Background of the project

The delivery of instruction through an online platform is becoming more popular every year. While students are taking advantage of the convenience provided by online instruction, their teachers are grappling with how to engage students and approximate more closely the ambiance of a traditional classroom, which is still the most familiar environment for many. For many learners, online classes are places to learn at their own time and pace, where automated activities provide immediate feedback and learning. For many teachers, questions around assessment validity in an online environment are issues of concern.

Most language classes provided in the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program have the capability for learners and instructors to be online so that both can benefit from the affordances of synchronous and blended learning and teaching, meeting their different needs. However, utilizing platforms that allow for synchronous and asynchronous interactions requires a certain level of proficiency in technical skills both from the instructor and the learner.

For many instructors, shifting from teaching in a traditional, face-to-face environment to teaching through an online learning system means they need to make changes to their mode of delivery while still ensuring the quality of their instruction, resources used, and student assessments do not suffer. Through consistent synchronous and asynchronous interactive online instruction, teachers may engage students, enhance the quality of learning, and provide more flexibility. Another benefit of a consistent approach to synchronous and asynchronous interactive teaching can be improved teacher presence and increased student engagement.

In a rapidly evolving educational landscape, the pursuit of excellence in teaching and learning remains a paramount goal, particularly in the context of LINC and the Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) framework. The intricacies of fostering effective synchronous and blended learning experiences in these settings demand a comprehensive understanding of strategies that truly resonate with learners, instructors, and organizations alike.

Research activities

ISANS together with research consultants from NLS and its community partners conducted field research into the effectiveness of LINC and PBLA approaches in synchronous and blended learning settings. After an initial environmental scan, which identified which approaches were used, the research phase was structured to yield robust, replicable, and holistic insights. Recognizing the influence of the very individuals for whom the educational experience is designed, the project integrated the voices of learners. Their perspectives, experiences, and aspirations formed a cornerstone, shaping the trajectory of inquiry and ensuring that the research was meaningfully grounded in the reality of those it seeks to benefit. The environmental scan indirectly included learner voices, through comments teachers left on the survey.

The field research employed a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data collected and analyzed by independent researchers at each community partner organization participating in the study: ISS of BC, NorQuest College, Red River College, YMCA of Saint John, and ISANS. Findings from analyses of quantitative data from surveys were used to inform and design qualitative data generation protocols by way of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Researchers at the community partners implemented the research protocols and provided a local analysis. They also supported the teachers participating in the field research and organized Community of Practice events. Data was collected from both instructors and learners at the five research locations. Through accessible surveys we heard from 758 learners, and 369 learners also participated in focus groups. Additionally, 61 instructors completed the Instructor survey, were interviewed, and participated in focus groups.

One major outcome of this project has been a best practice guide and professional development course for LINC instructors and program administrators. This article provides an overview of the research findings that shaped the development of these outcomes from the perspective of the research consultants overseeing the project in collaboration with the project lead. We present the guide and PD course to familiarise prospective users with its offerings and benefits to LINC and PBLA in synchronous and blended settings. Finally, we share some feedback from instructors and administrators who have completed the course.

Identifying and sharing best practices

First, let us look at some considerations for articulating and presenting best practices in online and blended teaching. From the environmental scan (144 respondents), we learned that 45% of respondents taught stage I (CLB 1-4), and 55% of respondents taught stage II (CLB 5-8). There are also various interpretations of blended learning. 15% engage learners online three days a week, 49% indicate either two online days or half & half, and 34% stated one online day each week. Therefore, best practices should be applicable to a range of levels or be differentiated for stage I and II and be applicable to a smaller or larger online component.

Teachers reported using various LMSs to support (asynchronous) online learning and platforms for (synchronous) video classes. 57% of respondents used a Moodle based LMS (either Avenue or other Moodle), Blackboard was mentioned by 17% of respondents, and Brightspace by 6%. The use of an LMS is complemented by other sites (iStedy, LEARN, Ellii, MS Teams, Smartboard, Settlement Online). MS Teams was further used by 49% for their video classes, other platforms were Blackboard, Zoom, and BBB. These LMSs and platforms offer different functionalities to their users, the extent of which can also depend on what role a user has been assigned. For example, on Avenue (Moodle) a facilitator can be a Teacher (editing), or an Instructor (non-editing). Furthermore, many other online resources are used by respondents such as Learning Chocolate, Teach-This, YouTube, Mauril, Padlet, Kahoot, Quizlet, Bow Valley literacy readers, and Wordwall to name just a few, as well as slide presentations instructors created themselves. All of this needed to be considered when drafting Best Practices for online or blended teaching.

Finally, as the title of the research project indicates, the Best Practices apply to a LINC/PBLA context. This is a different context than in an English for Academic Purposes or an Employment Language Training Program, even if these also serve learners of English as an additional language. This project's primary goal is to build knowledge about the most effective online/blended language delivery methods in a PBLA/LINC context. Current PBLA practice is rooted in the physical classroom; materials, resources and tools for remote delivery of PBLA are quite limited. Therefore, a data analysis approach centered around the PBLA Pillars was adopted to present the findings.

We found that the field research findings (Phase I) confirmed the literature review findings but also further informed, extended and complemented them. Through analyses of the surveys, interviews and focus groups, we were able to identify current good practices as well as gaps in supporting practices for online and blended LINC and PBLA. We also needed to conceptualize the way in which these best practices could be articulated and presented so that they would be considered for implementation by the instructors participating in the field-testing phase of the ongoing study. As the findings of the field research phase had adopted an approach centred on the PBLA Pillars, we decided to use the same structure in a Best Practices Guide format.

To align this project with documents such as the ISTE Standards (International Society for Technology in Education, 2023), we articulated considerations for program administrators, based on the the PBLA Guide (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2019). These were included in the guide as Section 0. Best practices for synchronous and blended teaching at an organizational level. The sections in the guide can be summarized as follows:

1. How to provide support in a blended/online environment
2. A. – Suggestions for course set up and types of activities that are best suited for skill building
   B. – Possible solutions to complete assessment tasks in a reliable way
3. Ways to provide feedback in an online/blended classroom
4. Guidance for using group work (breakout rooms) and facilitating peer feedback
5. Suggestions and tools for goal setting and learner reflection

The Best Practices Guide (BPG)

The first version of the Best Practices Guide (BPG) was developed based on the findings from the Field Research phase and for the sole purpose of testing best practice recommendations through implementation at the community partners' programs during the Field-Testing phase. Instructors reviewed the BPG and provided feedback, after which the BPG was updated. At the start of the Field-Testing phase, the research consultants and project lead recorded a 20-minute webinar in which they introduced the BPG, briefly explaining each section and giving some examples of how suggestions could be implemented. Each section of the BPG is written in the form of a checklist, where administrators or instructors can check off which practices they have already implemented, which they want to try, and which practices they are currently not able to incorporate into their teaching. Thus, the guide enables instructors to set clear goals for improvement. The BPG is not prescriptive, but a tool for instructors to reflect on their teaching practice and find ways that they can continue to grow their skills in a blended/online environment.

During the Field-Testing phase, the LINC instructors from the community partners implemented many best practices recommended in the BPG in their teaching, classroom activities and online courseware. They also provided further feedback through individual checklists and attended Community of Practice meetings with the researchers at each community partner to discuss the implementation. Researchers collected input from instructors during these meetings.

In the Community of Practice meetings at one community partner organization, the instructors participating in the research project reported varied experiences implementing best practices during the testing phase. They shared that step-by-step instructions improved learner engagement, particularly in lower-level classes, while participation trackers motivated learners but proved resource-intensive. They found forums enhanced community-building, especially for younger learners, but they also mentioned challenges for some of their students: Cognitive overload in flipped classrooms, difficulties with using Learning Managment Systems. Adaptations made to online courses, such as conditional access to past lessons and the use of tools like H5P, improved clarity and reduced cognitive load. Instructors also found that reflective practices were widely adopted, and they identified a need for streamlined digital resources and further training to enhance implementation efficiency.

The summary of all activities in the Field-Testing phase provided the basis for a revised version of the BPG. Several best practices were rephrased to make them less ambiguous. More details and examples were added where appropriate to improve the clarity of the suggestions, often following suggestions instructors had given in the community of practice meetings. Particular attention was paid to the checklist instructors completed at the end of the Field-Testing phase, indicating which best practices they could implement. Many of them left notes about practices they were not able to implement. These checklists were analyzed, and the summary of these results also informed Version 2 of the guide.

The Professional Development course

The team determined that exemplary practices would be best presented in a professional development course where instructors engage with supporting resources in addition to Version 2 of the BPG. At the start of this Material Development phase, the ISANS-NLS research team conducted another scan of resources to determine which professional development resources on synchronous online and blended teaching were already available and which may help instructors to implement the best practice recommendations. Some resources released during the COVID-19 pandemic were identified by organizations such as CCLB and TCDSB, to guide instructors in online teaching. These resources, such as videos, were evaluated, and researchers obtained permission to use some of them in the Best Practices Professional Development Course. Other resources identified as content for the Professional Development course were clips of the webinar the research team had offered, as well as certain sections from the PBLA guide.

The ISANS-NLS team decided to set up the PD course as a micro credentials course from which administrators and instructors can choose one or more topics they wish to learn more about. Each topic can be completed in under 2 hours. While the Best Practices Guide follows the PBLA pillars, the PD course offers a holistic approach, bringing together best practices from several pillars under different topics, thus showing how these best practices support and enhance each other. The Professional Development course consists of the following six topics.

1. Support from Administrators
2. Structuring Your Online Course
3. Being Present Online and Building a Classroom Community
4. Flipped and Blended Learning
5. Goal Setting, Learner Reflection, and Feedback Online
6. Administering Valid Assessment Tasks Online

Furthermore, the course has an introduction topic with information about the research project, the Best Practices Guide final version files, and a link to a feedback survey.

Each of the six topics is structured the same way, beginning with a self-assessment in the form of a questionnaire that can be completed at the beginning and end of each topic. Next, there are two H5P activities and a discussion forum that is only accessible once these two H5P tasks have been completed. Each H5P task contains two videos, readings, or podcasts. Instructors can assess their comprehension with quiz questions and reflect on their learning with discussion questions. These activities also include a summary slide and glossary of keywords. After posting to the Discussion forum, Instructors receive a badge for completing the topic.

The PD course further includes a topic with Additional Resources. In this topic, the information contained in the Appendices of the Best Practices Guide is offered on pages that include links to all resources mentioned in Version 2 of the BP guide and in the PD course. Finally, two sample units were included in the course, one for Stage I and one for Stage II. The original units are available from the Avenue Course Builder. The units were added, and changes were made where necessary, to give examples of how an instructor can implement Best Practices. The units were annotated to highlight where changes were made, and which best practices were included.

PD course uptake and feedback from participants

Following the project's conclusion, post-project activities entailed moderation of discussions within the professional development (PD) course, fostering an environment conducive to instructors sharing their insights and experiences. Moreover, proactive promotion of the PD course will persist, advocating its utilization for onboarding purposes and ongoing professional development within organizations.

As of January 13, 108 instructors have been enrolled in the PD course on Avenue and 19 instructors enrolled in the same course on Settlement Online. Overall, 120 badges for completing one of the individual topics have been issued and 16 badges for completing the entire course were awarded.

In response to the question *How well did the course material support your learning experience?* instructors mentioned: "The material was thorough and clear to follow and understand," and "The podcasts and videos were especially great."

As to why the PD course was helpful, one participant said: "The additional resources and learning what other instructors are doing to keep their classes engaging and how they are running assessments was most helpful as that is what I struggle with, but I am thankfully already doing many of the other best practices."

Another course participant mentioned that the activities "built up my confidence to make the best decision for planning as well as practicing before starting a course." And a third instructor taking the course reported that "all the materials made an important contribution to professional growth."

In the Avenue Leadership Learning Certificate (ALLC) course, where a plan for local innovation is articulated as part of a capstone project, one participant referred to the ISANS/Avenue-LearnIT2teach one-page *Summary of Best Practices for Synchronous/Blended Learning*, that is available in the Professional Development course. One element of the plan mentioned is to request regularly scheduled PD days to provide time for extra training and/or to implement and integrate digital resources into the program. Another element is an integrity quiz for the learners to complete before online assessments that could be used by other instructors in the program for consistency.

Overall, instructors who have taken the PD course and worked with the Best Practices Guide have provided positive feedback. At the end of the course, participants are asked to provide feedback. The survey results highlight the effectiveness of the course material in supporting participants' learning experience. Respondents appreciated the clarity and thoroughness of the topics, with particular praise for the podcasts and videos. The materials were seen as instrumental in fostering professional growth and building confidence for planning and practice. Overall, participants found the resources well-structured and valuable for enhancing their skills and decision-making abilities.

We invite you to review the course and the guide and share your experiences with your colleagues in the course forums or your program.

How you can access the PD course and Best Practice Guide

The Best Practices for Synchronous/Blended Teaching - PD Course can be found on Avenue and on Settlement Online.

Avenue: https://avenue.ca/classroom/course/view.php?id=6088

Send an email to apremkumar@isans.ca for enrollment

Settlement Online: https://settlementonline.ca/course/view.php?id=655

For self-enrolment follow the instructions here: https://cdn3.me-qr.com/pdf/21592453.pdf

Author Bios

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Matthias Sturm is the Lead Evaluator and Researcher with New Language Solutions for the Avenue-LearnIT2teach project. He has a MA in Distance Education and is a PhD candidate researching the use of technologies and digital equity among newcomers in LINC programs. Matthias has worked in the adult education field for more than 20 years, supporting service providers in basic skills education and settlement language training in their efforts to build program capacity.

Anita Premkumar is an ESL professional with over a decade of experience teaching ESL. Currently, she is associated with ISANS as a Program Supervisor. She holds an Ed.S in Education and Technology and is strongly committed to integrating technology into education. Anita is dedicated to exploring innovative AI applications, aiming to bridge the gap between traditional teaching methods and modern technological advancements, making education more accessible and impactful for all learners.